What is mental health?

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Mental health is about how people think, feel, and behave. Mental health care professionals can help people manage conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, addiction, and other disorders that affect their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Mental health can affect a person's day-to-day life, relationships, and physical health. External factors in people's lives and relationships can also contribute to their mental well-being.

Looking after one's mental health can help a person maintain their ability to enjoy life. This involves balancing their activities, responsibilities, and efforts to achieve psychological resilience.

Stress, depression, and anxiety can affect mental health and may disrupt a person's routine.

Although healthcare professionals often use the term "mental health," doctors recognize that many mental health conditions have physical roots.

This article explains what mental health and mental health conditions mean. It also describes the most common types of mental health disorders, including their early signs and how to treat them.

The WHO definition of mental health

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According to the [World Health Organization (WHO)](#) ✔:

> "Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."

The WHO states that mental health is "more than the absence of mental disorders." Peak mental health is about managing active conditions and maintaining wellness and happiness.

The organization also emphasizes that preserving and restoring mental health is important at individual, community, and societal levels.

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In the United States, the National Alliance on Mental Illness estimates that almost 1 in 5 adults experience mental health problems each year.

In 2021, an estimated 14.1 million adults ✓ in the U.S., about 5.5% of the adult population, had a serious psychological condition, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).

Risk factors for mental health conditions

Everyone is at some risk of developing a mental health disorder, regardless of age, sex, income, or ethnicity. In the U.S. and much of the developed world, depression is one of the leading causes ✓ of disability.

Social and financial circumstances, adverse childhood experiences, biological factors, and underlying medical conditions can all ✓ shape a person's mental well-being.

Many people with a mental health disorder have more than one ✓ condition at the same time.

It is important to note that mental well-being depends on a balance of factors, and several elements may contribute to the development of a mental health disorder.

The following factors can contribute to mental health conditions.

Socioeconomic pressure

Having limited financial means or belonging to a marginalized ethnic group can increase the risk of mental health disorders as a result of biases in healthcare.

A 2015 Iranian study ✓ describes several socioeconomic causes of mental health conditions, including poverty and living on the outskirts of a large city.

The researchers also described flexible (modifiable) and inflexible (nonmodifiable) factors that can affect the availability and quality of mental health care treatment for certain groups.

- socioeconomic conditions, such as whether work is available in a local area

- occupation

- a person's level of social involvement

- education

- housing quality

Nonmodifiable factors include:

- gender

- age

- ethnicity

- nationality

The researchers found that being female increased the risk of low mental health status by nearly four times. People with a "weak economic status" scored highest for mental health conditions in this study.

Childhood adversity

Several studies ● report that childhood traumas such as child abuse, parental loss, parental separation, and parental illness significantly affect a growing child's mental and physical health.

There are associations between childhood abuse and other adverse events and mental health disorders. These experiences also make people vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Biological factors

The NIMH suggests that a person's family history can increase the likelihood ● of mental health conditions, as specific genes and gene variants put a person at higher risk. However, having a gene associated with a mental health disorder does not guarantee that a condition will develop.

Likewise, people without related genes or a family history of mental

Chronic [stress](#) and mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety may develop due to underlying physical health problems, such as [cancer](#), [diabetes](#), and [chronic pain](#).

Mental health resources

Visit [our dedicated hub](#) for more research-backed information and resources on mental health and well-being.

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Types of mental health disorders

Healthcare professionals group mental health disorders according to the features they have in common. They include:

- [anxiety](#) disorders
- mood disorders
- [schizophrenia](#) disorders

Anxiety disorders

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, anxiety disorders are the [most common](#) mental health disorders.

People with these conditions have severe fear or anxiety related to certain objects or situations. Most people with an anxiety disorder try to

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Below are some examples of anxiety disorders.

Generalized anxiety disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) involves excessive worry or fear that disrupts everyday living.

People may also experience physical symptoms, including:

- restlessness

- fatigue

- poor concentration

- tense muscles

- interrupted sleep

Anxiety symptoms do not always have a specific trigger in people with GAD.

They may experience excessive anxiety when encountering everyday situations that do not pose a direct danger, such as chores or appointments. A person with GAD may sometimes feel anxiety with no trigger at all.

Panic disorder

People with panic disorder experience regular panic attacks involving sudden, overwhelming terror or a sense of imminent disaster and death.

