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For Lanark
Children and Youth

Mental Health and Mental Illness: Youth Edition

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Summary: Mental health is your brain's ability to make sense of and interact with the world around you, enjoy life, realize your personal potential, and handle the ups and downs of everyday life. Although mental health problems are common today's stressful society, the good new is that there many things that you can do to be mentally healthy.

Mental Health vs. Mental Illness

Many people talk about mental health and mental illness as if they were the same thing. But they're not the same thing at all.

For starters, mental health is something we all have. Mental illness only affects some people. Just like physical health, there are some things that you can do to be mentally healthy and reduce your chances of developing a mental illness.

What is Mental Health?

Mental health is your brain's ability to:

- Make sense of and interact with the world around you;
- Enjoy life;
- Realize your personal potential;
- Handle the ups and downs of everyday life.

Your brain (or mind) is the starting point for your mental health. It helps you manage pretty much everything in your life, like your:

- Feelings;
- Mood;
- Thoughts;
- Behaviours;
- Relationships;

- Responsibilities (like school or work).

Remember that your mind and body are closely linked-they are not separate. Mental health depends a lot on how well you take care of your body: how well you eat, and whether you get enough sleep and exercise.

What is Mental Illness?

Mental illness happens when problems with thoughts, feelings or behaviours get in the way of every day life: at home, school, work or in relationships.

For example, everyone feels sad or upset once in a while. But when these feelings become so strong that it's hard to carry on at school or home, then it could mean a mental health problem.

Some of the most common mental illnesses for young people are depression, anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and eating disorders.

Did you know?

In North America, 1 in 5 children and youth will have some type of mental health problem.

Can I Have a Mental Illness and Be Mentally Healthy at the Same Time?

Yes. It may sound strange, but we can have an illness and still have health. Do you know someone with diabetes? They may need a special diet, exercise plan and medications, but they can still feel 'well', and do the things they need to do. This is also true for mental illnesses. Youth with depression may need regular 'talk' therapy and medications. They may need help learning to cope with stress, or how to handle emotions. But when the depression is under control, they can feel well, enjoy school, friends and activities.

What Causes Mental Illness?

Both mental illnesses and physical illnesses are caused by a combination of many things, for example:

Genetics

The genes you get from your parents have a big role to play in whether of not you have a risk for developing a mental illness. If your parents or grandparents live with a mental illness, it's something that could be passed down to you. But having a family history of mental illness doesn't mean that you will develop one. There are lots of things you can do to take care of your mental health (more about this later!), and lower the chance that you'll experience mental health problems. For example, some people have a family history of heart attacks. If they exercise, eat well and avoid smoking, they can really lower the chance that they'll have a heart attack.

Environment

Your environment and your experiences have a big influence on your mental health. Your environment includes:

- Family, friends and other support people;
- Your home, neighbourhood and school;
- Your culture;
- Day to day stresses;
- Life experiences;
- Your family's income;
- Opportunities for learning, recreation and employment.

Your mindset

This means:

- The way you look at things (your point of view or 'outlook');
- How you 'explain' your experiences to yourself;
- The way you connect and interact with others;
- How you cope with stress and feelings;
- How you care for your physical and mental health;

(for example: eating well, exercising, getting enough sleep, expressing feelings in a constructive way, problem solving).

You probably can think of 2 people in your life who look at the same situation very differently, and would respond to the same situation very differently. Some ways of looking at things promote mental health better than others. Some things that could help improve or prevent a mental illness:

- Good social skills;
- Positive ways to manage stress and feelings (ways of handling things that help to relieve stress, instead of making it worse).

The good news? You can learn how to do all of this stuff!

When Should I Be Concerned and Get Help?

Talk to an adult you trust about getting help if:

- You are overwhelmed by your feelings, and having trouble managing them;
- You find your moods, feelings or behaviours are really getting in the way of your life at home, school, work or with friends;
- You're noticing big changes in your eating or sleeping patterns;
- You're pulling away from friends;
- You're just not interested in things you used to like (for example, school, sports or other activities);
- You're feeling hopeless, or that your life is not worth living;
- You have thoughts of ending your life.

How Can I Prevent Mental Health Problems?

Just like we can prevent physical health problems, we can also reduce our chances of developing mental health problems. We can do things to promote our physical health, by eating healthy food, exercising, not smoking or wearing a seatbelt. But even if we do all these things, we sometimes still get sick or hurt. It's just the same for mental health. Sometimes
a situation is just too difficult, or feelings too overwhelming to handle alone.

Some Ways to Prevent Mental Health Problems

Try to practice these every day!

