

Lecture 10: Physical and Mental Health

June 12, 2025

1 What is Health?

Definition 1: Health

A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. (WHO, 1948)

Example 1

Consider two individuals: one with no diagnosed disease but suffering chronic anxiety, and another with controlled diabetes but strong social support and activity. According to WHO, the second may be “healthier” overall despite a chronic condition.

1.1 Analysis

The WHO definition shifts focus from pathology to holistic well-being. It invites us to examine how mental health and social factors interrelate: e.g., community programs that reduce loneliness can improve physical outcomes such as blood pressure.

2 Micro-level Causes of Illness

Individual lifestyle choices are socially patterned. For instance:

- **Tobacco use:** In 2018, 15% of Canadian adults smoked regularly, but among lower SES groups the rate was nearly 25%.
- **Physical inactivity:** Census data show 30% inactivity nationally vs. 45% in neighbourhoods lacking safe parks.

Social context shapes these behaviours: peer networks can normalize smoking or exercise. A 2019 study found that having at least two physically active friends increased an individual’s odds of meeting activity guidelines by 50%.

3 Macro-level Causes: Social Determinants of Health

Definition 2: Social Determinants of Health

Non-medical factors influencing health: the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, shaped by economic policies, social norms, and political systems. (WHO)

Example 2: Food Environments

A Toronto neighbourhood designated a “food desert” saw a 20% higher diabetes incidence over ten years compared to adjacent areas with supermarkets within 1 km.

3.1 Analysis

This illustrates how access to healthy foods—rooted in urban planning and economic investment— influences disease patterns. Policies incentivizing grocery stores in underserved areas can yield measurable health gains.

4 Sociological Paradigms of Health

4.1 Conflict Theory

Highlights power dynamics: pharmaceutical corporations may prioritize profit over access, leading to unequal medication pricing.

4.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Focus on subjective meanings: the “sick role” defines expectations for those labelled ill.

Definition 3: Sick Role

A set of societal norms allowing individuals temporary exemption from normal duties, provided they seek and comply with medical advice.

Example 3: Sick Role in Practice

student diagnosed with influenza receives a medical note, is exempted from class, and is “allowed” to rest; however, costs or stigma may prevent others from enacting this role.

4.3 Functionalism

Views health as vital for social stability. Chronic illness is “dysfunctional” and must be managed to maintain social order. Critics argue this overlooks structural barriers.

5 Upstream Thinking

Shifts focus from individual treatment to prevention via policy. Examples include:

- Implementing a sugar tax to reduce soft drink consumption.
- Investing in early-childhood education to promote long-term mental health resilience.