Phobias

There are many types of phobias, and what may seem typical to one person might be a severe problem that dominates daily life for another. Different types include:

- **Simple phobias:** These may involve a disproportionate fear of specific objects, scenarios, or animals. A fear of spiders is a typical example.

- **Social phobia:** Sometimes known as social anxiety, this is a fear of being watched or judged by others. People with social phobia often

- **Agoraphobia:** The term "agoraphobia" refers to a fear of situations where getting away may be difficult, such as being in an elevator or a moving train. People sometimes misunderstand this phobia as a fear of being outside.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder

People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) may experience constant, stressful thoughts and an urge to perform repetitive acts, such as handwashing.

PTSD

PTSD can occur after a person experiences or witnesses a stressful or traumatic event. During this type of event, the person thinks their life or other people's lives are in danger. They may feel afraid or that they have no control over what is happening.

These sensations of trauma and fear may then contribute to PTSD.

Mood disorders

People may also refer to mood disorders as affective disorders or depressive disorders.

People with these conditions have significant mood changes, generally involving either mania, a period of high energy and joy, or depression. Examples of mood disorders include:

- **Major depression:** An individual with major depression experiences a constant low mood and loses interest in activities and events that they previously enjoyed (anhedonia). They may feel prolonged periods of sadness or extreme sadness.

- **Bipolar disorder:** A person with bipolar disorder experiences unusual changes ✅ in their mood, energy levels, levels of activity, and ability to continue with daily life. Periods of high mood are known as manic phases, while depressive phases bring on low mood.

- **Seasonal affective disorder (SAD):** Reduced daylight during the fall,

Read more about the different types of bipolar disorder.

Schizophrenia disorders

The term "schizophrenia" often refers to a spectrum of disorders characterized by features of psychosis and other severe symptoms. These are highly complex conditions.

According to the NIMH, signs of schizophrenia typically develop between the ages of 16 and 30 ✓. A person will have thoughts that appear fragmented, and may also find it hard to process information.

Schizophrenia has negative and positive symptoms. Positive symptoms include delusions, thought disorders, and hallucinations, while withdrawal, lack of motivation, and a flat or inappropriate mood are examples of negative symptoms.

Early signs

No physical test or scan reliably indicates whether a person has developed a mental health condition. However, people should look out for the following as possible signs:

- withdrawing from friends, family, and colleagues

- avoiding activities they would usually enjoy

- sleeping too much or too little

- eating too much or too little

- feeling hopeless

- having consistently low energy

- using mood-altering substances, including alcohol and nicotine, more frequently

- displaying negative emotions

- being confused

- being unable to complete daily tasks, such as getting to work or cooking a meal

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- hearing voices

- experiencing delusions

Diagnosis

Diagnosing a mental health disorder requires a multistep process. A doctor may begin by looking at a person's medical history and performing a thorough physical exam to rule out a physical condition that may be causing the symptoms. They may also order laboratory tests, such as imaging exams and bloodwork, to screen for possible underlying causes.

The healthcare professional will also do a psychological evaluation. This includes asking about a person's symptoms and experiences and how these affect the individual's life. The doctor may ask a person to complete mental health questionnaires to help understand their thoughts, feelings, and behavior patterns.

Most mental health care professionals use the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, text revision (DSM-5-TR) to make a diagnosis. The DSM-5-TR contains descriptions and specific criteria for a diagnosis.

Treatment

Various methods are available to help manage mental health conditions. Treatment is highly individual, and what works for one person may not work for another.

Some strategies or treatments are more successful in combination with others. A person with a mental health disorder may choose different options at various stages in their life.

It is important for an individual to work closely with a doctor who can help them identify their needs and provide suitable treatment.

Below are some treatment options for people with mental health conditions.

Psychotherapy, or talking therapies

The following types of therapy✓ take a psychological approach to treating mental health:

- cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- exposure therapy
- dialectical behavior therapy

Psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and some primary care physicians carry out these treatments.

Therapy may help individuals to understand the cause of their mental health condition. Working with a healthcare professional may help people manage their day-to-day living and reduce any risk of isolation and self-harm.

Read more about psychotherapy.

Medication

Some people✓ take prescribed medications, such as antidepressants, antipsychotics, and drugs for anxiety.

Although these medications cannot cure mental health disorders, some can help improve symptoms. They may also help a person to manage their social interactions and routines.

Some medications boost the body's absorption of feel-good chemicals,

Self-help

A person coping with a mental health condition may decide to make certain lifestyle changes to help them manage their well-being.