You may find these helpful, but if you don't, that's OK too.

- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise daily-even a walk makes a difference! Try to get outside, too.
- Try to surround yourself with positive, supportive people.
- Eat plenty of nutritious foods.
- Spend time everyday doing things that make you feel good.
- Take time to relax.
- Use problem solving skills and effective ways to reach your goals.
- When you are upset, try to see things from other people's point of view.

- Be in touch with your feelings, and talk with close friends and family about your thoughts and how you feel.
- Learn ways to calm yourself when you get stressed (maybe yoga or mindfulness).
- Instead of constantly thinking about problems or worries, try working to solve the problem. Or distract yourself for a while with something you enjoy.
- Try new things, or learn to master a new hobby.
- Forgive yourself and forgive others.
- Learn to say no.
- Go offline.

Stigma: Negative Attitudes about Mental Illness

Youth often feel ashamed, guilty or embarrassed about having a mental health problem. They may be afraid of being judged by others. This 'stigma' is a big reason why youth don't reach out for help when they need it. Youth may believe that the struggles they are having are signs of weakness or that they really have no good reason to feel the way they do. Some youth may just 'tough it out', and not seek support.

What Helps to Change Attitudes About Mental Illness?

You can help to reduce stigma and change attitudes about mental illness by:

- Talking about mental health with people around you;
- Trying to think about mental health and illness the same way you think about physical health and illness;
- Accepting friends going through mental health struggles and offering support;
- Not blaming yourself or others;
- Asking for help when you need it-this sets a great example for others!

What Should I Do If I Think I Have a Mental Illness?

You don't have to be alone through this. Depression, anxiety or other mental health problems often trick people into thinking that they don't deserve help, but that's the mental health problem speaking. Start by letting a trusted adult know. Start thinking about resources and supports inside you and around you. You'll see more information about community resources at the end of this fact sheet.

For example:

1. YOU

Positive coping (how have you handled rough times in the past?);
• Being able to reach out for support;
• Helpful ways of thinking about things.

2. FAMILY

- Parents
- Siblings, e.g. brothers, sisters
- Grandparents, cousins, uncle or aunts

3. FRIENDS

- Friends can be a great support, but you need to make sure that you share your struggles with an adult who can help. Friends aren't always able to connect you to the help you need.

4. SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

- Family doctor;

- Teachers, school social workers or counsellors;
- Community health or resource centres, youth organizations, hospitals;
- Telephone support lines.

5. GET STARTED AND FOLLOW THROUGH

- Keep track of the actions you're taking. This can help you see the progress you're making. Plan some little 'rewards' for yourself, for sticking to your
plan. Don't freak out if you mess up-everyone slides a bit when trying to make a change. Learn from it, and move on.

6. REFLECT

Think about what's working and what's not working. Be sure to pay attention to the things that may be getting better. Ask yourself:

- Is your goal realistic?
- What part of the plan am I having trouble with?
- Do you need:
    - More time?
    - More support?
    - A different plan?

What to Expect from Mental Health Professionals and Support Lines

Most mental health professionals will be able to help you with many questions and concerns you may have. People you can talk to include (but are not limited to):

- Your school counsellor;
- Your family doctor;
- A community counsellor (often found in your local community health or resource centre);
- Trained volunteers;
- A social worker;
- A psychologist;
- A psychiatrist.

These professionals are used to hearing all about sorts of situations, so don't worry about scaring them off. When you share your concerns, they will:

- Listen without judging;
- Keep it confidential;
- Include others if you are feeling unsafe;
- Try to get a better understanding of your unique situation by asking questions;
- Explore strategies that have worked for you in the past;
- Share information, tips and tricks for you to consider;
- Consider referring you to another service or professional who might be more helpful or specialised.

For more information on all the different types of services and professionals out there, check out our Mental Health Services handout.

Before Speaking With a Mental Health Professional...

Asking for help is not easy, but it is often the first step to getting better. Many youth tell us they wish they had asked for help sooner. It will be easier to speak with a counsellor if you think about a few things ahead of time. You may even want to write things down.
Start by asking yourself:

- What's bothering me?rite down or describe your concern by asking yourself:
- What have I noticed?
- When does it happen?
- Where does it happen?
- Why do I think it happens?
- What have I tried to make things better?
- What am I hoping to get out of my visit (or conversation)?

If you want extra support, ask a family member or friend to help you (you don't have to be alone). If you have questions, write them down so you don't forget.

About This Document

Created and reviewed by members of CHEO's Mental Health Information Committee. Many thanks to YouthNet's Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) for reviewing and revising.

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