

What is mental health?

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual is:

Able to realize their potential,

Able to cope with stressful life situations that come their way,

Able to have meaningful relationships,

Able to make meaningful decisions that lead to optimum work productivity

Able to make a contribution to your community.

When you are not realizing your potential, it means your thoughts, emotions and behaviors are not driving you to achieve that which you aspired to be. There is a mental health problem.

We cannot prevent stressful situations from happening, but we can learn skills which we have to continuously use to combat the stressful situations. These can include loss of a loved one, loss of a job, or loss of a relationship. No one knows that this is going to come, it just happens like that.

We need to know how to positively cope with these challenges.

We need to know how to nurture deep meaningful relationships because these relationships help us prevent major shifts in our mental health such as a mental breakdown. This is because if you have people whom you confide in, you are more likely to receive emotional support. There will be people in your life who can listen to your problems, provide you with positive encouragement and information that you can use to solve your problems. You will not be stuck with your problems wondering “what do I do? whom do I tell?”.

We also need to pay attention to the decisions that we make. Take a moment and ask yourself “Is it a good decision to have multiple boy friends?” Is it a good decision to use drugs to feel good? Is it a good decision to wake up at midday every day? Your decisions should enable you to make a meaningful contribution to your community.

We need to think about our mental health along these lines. We need to continuously monitor our thoughts, our feelings and our behavior so that we can recognize and improve our weaknesses and maintain our strengths. It’s a daily struggle. On a scale of 0% to 100%, rate your mental health.

	OCT	NOV
Realizing your Potential	9/10	9/10
Coping with stressful life situations	9/10	8/10
Deep meaningful relationships	6/10	6/10
Making decisions that build you up	8/10	7/10
Contribution to your community	10/10	
Average total score	10/10	

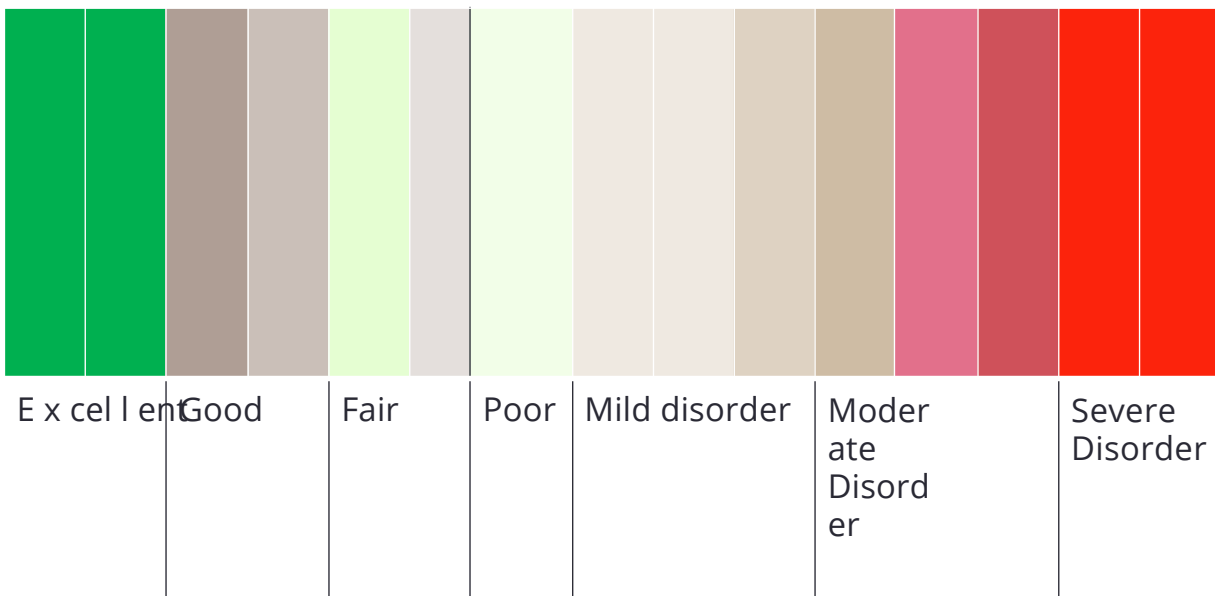
84% 80%

What are the components of mental health?

