Mental illness vs mental health: what's the difference?
Mental health and mental illness are not simply two sides of the same coin. Mental health, just like physical health, exists on a spectrum from poor to optimal.

With physical health, some days we naturally feel stronger and more energetic than others. Similarly, some days our mental health is worse than others, and that too is a natural part of being human. We may feel tired, grumpy, sad, angry, anxious, depressed, stressed, or even happy at any point in time. These are all normal human emotions, and aren't on their own a sign of mental illness.

How The Conversation is different: We explain without oversimplifying.
Someone living with a mental illness can be experiencing optimal mental health at any point in time, while someone else can feel sad or low even in the absence of a mental illness.

Differentiating between poor mental health and symptoms of a mental illness is not always clear-cut. When poor mental health has a sustained negative impact on someone's ability to work, have meaningful relationships, and fulfil day-to-day tasks, it could be a sign of mental illness requiring treatment.

Mental health and mental illness are not the same thing. You can have poor mental health in the absence of a mental illness. Supplied, adapted from Keyes 2002.
What does positive mental health look like?
Mental health is more than just the absence of mental illness.

Positive mental health and well-being is a combination of feeling good and functioning well. Important components include:

experiencing positive emotions: happiness, joy, pride, satisfaction, and love

having positive relationships: people you care for, and who care for you

feeling engaged with life

meaning and purpose: feeling your life is valuable and worthwhile

a sense of accomplishment: doing things that give you a sense of achievement or competence

emotional stability: feeling calm and able to manage emotions

resilience: the ability to cope with the stresses of daily life

optimism: feeling positive about your life and future

self-esteem: feeling positive about yourself

vitality: feeling energetic.

How can I cultivate my mental health?
Your mental health is shaped by social, economic, genetic and environmental conditions. To improve mental health within society at large, we need to address the social determinants of poor mental health, including poverty, economic insecurity, unemployment, low education, social disadvantage, homelessness and social isolation.

Positive mental health involves being able to cope with the challenges of daily life. Shutterstock On an individual level, there are steps you can take to optimise your mental health. The first step is identifying your existing support networks and the coping strategies that you've used in the past.

There are also small things you can do to improve your mental health and help you to cope in tough times, such as:

helping others

finding a type of exercise or physical activity you enjoy (like yoga)

getting good sleep

eating healthy food

connecting with others, building and maintaining positive relationships

learning strategies to manage stress

having realistic expectations (no one is happy and positive all the time)

learning ways to relax (such as meditation)

counteracting negative or overcritical thinking

doing things you enjoy and that give you a sense of accomplishment.