

It has always been easier to define mental illnesses than to define mental health. More recently many have recognized that mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. Even though many of us don't suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder, it is clear that some of us are mentally healthier than others. The study of the characteristics that make up mental health has been called "positive psychology." Here are some of the ideas that have been put forward as characteristics of mental health:

- The ability to enjoy life is essential to good mental health. James Taylor wrote that "The secret of life is enjoying the passing of time. Any fool can do it. There ain't nothing to it." The practice of mindfulness meditation is one way to cultivate the ability to enjoy the present. We, of course, need to plan for the future at times; and we also need to learn from the past. Too often we make ourselves miserable in the present by worrying about the past or future.

- The ability to bounce back from adversity has been referred to as "resilience." It has been long known that some people handle stress better than others. Why are some Viet Nam combat veterans handicapped for life, while others become United States senators? Why do some adults raised in alcoholic families do well, while others have repeated problems in life? The characteristic of "resilience" is shared by those who cope well with stress.

- Balance in life seems to result in greater mental health. We all need to balance time spent socially with time spent alone, for example. Those who spend all of their time alone may get labeled as "loners", and they may lose many of their social skills. Extreme social isolation may even result in a split with reality. Those who ignore the need for some solitary times also risk such a split. Balancing these two needs seems to be the key – although we all balance these differently. Other areas where balance seems to be important include the balance between work and play, the balance between sleep and wakefulness, the balance between rest and exercise, and even the balance between time spent indoors and time spent outdoors.

- Flexibility - We all know people who hold very rigid opinions. No amount of discussion can change their views. Such people often set themselves up for added stress by the rigid expectations that they hold. Working on making our expectations more flexible can improve our mental health. Emotional flexibility may be just as important as cognitive

flexibility. Mental healthy people experience a range of emotions and allow themselves to express these feelings. Some people shut off certain feelings, finding them to be unacceptable. This emotional rigidity may result in other mental health problems.

- Self-actualization - What have we made of the gifts that we have been given? We all know people who have surpassed their potential and others who seem to have squandered their gifts. We first need to recognize our gifts, of course, and the process of recognition is part of the path toward self-actualization. Mentally healthy persons are persons who are in the process of actualizing their potential. In order to do this we must first feel secure.

What is Good Mental Health? When we talk about mental health we look at how you think, act, and feel. In general, people with good mental health have a positive attitude, they feel good about themselves and others, and they act RESPONSIBLY in their work and relationships. Mental health is much like physical health. There are times when we feel “down-in the dumps” just like there are times we might have a cold. Obtaining good mental health and physical health is no accident. We must learn to maintain and take care of our selves to achieve good mental and physical health. All the events in the world today can create much stress. However, we can make the decision to handle these events in a “positive” way and continue to cope with everyday decisions. If you find yourself dwelling on more negative thoughts, take action to help relieve your stress. Let some things go... talk out your frustrations, get some physical exercise... get enough sleep... and take time for yourself (read, bike, garden, golf, fish, hunt, etc.).

If you feel you can't “get out of the dumps”, don't be afraid to ask for help.

Being aware of the services available to you and an awareness of how to access them is one way to care for your mental health and maintain balance. Start your plan to achieve good mental health TODAY and be Kinder to yourself and each other.