Our thoughts, feelings and consequent behaviors

What is the mental health spectrum?

Our mental health lies on a continuum whereby on one end of that continuum it's excellent (no problems at all) and on the other end it is extremely poor (severe mental disorder) as shown on the figure below. The number one thing that impairs our mental health is stress. Stressful problems will lead to major negative changes in our mental health.



What is stress?

Stress is a combination of physical, mental, and emotional reactions that you experience when the demands on you exceed the personal and social resources that you are able to mobilize to deal with those demands.

What is the relationship between stress and mental health?

Stressful problems impair our mental health. Whenever we experience difficult situations, call them problems or challenges our mental health gradually shifts from being excellent (the green zone) to being extremely poor (the red zone). This shift is gradual over many months or years. This shift is reversible when stress symptoms are mild to moderate and when they are recognized early at the onset of problems.

Categories of Stress

- Biological issues: Genes, Chronic disease e.g., HIV, Cancer Alcohol & Drug use, Medications

- Social issues: Significant loss, Financial losses, Marital conflicts, works conflicts, land conflicts, unemployment

- Psychological issues: Uncertainty, Negative thinking styles, De-motivation, Stigma, Discrimination Fear

Various stressful situations interact to cause major negative changes in our mental health.

Stressful situations are automatically perceived as threats to one's life. They automatically lead to negative thoughts. When you have a conflict with your girl friend, you may automatically think *"My girl friend is going to leave me. I will never be happy"*. When you have a conflict with your husband, you may automatically think *"I am a bad wife, my marriage is going to fail"*.

When your

teenage son is rude and abusive and refuses to go to school, you may automatically think *"My child is addicted to drugs. I am a bad parent."* When you feel certain sensations in your body, you may automatically think, *"I have cancer.....I am going to die."* When we are threatened our thoughts turn negative...In our brains, there is an in-built mechanism to help us survive these threats. It is referred to as the stress- response reaction.

The stress- response reaction

When we are in stressful situations, there are changes in our brains and other body organs. These stressful situations lead to a secretion of a hormone called cortisol, which is also called “the stress hormone.” Cortisol will lead to the release of adrenalin, and this adrenalin will activate various body organs. So your heart will pump more blood and your heart rate increases. Your lungs will be activated to bring in more oxygen thus your respiratory rate increases. Your organs will function more to give you the energy to meet the new demands and once you meet your new demands then cortisol is shut off. This is the stress-response reaction.

Good Stress

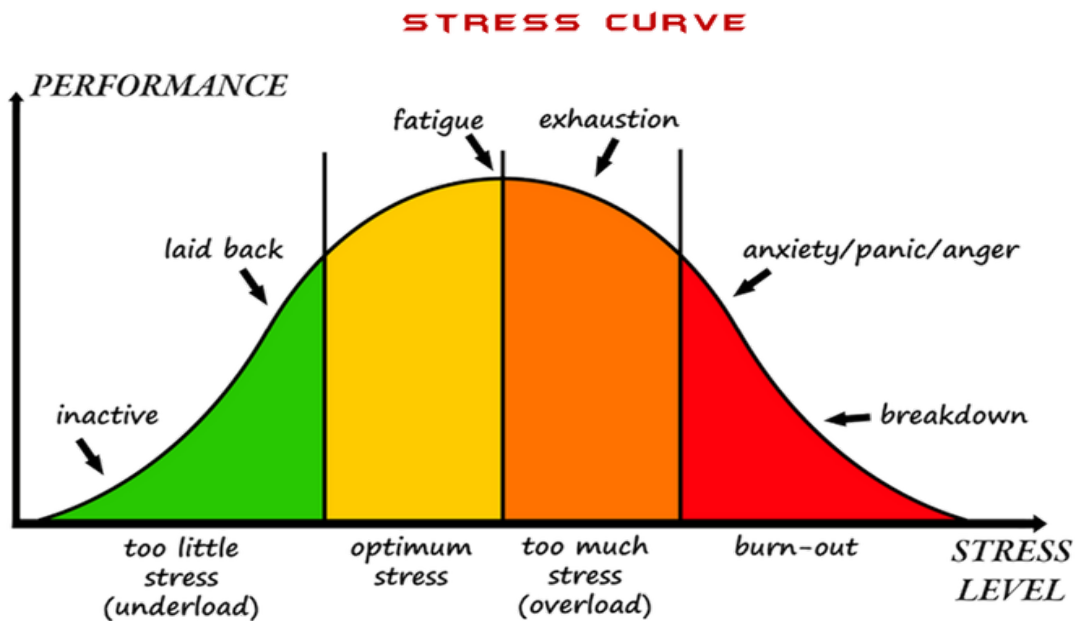
Good stress comes from positive events, for example, winning a scholarship, getting married, having a new born baby, getting a promotion...etc. These events increase the demands on you but they generate positive feelings. Therefore they are not perceived as threats. When you experience positive events they led to normal secretions of cortisol which adequately activates your body organs. This increases your performance which helps you meet your new demands.

