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# Achieving Positive Mental Health

When was the last time you asked someone at the gym what was ailing them? Chances are the person on the Stairmaster beside you is exercising to increase their physical well-being, not fight an illness. So why do so many people wait until they develop a mental illness before taking steps to improve their mental and emotional well-being?

Public perceptions are an important factor. Media images portray physical fitness as sexy, a worthy pursuit for people with self-discipline and high self-esteem. In contrast, learning to deal with emotions and improve one's mental health is viewed as an indication of weakness, something only a sick person needs to do.

These widely held views prevent people from achieving positive mental health and increasing their resistance to mental illness. For example, much press is devoted to rising depression and suicide rates in adolescents. However, little mention is made of protective factors. For example, high school students in BC with strong family connections are less likely to smoke cigarettes or marijuana, drink alcohol, feel emotional distress or consider suicide. Nearly one-fifth of youth without an adult family member to talk to experienced severe emotional distress in the previous month, compared to 5% of those who have someone to talk to. When these same youth were asked if they thought they would live to be 25, 97% said yes, but the 3% that said no are at very high risk and report poorer health, more physical abuse, many more thoughts of suicide, and more cigarette and alcohol consumption.

These relationships start young: a Canadian

study of high school students' coping strategies found that self-esteem was the prominent protective resource youth could use against daily negative life events and that problem-solving coping strategies were instrumental in helping adolescents to avoid too much stress and depression.

These findings show the logic of prevention programs and ongoing activities aimed at maintaining positive mental health. Examples include stress reduction programs, activities that help children build self-esteem and community events that are accessible to members of society who may feel isolated such as seniors or people with disabilities.

Skeptics may point to the cost of such programs, but investing in mental health could actually reduce the overall costs of health care. For instance, according to recent research:

- 7.7 million hospital days in Canada are due to mental illness and suicidal behaviour.
- People with mental illness, as a group, represent the most frequent category of billings by general practitioners.
- Four of the top 10 costliest medications prescribed in BC are for mental disorders. The bill for these in 2003 to Pharmacare was more than \$58.5 million.
- Mental illness-related hospital stays account for more than twice the number of bed days as cancer does; in BC, the average stay is 29 days and roughly 19,000 people require inpatient beds for mental illness.
- About 20,000 mental health and

## Tips for Reducing Daily Stress

According to a recent CMHA survey, three-quarters of Canadians feel really stressed at least once a month. Below are suggestions to cope with this mental health hazard:

- learn to delegate tasks: e.g. rather than cleaning the whole house by yourself, have each family member clean one room
- practice saying "no": if you're not sure about something, say you need more time to think about it
- put "relaxation time" on your "To Do" list each day
- prioritize: learn to distinguish between what is truly urgent and what you think is important (e.g. if you need to see the doctor about a lump, don't worry about sending a birthday card on time)
- consider yourself successful if you accomplish half- to two-thirds of the activities you plan for each day
- try sleeping for an hour more than you think you need
- challenge any thoughts that put yourself down or dwell on negative outcomes (e.g. "That was stupid of me to forget," or "I'll never finish this project on time")
- keep reminding yourself to breathe: to activate your body's relaxation response, breathe through your nose and make your belly rise and fall with each breath
- experiment with various activities until you discover what is truly relaxing for you (e.g. hot baths, listening to music, gardening)
- quit smoking

## Ten Steps to Mental Health

- Build a healthy self-esteem.
- Learn to manage stress effectively.
- Acknowledge and express your emotions.
- Make friends who count.
- Develop positive family relationships.
- Create a reasonable budget and live within your means.
- Learn to enjoy nutritious foods and regular exercise.
- Create strategies to cope with changes that affect you.
- Get involved in your community.
- Have a spirituality to call your own.

addictions patients are discharged from the hospital each year. 77% of these clients receive 30-day follow-up services, provided by physicians and community mental health centres.

- Mental illness and those with substance use problems represent one of the top categories of “frequent users” of emergency room services. And it’s a wide range of mental disorders; in fact, a fifth of people with mood or anxiety disorders use emergency rooms, according to Statistics Canada.

In order to reduce the impact of mental illness, Canadians need to learn what positive mental health is and how to achieve it. A 2006 national survey showed that 40% of Canadians still don’t know concrete strategies to improving their mental well-being. Health professionals have a variety of definitions for mental and emotional well-being, but the consensus is that mental fitness is more than just the absence of illness. The two qualities that appear most often in definitions of well-being are resiliency—the ability to rebound from life’s setbacks—and empowerment which means having a sense of control over one’s life whether one lives in an institution or in the community.

