

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH



The Justice Desk
A Human Rights NPO



Let's start here:

WHAT IS HEALTH?

Health is a state of complete *physical*, *mental* and *social* well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (physical or mental weakness).

WHO, World Health Organization



Physical

Social

Mental



INTRODUCTION

WHAT MAKES A PERSON HEALTHY?

| Physical Health | Mental Health | Social Health |
|---|---|--|
| Refers to the body. | Refers to the mind. | Refers to our interactions with others. |
| Focus is on the way our bodies work. | Focus is on our emotional, psychological and social well-being. | Focus is on a person's sense of belonging. Lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs are important for social well-being. |
| Affects physical functioning. | Affects how we think, feel and act. | Effects our sense of belonging and how we interact with others. |
| Out of the components that make up overall health; physical health is the most visible/ easiest to see when a person is not physically healthy e.g. broken arm | Often not easy to see when a person is suffering from mental illness e.g. depression | Problems with social well-being is visible in terms of the way an individual interacts with individuals in their life e.g. an individual who was once outgoing, isolating themselves. |
| A person is viewed as physically healthy when all internal and external body parts, organs, tissues and cells can function properly as they are supposed to function. | A person is viewed as mentally healthy when they are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in a state of well-being and they realize their own potential • can cope with the standard stresses of life • can work productively and areas of their life are • not negatively impacted by their mental state. | A person is viewed as having social well-being when: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they feel supported • they feel a sense of belonging and social inclusion • they are able to interact with others |





- If a system is working well, it is called healthy.

- The body and mind work together to keep us healthy.

So, why do we think physical health is more important than mental health?

- There is a lot of stigma around mental health, mental illness and disorders.
- Mentally ill individuals are discriminated against.
- There is a limited knowledge & understanding of mental illness among members of society.
- Physical illness is accepted as a 'real illness'.
- Many people do not talk about or accept mental illness as a 'real illness'.



MENTAL ILLNESS VS PHYSICAL ILLNESS

Activity: Is one accepted more than the other?

1. Activity

Get in pairs and act out 2 scenarios. In the first scenario one person must act as the boss and one person must act as the employee.

Scenario 1: The employee must call the boss and say that they will not be able to come into work today because they have broken a bone (or any physical illness or pain). The boss must respond to the employee. Act this out. Think of how this will play out in a real work setting.

Then switch roles and act out scenario 2.

Scenario 2: The employee must call the boss and say that they will not be able to come into work today because they are having a depressive episode or severe anxiety (or any mental illness issue). The boss must respond to the employee. Act this out. Think of how this will play out in a real work setting.

Note: In the workplace and school environment mental illness is often misunderstood and the amount of stigma about mental illness leads to people being labelled as 'weak' or 'making excuses' whilst physical illness is accepted as a 'real illness' or a 'valid excuse'.



2. Reflect and discuss

Discuss in a group how you think these types of scenarios will take place in real life.

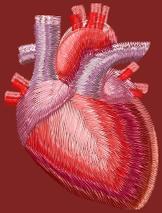
- Will the boss be equally understanding of a mental illness and a physical illness?
- Do you think one is accepted more than the other?
- Do you think a boss will understand what is meant by mental illness?

The Complex Human Brain

Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, a psychiatrist, speaks about the brain and the heart to help us understand why we shouldn't think of mental illness as anything less 'real' than physical illness. He illustrates how complex the human brain is compared to the heart.

Psychiatrist: A medical doctor who diagnoses and treats mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders : a specialist.

Psychologist: A person who specializes in the study of mind and behavior or in the treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders : a specialist in psychology



- We look at physical illness like heart problems or heart attacks as a 'real' condition
- There is a specialist that works with the heart and looks after the heart. The specialist is called a cardiologist.
- The Heart is a pump a pump with 4 chambers, blood vessels and 2 billion muscle cells that is responsible for pumping blood through the circulatory system.

- We often look at mental illness or disorders like depression or anxiety disorder as a 'weakness' or 'made-up'.
- There are specialists that work with the brain called psychiatrists and psychologist.
- The brain has 100 billion neurons that make over 30 trillion connections that links, connects and shares information- control functioning, personality formation, consciousness and creativity etc. The brain is the most complex organ in the body.