Bad Stress

Bad stress comes from negative events, for example, uncertainty brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, financial loss, marital conflicts, work conflicts, loss of income, and loss of a loved one, divorce or separation, sexual harassment or assault, and domestic violence.

This bad stress creates negative feelings like fear, anxiety, and sadness. The brain perceives these signals as a threat. *“Oh my God, this person is in danger, I must work to protect this person”* so the brain secretes cortisol. However, when these problems are chronic, for example, the pandemic is not going away anytime soon, or we do not cope well with negative events,

then the brain secretes excessive cortisol which leads to an excessive stress-response reaction which leads to organ damage. Consequently our performance goes down. Organ damage leads to both physical and mental disorders. The graph below demonstrates the effects of bad and good stress.



Signs of Bad stress

Physical signs

- Persistent headaches
- Dizziness
- Lack of sleep
- Sleeping too much;
- Loss of energy
- Easily gets tired
- Palpitations;
- Body tremors;

Emotional Signs

- Excessive Anger
- Excessive irritability
- Over critical (complains about everything)
- Hostile behavior
- Loss of interest (neglect physical appearance, absenteeism)
- A negative view of oneself, those around you and the future
- Lack of motivation
- Persistent low mood
- Social withdrawal

Cognitive signs

- Decreased ability to focus on tasks
- Decreased ability to remember things (Forgetfulness)
- Decreased ability to concentrate on your work
- Decreased ability to make decisions (Indecisiveness); impaired judgment
- Loss of rational thinking (Suicide ideation / homicidal ideation)
- Negative thinking styles e.g. catastrophizing, labeling,

- Negative coping e.g. self-blame, denial and excessive use of alcohol and drugs

How do we protect our mental health?

1. Get knowledgeable about mental health and Stress. You cannot address what you do not know. You will be able to overcome stigma when you are knowledgeable.

2. Learn to express your pain. Open up about painful, disturbing experiences to close friends you trust. They will offer emotional, information or instrumental support that will lessen the burden you have to carry. A problem shared is half solved.

3. Nurture deep confiding relationships. Be proactive and connect with other people.

Research shows that social connections and support are the strongest buffer against depression. Close connections are important to your well-being. The best way to cultivate and maintain close relationships is to put time and energy into building your relationships with others

4. Create positive experiences to have positive thoughts. Practice positive self-talk, visualize yourself succeeding, recall something in your life you're grateful for; (past success), practice acceptance; learn to say “No” & learn to delegate tasks.

These are some of the positive coping skills that will be discussed in this training workshop

5. Practice spiritual care. Believe in a “higher power” & have FAITH. Schedule Time for a spiritual activity.

6. Schedule physical care activities. Schedule physical activity: go for a walk, play football, gardening, cooking, re-organize your home. Drink more water –rehydrate your- self. Eat right; increase fruit & vegetables in your diet.