An important aspect of resiliency is learning how to cope with different situations. It is especially valuable to model good coping skills for children, so that they are better equipped to meet life’s demands without their mental health suffering. If you’ve had a tough day or are experiencing some extra stress, do something that will take your mind off your problems and allow you to relax: take a bath, get outdoors, do some yoga, or listen to your favorite music. Try to avoid using alcohol or medications to relax or take your mind off your problems. It is important to exercise moderation in using such substances. Modelling good coping skills, and moderate and appropriate use of substances is

an effective way of communicating to young people and improving their resiliency.

The relationship between positive mental health and overall health has been explored in detail by Aaron Antonovsky who studied survivors of Nazi concentration camps. He noticed that some of them were in remarkably good health and had coped relatively well with their horrific experiences. To explain this, he theorized that people with a healthy outlook on life are more able to cope successfully with trauma and stress. He defined a healthy outlook (or a sense of coherence) as the extent to which people feel that life is meaningful, manageable and comprehensible.

In fact, feelings of well-being can be protective in various ways. For example, people who are sick but have happier dispositions tend to have decreased hospital visits, calls to the doctor, medication use, and work absences. Emotional well-being also affects physical health through social relationships, behaviour, stress, accidents, suicide, coping strategies, and immune system functioning.

One study based out of Vancouver found that women above 60 who had high levels of psychological well-being—engaging in positive daily activity and healthy social relationships, for example—had reduced levels of two chemicals associated with age-related diseases like Alzheimer’s and arthritis. Conversely, poor mental health can be life-threatening. Older women who are emotionally distressed due to finances, family stress and feelings of hopelessness are far more likely to die sooner than those without such problems.

Since many people with mental illness find meaning in life and excel in many circumstances, they, too, can strive for and achieve positive mental health. One individual who has is Maurizio Baldini, a mental health advocate and former lawyer with schizophrenia. Baldini says he finds it rewarding to offer support to others. “I have a positive outlook on life and have been lucky enough to build a comfortable life for myself.”

The idea that health extends beyond the physical person is not new in other parts of the world. Many cultures do not differentiate between mental illness and physical illness. For example, many cultures including Asian, African and Aboriginal groups tend to view health issues more holistically and express mental health symptoms as a sign of imbalance. These and other cultures view much greater roles for the family, the spiritual healers and Elders, and symbolic healing that involves a wider community. For example, many Aboriginal groups would look to the Medicine Wheel to help describe mental health. The wheel seeks a balance between four, interrelated quadrants: mental, physical, social and spiritual.

### Partners:

*Anxiety Disorders  
Association of  
British Columbia*

*British Columbia  
Schizophrenia  
Society*

*Canadian Mental  
Health Association,  
BC Division*

*Centre for  
Addictions  
Research of BC*

*FORCE Society for  
Kids’ Mental  
Health Care*

*Jessie’s Hope Society*

*Mood Disorders  
Association of BC*

**For more  
information call  
the Mental Health  
Information Line  
toll-free in BC at  
1-800-661-2121**

**or email  
bcpartners@  
heretohelp.bc.ca**

**web:  
heretohelp.bc.ca**

## Do You Have Positive Mental Health?

People with positive mental health are:

- **authentic:** live in the here and now, respond to people and events in a genuine way
- **realistic:** know the difference between what they can and cannot change
- **in the driver's seat:** take steps to control what they can change and take responsibility for their actions and feelings
- **open to experience:** willing to experience both their internal and external realities accurately and fully even if it means dealing with grief, anger or frustration
- **capable of intimacy:** are able to give and receive love and share their feelings with others
- **accepting of others:** gauge people by their individual merits and not according to race, sex, age or economic background
- **balanced in their reactions:** able to lead as well as follow, judge as well as empathize
- **able to enjoy life:** take pleasure in family, community, work and leisure without expecting perfection
- **self-accepting:** feel good in their own skin, like themselves and have a sense of being worthwhile

Source: Dr. Ian Pike

These ideas are gradually emerging in Western medicine as well. The mental health community considers both the individual and his or her experiences within a larger context that includes the immediate family, the workplace and the broader ecological, social and economic environments.

But even if the big picture doesn't appeal to you, research shows that well-being is possible if you develop and maintain supportive relationships with family and friends. According to Dr. Ian Pike, a wellness consultant in BC:

*Whether we smoke or exercise are important determinants of health, but whether we live longer, healthier and happier lives because we jog and eat right is questionable. We do know, however, that strong social supports, such as family and friends that we can count on, regardless of the situation, are the best predictors of longevity.*

In the daily crush of stressors and worries, it seems we may be starting to get the point about balance and peace of mind even if we don't talk about it as positive mental health. In a 2006 Canadian Mental Health Association poll, nearly 90% agree that it is as important to strive toward positive mental health as it is to strive toward physical fitness.

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