The Brain is the most complex organ in the human body. It has taken years to understand what we currently understand about the brain. So, why is it so is it so difficult to believe that the most complex organ can have problems with its functioning? Mental illness is real and there are effective ways of treating mental disorders. Increased scientific knowledge and understanding and the removal of stigma will help us to understand the complex human brain more.

The biggest barriers to effective treatment:

- 1.Lack of awareness
- 2.Lack of access and
- 3.Stigma!

Modern mental health care and effective treatments are available. But we still need more research and greater understanding of the causes of and treatments for certain cases. But treatments do exist!

FACTORS INFLUENCING MENTAL HEALTH

- Biological Factors
- Social Factors
- Psychological factors

Note: Mental illness is not a choice- a person does not choose to have a mental disorder.

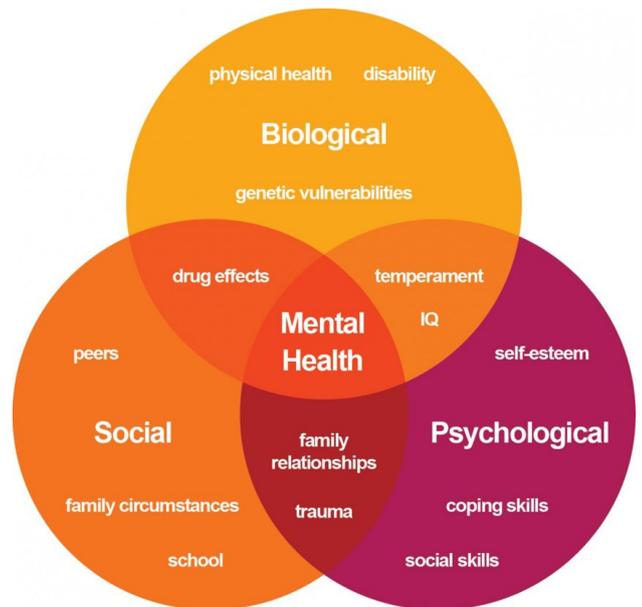


Diagram 1: Sourced from kidsmatter.edu.au

What is Mental Health?

We immediately start thinking about mental health problems or mental illness, but that is only one part.

