

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

What is emotional health?

Emotional health is part of our overall health concerned with the way we think and feel. It refers to our sense of well-being, and our ability to cope with life events. Emotional health is about our ability to acknowledge and respect our own emotions as well as those of others.

People are not born with good or poor emotional health, it depends on the circumstances they grow up in, as well as the knowledge and skills and experience they collect throughout life and how they use those.

An analogy might be that emotional health is like a ladder. Strong climbers have learned to cope with stress and problems, to build strong relationships and are good at recognising when problems get too much so they ask for help.

People who may not be coping well, who feel isolated and overwhelmed by all the problems they have to deal with are sliding towards the bottom, and may need support to find their balance and start moving up again.

Emotional health is not the same as happiness. Happiness is an emotion that can come and go very quickly. Emotional health is like a toolkit which equips you to get the most out of life.

How is it different from mental health?

Emotional health is a relatively new term. Historically, health was dealt with by people in the medical profession, who were mostly trained to treat illness. Even now, many people say mental health when actually what they mean is mental illness. However, the official definition is:

- ✦ Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (World Health Organisation).

What are emotional health problems?

- ✦ In the same way that being physically fit can help to prevent illness, being emotionally resilient can help prevent emotional and even mental health problems.
- ✦ Emotional health problems occur when a person is under so much stress that it starts to affect their wellbeing. Signs include feeling very low, acting aggressively and using a lot of drugs or alcohol, depression, anxiety, self-injury and suicidal feelings.
- ✦ Mental health problems are like emotional health problems but usually have a physical basis (sometimes genetically inherited), for example a chemical imbalance in the brain. However, mental health problems can be triggered by high stress, and building emotional health helps someone recover from mental illness.

Why is emotional health important?

- ✦ Good emotional and social skills are more important for success at school, in work and in your personal life than a person's cognitive (thinking) ability. Poor emotional health can impact on other aspects of your life like relationships, health, school, sports and home life.
- ✦ Young people who do not mix well socially are between two and three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms, compared with those who have confiding relationships.
- ✦ 10 per cent of teenagers aged 15 and 16 years old have deliberately self-injured. Young people who self-injure use fewer positive coping strategies than people who do not self-injure. For more information see DEAL Factsheet: Understanding self-injury.
- ✦ One in five young people experience psychological problems at any given time.

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- * In 2005 Samaritans received approximately 5 million contacts from people in distress.
- * Poor emotional health can result in destructive behaviour. In Canada, bullying in schools is estimated to happen once every seven minutes. On average, bullying episodes are brief, approximately 37 seconds long. But by the age 24, 60% of identified bullies have a criminal conviction.
- * There are 24,000 cases of attempted suicide by people aged 10-19 years each year in England and Wales, which is one attempt every 20 minutes. For more information see DEAL Factsheet: Understanding Suicide.

Social pressure, stigma and discrimination

Mental health problems are often misunderstood and people suffering these problems face negative stigma as a result.

- * Many young men feel it is less socially acceptable for boys to talk about feelings than girls. In a survey of people aged 14-16, only 52% of boys talked to their friends about their feelings more than once a month, compared to 82% of girls.
- * One in four people experience a mental health problem at some point in their lives and nearly three-quarters of us know someone who has been diagnosed with one. Yet the stigma of having a mental health problem is so high that 50% of people said if they developed a mental health problem they would not want anybody to know about it.
- * The embarrassment of admitting something is wrong can be so great it stops people getting the help they need. Only 1 in 5 of 16-24 year olds with suicidal thoughts say they would seek help from a GP.
- * 83% of mental health service users say that the stigma and discrimination they face from the public has a bigger impact on their lives than their mental illness itself.

Building resilience and looking after your emotional health

Here are just a few examples of ways to reduce physical and psychological stress:

- * Friends and family: Social support was also found to be the single most powerful influence on wellbeing and lack of distress. Isolation is a risk factor for depression so put time into building solid relationships with people.
- * Know yourself: Being self aware means stopping to reflect on things that happen, what they made you think and feel, and how other people reacted to that. It can help you build friendships and find new ways of coping with difficult situations.
- * Keep a balance: When you know you are under pressure, for example because it's exam season or you're dealing with stress, take extra care to look after yourself. Unwind physically and mentally, and unload your feelings by talking to someone.
- * Keep healthy: stress can suppress the immune system. Make sure you eat well, exercise and get enough rest.
- * Get creative, get active, help others: Doing something positive can help alleviate low mood and builds self worth.
- * Be part of something: Whether it's religion, a football team, a choir or a community, being part of a group is good for emotional health.

Many people have fairly sophisticated techniques for looking after their emotional wellbeing at times of stress but major life events like parents divorce, being a victim of crime or moving country can be hard. If you feel things are getting on top of you, make the most of the help that's out there.

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For further information and support...

BBC Health

Website full of useful facts about emotional and mental health with links to support.

Web: www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental

Wired for health

A website with information for students and teachers.

Web: www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk

Young Minds

Friendly website with information and postings about emotional health.

Web: www.youngminds.org.uk

Samaritans

Our volunteers are there 24 hours a day to give confidential emotional support.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (United Kingdom) or

Tel: 1850 60 90 90 (Republic of Ireland)

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Web: www.samaritans.org

Write to: Chris PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA, Scotland

DEAL FACTSHEET