

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255657987>

Defining mental health and mental illness

Article · January 2009

CITATIONS

8

READS

120,513

2 authors, including:



Nisha Dogra

University of Leicester

150 PUBLICATIONS 2,532 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



GEMS University of Limerick [View project](#)



Diversifying the medical curriculum [View project](#)

Defining mental health and mental illness

Sharon Leighton and Nisha Dogra

Key features

- Discussion of the terminological confusion that exists in relation to issues associated with mental health.
- The scale of individual suffering from mental health problems and illness among young people.
- The worldwide phenomenon of the stigmatization of mental illness, originating during childhood.
- Evidence regarding interventions to reduce stigma.

Introduction

In this chapter we explore the concepts of mental health and mental illness from different perspectives, including those relating to children, and of children. This is important as those who work in mental health, or are familiar with the field, often make the assumption that the terms used are readily understood by others. The scale of the problem and access to services is outlined. We then discuss stigma generally, explore the reasons for it and possible sequelae, and then consider how this relates to children. Finally, interventions to reduce stigma are briefly presented. As mentioned in the Introduction, where possible we have referred specifically to the literature relating to children but where this is limited we have drawn from the wider literature to highlight key issues.

The chapter begins with an exercise which provides a practical context for the theoretical content and should be borne in mind as you read, and answered once you have finished the chapter.

Box 1.1

Exercise

General questions

- What words or images do you associate with the following terms:
 - Mental health
 - Mental health problems
 - Mental illness
 - Mental disorder
- What sorts of problems do people experience that could be described as mental health problems or mental illness?
- How would you be able to tell if someone was experiencing mental health problems or mental illness?

Case scenarios and associated questions

Please read each scenario and then consider the following questions in relation to it:

- What do you think might be happening with the young person?
- Do you think the young person has a mental health problem or illness? If so, on what grounds would you justify that decision?
- Do they need help?
- If so, who and/or what might be helpful?
- How might this be helpful?

Case scenario 1

Jack, aged 9, lives with his mother and younger brother. His father unexpectedly left the family a year ago. Jack started a new school six months ago and is having difficulty settling in. He complains of tummy ache each school morning and is increasingly reluctant to attend.

Case scenario 2

Emily, aged 14, lives with her parents, who are both busy professionals. She works hard, achieves A-grades and plans to be a lawyer. Recently she has been teased by her friends about her weight and has decided to go on a strict diet. She is pleased with the results so far and plans to continue eating little, making herself sick after meals and exercising a lot.

Case scenario 3

Joshua, aged 15, lives with his dad and stepmother. He has little contact with his mum or younger brother and sister. Recently he has been cautioned by the police for joy-riding in stolen cars with his mates. He prefers to spend time smoking dope with older boys rather than going to school.

Defining mental health and mental illness

Clarity is essential when using the terms 'mental health' and 'mental illness'. In all phases of a recent small-scale research project, conceptual confusion was identified in the literature review and among participants (Leighton 2008). Ironically, referring to mental illness in terms of mental health originated in the 1960s in an attempt to reduce stigma (Rowling *et al.* 2002). There is no widely agreed consensus on the meaning of these terms and their use. Mental health and mental illness can be perceived as two separate, yet related, issues.

Ryff and Singer (1998) suggest that health is not a medical concept associated with absence of illness, but rather a philosophical one that requires an explanation of a *good life* – being one where an individual has a sense of purpose, is engaged in quality relationships with others, and possesses self-respect and mastery. This is synonymous with the World Health Organization (WHO) (2000, 2005b) definition of positive mental health.

However, such a definition is incomplete as individuals do not exist in isolation, but are influenced by, and influence, their social and physical environments. Furthermore, people will have their own individual interpretations of what a *good life* is. Rowling *et al.* (2002: 13) define mental health as the

capacity of individuals and groups to interact with one another and the environment in ways that promote subjective wellbeing, the optimal development and use of cognitive, affective and relational abilities, the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice.

This is a more rounded definition, and one that can coexist alongside the WHO (1992) definition of mental disorder.

Mental health – one of many factors

It is also important to recognize that neither physical nor mental health exist separately – mental, physical and social functioning are interdependent (WHO 2004). Furthermore, all health issues need to be considered within a cultural and developmental context, as do the social constructs of childhood and adolescence (Walker 2005). The quality of a person's mental health is influenced by idiosyncratic factors and experiences, their family relationships and circumstances and the wider community in which they live (WHO 2004). Additionally, each culture influences people's understanding of, and attitudes towards, mental health issues. However, a culture-specific approach to understanding and improving mental health can be unhelpful if it assumes homogeneity within cultures and ignores individual differences (WHO 2004). Culture is only one, albeit important, factor that influences individuals' beliefs and actions (Tomlinson 2001; Dogra 2003). Interaction between different factors may lead to different outcomes for different individuals.

It can be argued that the above approaches are rooted in western perspectives. However, they provide a useful starting point from which to discuss mental health issues with children and their families.

Definitions of child mental health

Definitions of mental health as they relate specifically to children have been provided by the Health Advisory Service (HAS) (1995) and the Mental Health Foundation (1999). These definitions bear similarities to those provided by Ryff and Singer (1998) and Rowling *et al.* (2002), while recognizing the developmental context of childhood – i.e. the ability to develop psychologically, emotionally, creatively, intellectually and spiritually; initiate, develop and sustain mutually satisfying personal relationships; use and enjoy solitude; become aware of others and empathize with them; play and learn; develop a sense of right and wrong; and resolve problems and setbacks and learn from them (HAS 1995; Mental Health Foundation 1999). Such definitions are useful as they relate to 'societal' expectations of children.

Different definitions are used to define mental ill health. The WHO uses the term 'mental disorders' broadly, to include mental illness, intellectual disability, personality disorder, substance dependence and adjustment to adverse life events (WHO 1992). The WHO acknowledges that the word 'disorder' is used to avoid perceived greater difficulties associated with 'illness' – for example, stigma and the emphasis on a medical model. Meltzer *et al.* (2000) use the term 'mental disorders' in reference to emotional, conduct, hyperkinetic and less common disorders as defined by the ICD (International Classification of Diseases) 10 and DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) IV. Jorm (2000) focuses specifically on depression and psychosis. Meanwhile, Rowling *et al.* (2002) use the terms 'mental illness' and 'mental disorder' interchangeably. Johns (2002) and the British Medical Association (BMA 2006) identify that the term 'mental health problems' is used to cover a broad spectrum of conditions ranging from diagnosable disorders such as anxiety and depression, through to acting out behaviours. The BMA (2006) also distinguish between mental disorders and illness, with illness being severe psychiatric disorders such as depression and psychosis.

- WHO (World Health Organization) (2000) *World Mental Health Day. Mental Health: Stop Exclusion – Dare to Care*, <http://who.int/world-health-day/en/>, accessed 2 December 2005.
- WHO (World Health Organization) (2001) *World Mental Health Day. Mental Health: Stop Exclusion – Dare to Care*, <http://www.emro.who.int/MNH/WHD/WHD-Brochure.pdf>, accessed 2 July 2009.
- WHO (World Health Organization) (2004) *Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice: Summary Report*. Geneva: WHO.
- WHO (World Health Organization) (2005a) *Child and Adolescent Mental Health Policies and Plans*. Geneva: WHO.
- WHO (World Health Organization) (2005b) *WHO European Ministerial Conference on Mental Health: Facing the Challenges, Building Solutions: Stigma and Discrimination Against the Mentally Ill in Europe*, <http://www.euro.who.int/document/MNH/ebrief10.pdf>, accessed 12 July 2008.