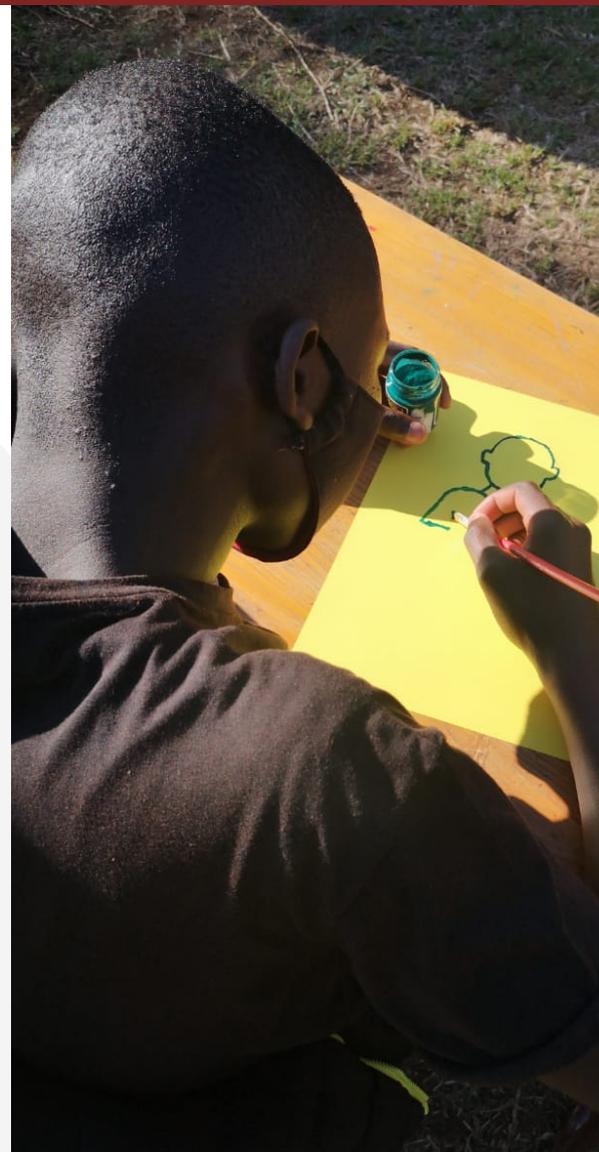
- Mental Health applies to everyone

- It is how we feel about ourselves
- Our ability to make friendships & maintain relationships
- Our ability to learn, grow and develop emotionally

- It is about having the ability to overcome

Mental Health relates to your:

- Self-esteem
- Confidence
- Support
- Decision-making





What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness is a condition that causes serious disorders in a person's behaviour and way of thinking.

“Everybody gets sick sometimes. When you have a sore throat, you might take medicine and sleep a lot. If you have a broken arm, you get a cast. Even teachers and parents get sick, and have to take medicine and rest to get better.

Just like physical illness, people can experience a mental illness anytime. You may hear people describe mental illness as a mental disorder, neurological disorder or a mental health challenge. Having a mental illness can change how you think, feel or act.

It can sometimes make it harder to do the things you want to do. Just like when your body is sick and you go to a doctor, someone with a mental illness can go to a mental health professional.”*

*[Walkinourshoes.org/mental illness](http://Walkinourshoes.org/mental_illness)

WHAT MAKES SOMETHING A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER?

A person with a mental health disorder/ psychological disorder is defined as:

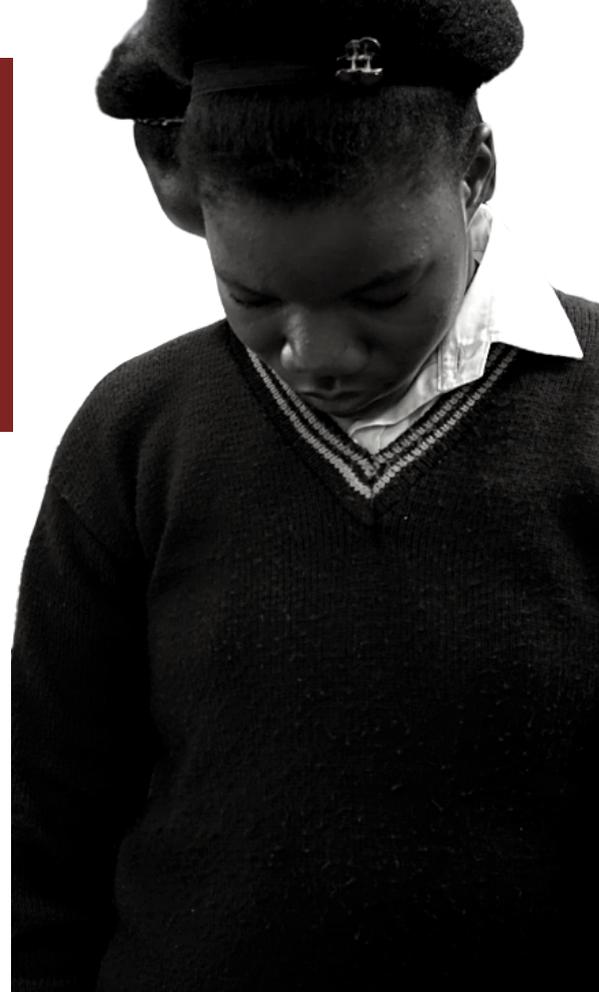
Having **patterns** of thoughts, feelings or behaviours that are **deviant**, **distressful** and **dysfunctional** and impact a person's ability to function healthily.

But what does this mean?

Let's unpack this definition:

1. **Patterns:** Repeated or regular i.e. takes place more than once.
2. **Deviant:** Different from your standard cultural context (so different from what is considered standard in your context).
3. **Distressful:** A negative feeling that something is wrong.
4. **Dysfunctional:** Your ability to work and live is clearly negatively impacted and can often be measured.

