

Mental Health & Chronic Disease

Positive mental health is more than the absence of a mental illness (WHO, 2007). The Public Health Agency of Canada defines mental health as:

the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is the positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity. (Government of Canada, 2006; Lakaski and Trottier, unpublished)

Having positive mental health means having the ability to enjoy life, deal with life's challenges, emotional and spiritual wellbeing and social connections, and respecting culture, equity, social justice and personal dignity (CIHI, 2009). Positive mental health is often referred to as "flourishing," that is having positive emotional, psychological and social wellbeing (Keyes, 2007).

An individual's mental health is impacted by everyday experiences in all settings. Supportive work, family, and social environments can enhance the capacity of individuals to enjoy life, deal with life's challenges, and achieve wellbeing. Positive mental health can be fostered through mental health promotion, defined as "the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to take control over their lives and improve their mental health. Mental health promotion uses strategies that foster supportive environments and individual resilience, while showing respect for culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity" (Joubert & Raeburn, 1998).

Health-Related Consequences

People with positive or flourishing mental health experience greater resilience and stronger bonds with friends and family, miss fewer days at work, use fewer health care services, and experience lower levels of chronic conditions (Keyes 2007). Communities also benefit from enhanced social interaction and mentally healthy environments at school, work and in social settings (WHO et al., 2004). Conversely, poor mental health and mental illness can have debilitating effects on a person's life and on the population's health (Government of Canada, 2006; WHO et al., 2004).

Mental and physical health share similar risk factors and symptoms, and are similarly affected by the social determinants of health, social isolation, and lack of social support (Bunker et al., 2003; CMHA Ont., 2008). Mental and physical health are closely associated: people with poor mental health are more likely to develop or experience a worsening of a wide range of chronic physical illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease or respiratory problems, and vice versa (CMHA Ont., 2008, Government of Canada, 2006). Conversely, positive mental health is a protective factor against chronic physical conditions. People with high levels of positive mental health tend to experience lower rates of physical health problems than those with moderate or poor mental health or mental illness (Keyes, 2005).

Prevalence

In 2002, 6.9% of Ontarians (15 years and older) rated their mental health as fair or poor and 4.8% of Ontarians reported symptoms of a major depressive episode experienced in the previous 12 months (Statistics Canada, 2002). The Canadian lifetime prevalence is estimated at 12.2% for depression and 11.5% for anxiety disorders (Government of Canada, 2006), but these figures may be underestimated (Patten, 2009).

Cost

Depression has one of the highest disease burdens and economic costs of a chronic condition in Ontario (Jain, 2008). Across Canada, the economic burden of mental illness was close to \$51 billion in 2003 (Lim et al., 2008). Mental health claims are the fastest growing category of disability payments (Canada Safety Council, 2005).

Reason for Action

Research demonstrates that mental health status is a key consideration in influencing and changing the health status of a community (WHO 2005). Anything less than flourishing mental health is associated with higher rates of chronic disease, impairment and experiences with disability (Keyes, 2007). Emotional, psychological, social and spiritual wellbeing are vital components of overall health and lead to greater social connectedness and psychosocial functioning.