

## Promoting mental health: Finding a shared language

Mental health is an important part of our overall well-being and is something we all can play a role in addressing. So, it is a subject that deserves our attention!

According to Statistics Canada, 1 in 3 Canadians will experience one of six mental illnesses or substance use disorders in their lifetime (Pearson et al., 2013). Other research for the Mental Health Commission of Canada shows that, in any given year, 1 in 5 Canadians will experience a mental illness or addiction (Smetanin et al., 2011)

Awareness has been raised about the importance of helping those experiencing mental illness to get access to treatments that will improve their mental health.

But what about the 4 in 5, or 80% of the population, who will not experience a mental illness or an addiction? What about their mental health? Are they mentally healthy? First: what is mental health?

There is some confusion about what mental health means, and this can have an impact on how we address mental health. For example, a lot of people think that when we talk about mental health, we are talking about mental illness – that these subjects are one and the same. Really, mental health and mental illness are two different things.

Mental illnesses are conditions where our thinking, mood and behaviours severely and negatively impact how we function in our lives. Mental illnesses can include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and other mood disorders (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2015).

Mental health, on the other hand, like the term ‘health’, is a positive concept! It relates to our ability to enjoy life and to manage it in ways that help us reach our goals and cope with stresses. It is a sense of spiritual and emotional well-being. This means, mental health is more than the absence of mental illness (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2015). Mental health is something that applies across the lifespan and for all ages, from infants to older adults.

Now, if mental health and mental illness are two different ideas, what is their relationship to one another?

Sometimes people picture mental health and mental illness being two ends of a continuum, as if one is the opposite of the other. But, a lot of research shows that we should think about mental health and mental illness as separate yet interconnected concepts that need to be looked at, measured, and responded to differently. We should think of them on two separate continua (Keyes, 2002).

So here’s what the mental health and mental illness continua really look like. On the mental illness continuum, one end runs from severe mental illness to no mental illness. On the mental health continuum, one end runs from poor mental health to good mental health. Each quadrant represents a range of experience (Keyes, 2002). This model shows that a person without a mental illness is not necessarily mentally healthy. They may be feeling down or experiencing a high level of stress because of life circumstances. But it also shows us that we can all strive for good mental health. That even individuals with mental illness can have good mental health.

Let me give you an example. This is Tara. Tara has been diagnosed with depression – a potentially severe mental illness. However, her depression is now under control: she is on medication and she sees her therapist regularly. She likes her job, feels capable of completing her work, and is able to eat right, sleep well and exercise. She feels comfortable and respected in the places where she lives and works and she feels like the people in her life love her and understand her. Despite her mental illness, Tara has good mental health.

So how do we promote mental health? How do we make more people mentally healthy?

While there are things we can do to take care of our own mental health, the community where we live, work and play has a big impact on our mental health.

A community can promote mental health when its members have access to good jobs, incomes, and housing. A mentally healthy community makes people feel safe and secure and like they belong, because it is inclusive of people with different ages, backgrounds, genders, languages and sexualities.

There are simple things that you can do to help create a community that is mentally healthy: Know and accept that everyone faces daily challenges; get involved in your community and give back; support and include different types of people in your community.

Finally, there are many things that you can do to take care of your own mental health – whether you have a mental illness or not: Know and accept that life can be challenging; create purpose in your life by learning and trying new activities, like starting a hobby and setting realistic goals; create healthy, trusting relationships with people who accept and support you; know and accept your strengths and weaknesses; accept yourself and others – it is the basis of self-esteem; and learn to recognize and understand that you and others have good and bad feelings.

By increasing good mental health, all of these things contribute to the overall health of Canadians. Like the World Health Organization (2014) famously said –THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT MENTAL HEALTH.

## References

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