All of this impacts a person's ability to function in a healthy way.



MENTAL HEALTH IS IMPORTANT

Your mental health is a very important part of your overall health.

This is why we must understand mental health and mental illness

Poor mental health can affect many, if not all, areas of your life!

YOUR MENTAL HEALTH CAN AFFECT:

- Your relationships (family, friends, peers etc.)
- Your work
- Your concentration
- Your sleep (too much or too little)
- Your body/ physical health



“Sadly, too often, the stigma around mental health prevents people who need help from seeking it. But that simply doesn’t make any sense. Whether an illness affects your heart, your arm or your brain, it’s still an illness, and there shouldn’t be any distinction.”

Michelle Obama

THE PREVALENCE OF MENTAL DISORDERS GLOBALLY

In 2017 WHO reported that it is estimated that:

792 million people
worldwide suffer from some kind
of mental or behavioural disorder.
This is an increase from the 450
million people in 2010.



Despite this high number, there is a lack of mental health awareness.
This results in:

- A lack of understanding about mental health, mental illness and mental health disorders
- Individuals being ashamed to talk about their mental illness and seek help
- Highly levels of stigma which prevents people from seeking help.



What is Mental Health Stigma?

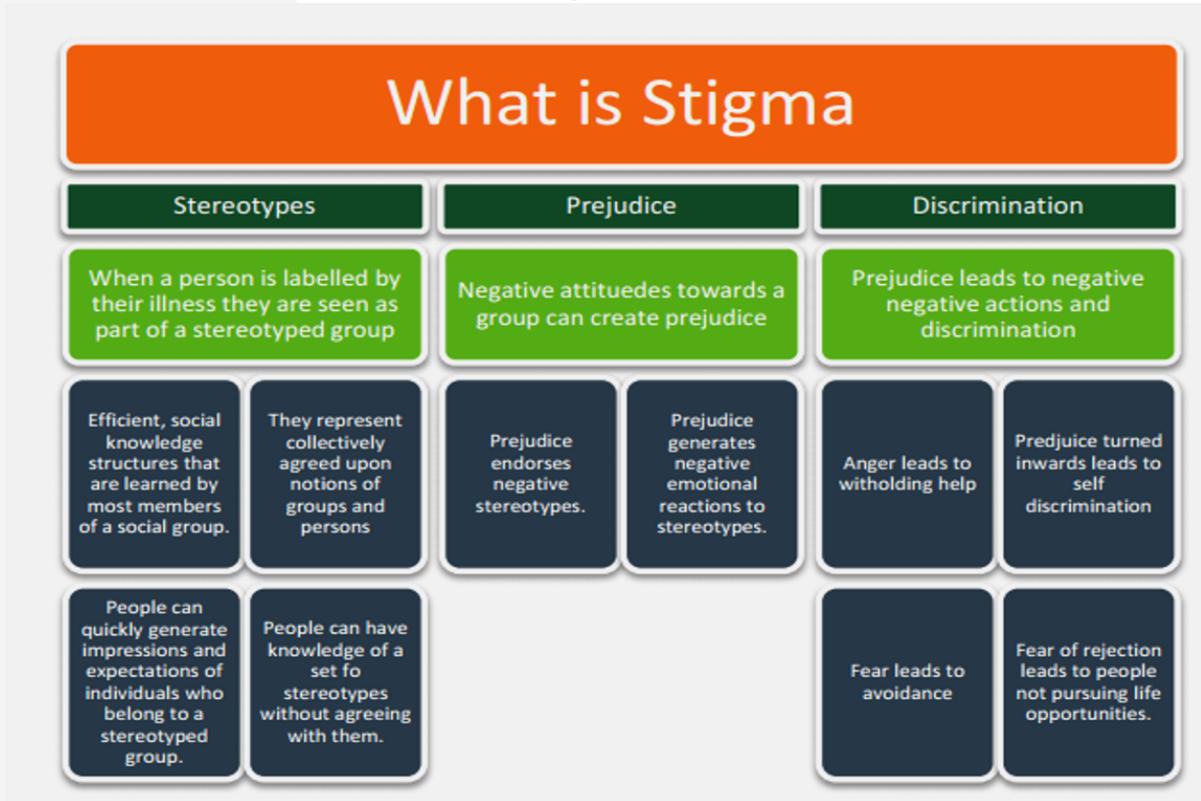


Figure Above: What is Stigma. SRSB Mental Health Campaign Handbook, page 4.

