

Defining mental health and mental illness

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.

Introduction

In this 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.

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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.

Summary

Considerable terminological confusion exists in relation to issues associated with mental health generally and among children and young people specifically. Furthermore, stigmatizing attitudes towards mental illness and related issues continue to pose a challenge. Children, young people and adults display similar negative attitudes towards both mental illness and individuals experiencing mental health problems or illness. However, there is some evidence that these might be amenable to interventions such as education.