Changes [may include](#) ✔:

- reducing alcohol intake, if applicable

- trying to improve [sleep quality](#)

- eating a [balanced, nutritious diet](#)

- taking time away from work, if this is possible

- practicing relaxation techniques, such as [deep breathing](#), [meditation](#), and [mindfulness](#)

A support network, whether through self-help groups or close friends and family, can be helpful to a person's well-being.

Myths vs. facts about mental health

There are several [commonly held misconceptions](#) about mental health. Here are some examples:

Myth	Fact
A person with a mental health condition has low intelligence.	Mental health disorders can affect anybody regardless of intelligence, income, or social status.
Teenagers do not have mental health issues. They have [changes in their mood](#) due to their fluctuating hormones.	While teenagers may often have mood changes, it does not mean they do not have mental health conditions. Half of all mental health conditions begin by the age of 14.
People with mental health conditions are dangerous, violent, and unpredictable.	Crimes committed by people with serious mental health disorders make up only [5%](#) of all violent crimes.
Psychiatric medications are harmful.	Mental health conditions, like other health conditions, are real. A healthcare professional may prescribe medication to help people manage their symptoms and day-to-day life.

	quickly. However, changes in a person's state of emotion may happen quickly.
A person with a mental health condition is weak. Such conditions would not affect strong people.	Having a mental health condition is not related to choice or willpower. Anyone can have a mental health condition.
Bad parenting causes adolescents to have mental health conditions.	Many adverse experiences and factors may influence a person's mental health and well-being. Relationships with parents and guardians are just one factor. A person living in a supportive, loving home can experience similar mental health disorders to someone living in a home with caregivers who need support to provide a safe environment.
People with mental health needs cannot keep and perform well in a job.	People with mental health conditions can perform well at work ✅, especially in a workplace that supports and promotes mental well-being.

Read more about mental health myths.

Help is out there

If you or someone you know is in crisis and considering suicide or self-harm, please seek support:

- Call or text the 988 Lifeline at 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. Caring counselors are available to listen and provide free and confidential support 24/7.

- Text HOME to the Crisis Text Line at 741741 to connect with a volunteer crisis counselor for free and confidential support 24/7.

- Not in the United States? Find a helpline in your country with Befrienders Worldwide.

- Call 911 or your local emergency services number if you feel safe to do so.

If you're calling on behalf of someone else, stay with them until help arrives. You may remove weapons or substances that can

If you're not in the same household, stay on the phone with them until help arrives.

Outlook

While mental health disorders are common, they vary in severity. Many people can manage their symptoms and lead full lives with treatment and access to support.

For others, recovery may include learning new ways to help manage their lives.

The prevalence of mental health disorders tends to peak in people ages 18–25 ✓ but drops significantly among people ages 50 and over.

Having a mental health condition, especially depression, is associated with ✓ severe chronic health conditions such as diabetes, stroke, cardiovascular disease, and Alzheimer's disease.

Steps to help maintain mental well-being

According to the NIMH ✓, the following steps can help a person manage their mental health by reducing their risk of illness, increasing energy levels, and controlling stress:

- **Regular exercise:** Exercising for 45 minutes three to five times a week can help improve ✓ a person's mental health.

- **Eat a balanced diet and stay hydrated:** This can help a person maintain a constant supply of energy throughout the day.

- **Aim for good-quality sleep:** A 2021 review found that significant improvements in sleep quality led to greater improvements in mental health.

- **Perform relaxing activities:** Breathing exercises, meditation, wellness apps, and journaling can help reduce stress and improve overall health and well-being.

- **Practice mindfulness and gratitude:** A person can identify and note

✕

- **Look for positive social interactions:** Connecting with people and maintaining meaningful relationships can help reduce stress and be a source of support and practical help in times of need.

Summary

The term "mental health" refers to a person's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. It affects how people react to stressors, engage with others, and make choices.

According to the WHO, peak mental health is more than the absence of mental health problems. It is the ability to manage existing conditions and stressors while maintaining ongoing wellness and happiness.

Factors such as stress, depression, and anxiety can negatively affect a person's mental health and disrupt their routine.

A healthcare professional may help someone with a mental health condition to manage their well-being through a program of therapy or medications.

Read this article in Spanish.

Depression　　Mental Health　　Schizophrenia　　Anxiety / Stress
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