“

“An environment that respects and protects basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights is fundamental to mental health promotion. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights, it is very difficult to maintain a high level of mental health.” (World Health Organisation)

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MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Mental Health Stigma is everywhere it is in our:

- Language
- Actions
- Social media
- Media
- Jokes
- Slang

We need to be aware of our actions and choices and how they can increase mental health stigma.

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT INCREASE MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

- "You are being selfish"
- "There are people out there worse off than you"
- "They are dangerous"
- "They are faking it for attention"
- "Just get over yourself"
- "She is crazy"
- "Overreacting, so dramatic"
- "But I was fine after that, what is your problem?"
- "Ignore it and it will pass."

"Breaking the stigma around Mental Health means that we need more voices to speak out.

We are many. We are Brave!"

Malcom Gertse. TJD CED Manager

Also remember, mental health illnesses are not adjectives

'you look so anorexic'

'she was shouting at me yesterday, she is so bipolar'

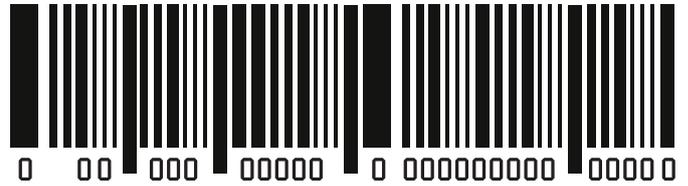
'that movie made me so depressed'

'He is psycho'

BARCODE VOTES

When The Justice Desk speaks about everyday activism, we always speak about barcode votes. This term refers to the idea that when you purchase any item from a shop, and the barcode is scanned, you are immediately voting for this product to be back on the shelf. This concept can be applied to the words you use your behaviour, every action is a vote!

When talking about the stigma around mental health it is important to recognise that we can all play a part in bringing about change. Our words and actions can increase the stigma or they can end the stigma.



Be aware of the words you use when speaking about mental health and mental illness. Language needs to shift from causing stigma to being:

- Constructive
- Compassionate
- Empowering

Why is it important to create an environment where people feel comfortable speaking about mental health?

- What if calling the fire department was viewed as being weak, uncool, unsafe or was something that someone was judged for doing?
- It is important and necessary to put out the fire, isn't it? Yes.
- Well then, why are individuals who are suffering from mental health illness made to feel too afraid/ too uncomfortable/ reluctant to ask for help with the pain and suffering they are experiencing?
- Surely, it makes sense to stop the pain, just like it makes sense to stop a fire?

Ignorance results in fear which leads to discrimination and fuels stigma. This leads to people not seeking the help they need and deserve. People end up saying 'I'm Fine' when the reality is far worse.

We need to recognise the importance of seeking help for mental illnesses or disorders, but this will continue to be difficult if we continue to view mental health as less important than physical health.

Your
Words
Have
Power To
End
Stigma &
Create
Safe
Spaces



Mental Health Awareness Activities:

1. Create a pledge to end mental health stigma in your school. Encourage everyone to sign it.
2. Challenge mental health stigma with awareness campaigns and invite a guest speaker to explain mental health issues to your school.
3. Create a mental health board with all the important numbers of national helplines & information about mental health concerns.
4. Start a let's listen campaign and create a safe school environment for individuals to seek the help they need.
5. Create a mental health room at your school which will be a safe space for counseling and support to take place.
6. Develop a mental health support system strategy with your teachers.
7. Create a Mental Health Week with activities and events each day of the week (e.g. one day encourage all of the students wear a green ribbon to support mental health and fight stigma, teach mindfulness and meditation make stress balls during lunch with common household items etc.)

The Justice Desk

Promoting the Power of
Everyday Activists

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