

Mental Health

Learn about mental health, what it is and how you can approach the topic when teaching. Find out how to promote positive mental health and wellbeing on this page.

What is mental health?

Mental health is an individual's level of psychological well being which can affect a person's mood and their thoughts and can sometimes dictate their behaviour. Everybody has mental health, and it can be better, worse or fluctuate depending on the individual.

What does mental health mean?

Mental health really means the state of your emotional wellbeing, which affects how you think, feel and behave. Having good mental health means more than just not having a mental health disorder; it means that you are able to make the most of your life, reach your potential and cope with the ups and downs of life. Mental health is just as important as physical health for living a happy, healthy and well-rounded life.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines good mental health as allowing someone to:

- Realise their abilities
- Cope with the normal stresses of life
- Work productively
- Make a contribution to their community

Having good mental health is vital for both individuals and communities to thrive. This is because it allows us to connect with ourselves and others, earn a living and enjoy life.

There are a lot of things that can affect our mental health, but one of the main things is stress. This stress can be caused by many things, such as; our jobs, relationships, physical health and perceptions of ourselves.

Other factors, such as difficult life experiences, can really affect our mental health and cause more serious issues. For example, poor mental health is associated with job

losses, relationship problems, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination and many more factors. It is important we have access to help and support our mental health when we need it.

More research into mental health is being conducted and it is becoming more important than ever to ensure that you are looking after your mental wellbeing in the same way you would take care of your physical health.

What is the difference between mental health and mental wellbeing?

Now we've answered the question 'what does mental health mean?', let's address the difference between mental health and mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing concerns your thoughts and feelings, and how you manage the ups and downs of daily life. While mental wellbeing is not the same thing as mental health, the two things do influence one another. *Prolonged periods of low mental wellbeing can cause mental health conditions like anxiety and depression to develop.* People who suffer from mental health conditions may experience low mental wellbeing frequently, although there will still be periods when they can maintain good mental wellbeing.

What are the characteristics of good mental wellbeing?

It's important to clarify that good mental wellbeing does not mean the absence of negative thoughts and emotions. Feelings like anger, sadness, overwhelm and a range of other emotions may all still arise, but good mental wellbeing means you're able to understand and deal with the feelings. Having good mental wellbeing means you:

- Are confident in yourself
- Build and maintain positive relationships with others
- Have a sense of meaning and purpose
- Live and work productively
- Manage the stresses of daily life
- Cope with change.

What can affect mental wellbeing?

Mental wellbeing is often impacted by events that are out of our control, for example:

- Loss
- Trauma
- Social disadvantages
- Health conditions
- Stress
- Discrimination

How we respond to such events can affect our mental wellbeing. Our habits may not be conducive to good mental wellbeing; for example, withdrawing instead of seeking support and fearing the worst rather than remaining open to different possibilities can both have a negative impact on wellbeing. Developing good habits will improve mental wellbeing so that we are better prepared to face challenges when they arise.

How can you improve mental wellbeing?

Connect with other people

Relationships with others impact our mental wellbeing. They can contribute to feelings of self-worth, provide emotional support and allow us to share positive experiences with others.

To build stronger relationships, try and take time out of your day to be with friends and family. Interactions on social media do not always substitute for meaningful relationships, so try and get into the habit of meeting friends in person if it's safe to do so.

Exercise

Being physically active improves mental wellbeing by increasing self-esteem, helping you to achieve goals and making chemical changes in the brain which promote good moods. Finding a way to be active with friends is a good way to improve mental wellbeing.

Learn a new skill

Learning something new also raises self-esteem, while promoting a sense of purpose. Think of different hobbies you'd like to try and use online resources to support you. Don't put any pressure on yourself to be good at the activity and make sure it's something you enjoy.

Be kind and give to others

Kindness creates positive feelings and helps you connect with other people. Even small acts of kindness like spending time with people who need company and offering to help others can improve mental wellbeing.

Be present in the moment (mindfulness)

Paying attention to the present moment makes life richer and more exciting. Plus, with your mind less likely to wander towards negative thoughts, it'll improve your mental wellbeing and help you understand yourself better.

What is emotional wellbeing?

Emotional wellbeing refers to a person's emotional experience. It concerns how we think, feel and relate to ourselves and others. People who are emotionally healthy can manage their own thoughts, feelings, behaviours, keeping problems in perspective and coping with challenges. Emotional wellbeing doesn't mean a person is happy all the time, but rather they're aware of their emotions and can manage negative feelings.

Tips to improve emotional wellbeing:

- Try and be aware of your emotions and reactions.
- Express feelings in appropriate ways rather than holding onto them or reacting angrily.
- Give yourself time to think before acting.
- Use techniques like breathing and meditation to manage stress.
- Focus on the positive things in your life and don't push yourself too hard.
- Exercise regularly and look after your physical health.
- Connect with others.

What are the benefits of positive mental health?

By having positive mental health, you can lead a much happier life by being more productive, more positive towards yourself and to others and enjoy increased levels of motivations for doing whatever it is that you love to do

Why should we teach about mental health?

With mental health being such a prominent issue in the 21st century, it's becoming more and more important to make children aware of their own mental health. Not only will this make them aware of the *importance of practising mindfulness* and looking after their own mental health in general, but it will also make them understand just how their actions can affect others and their wellbeing.

There are many topics that fall under the subject of mental health, for example:

- Mindfulness
- Emotions
- Self-esteem
- Acts of kindness

Teaching about mental health will help children understand and take notice of any warning signs that themselves, or someone they might know, may be struggling with their mental health. It will also teach them techniques they can use to help cope with any decrease in mental health, and give them advice on how to interact with others who may be in a period of poor mental health.

Equipping children at an early age about signs such as social withdrawal, will give ourselves and the kids the tools to help one another.

What are the effects of poor mental health?

Mental health issues can affect a person's ability to participate in activities that will positively influence their physical health and so on can often follow the other.

It's also important to show children how issues affecting a person's mental health can manifest in a number of different ways, such as eating disorders, anxiety, depression and, in more extreme cases, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

As our kids are exposed to social media and other technologies along with television and magazines, it is important to ensure that they are not comparing themselves to others, especially when it comes to body image.

How to teach about mental health in the classroom

Approaching a serious matter such as mental health in the classroom can be difficult, especially with KS1 & KS2 classes. Twinkl's specially designed resources are meant to make the introduction of mental health a positive and inoffensive thing.

Good mental health will assist with the kids being able to express themselves more clearly, by offering a safe space where they are free to discuss their innermost thoughts and feelings without judgement and instead with love and support.

It may be difficult for a child to open up about a specific worry or troubling thought in front of the whole class, be sure to offer them the opportunity to discuss problems with you one on one so that they can feel more comfortable.

A good way of introducing this topic might be on World Mental Health Week, where you can prepare an hour a day for the whole week that focuses on a different aspect of mental health. This will create a positive first impression of this vital topic and will allow for discussions and encourage whole-class engagement.

How to teach about mental health at home

Much like in the classroom, it can be intimidating trying to introduce your child to such a serious topic. This doesn't have to be the case.

Be as natural and relaxed as possible when explaining what mental health is - help to show your child that it's not something to be afraid of. It's natural and affects everyone in different ways and in different times. Let them know that you're there to answer any questions they might have or are there just to listen to their worries.

What is mindfulness?

Introduce your kids to Mental Health Awareness Week! You can use our mindfulness and mental health resources such as our colouring pages or brain break cards to help them relax and take time to understand their thoughts and feelings and why it is that they feel that way.

Use soothing music around the home to bring the level of energy down if the house is feeling chaotic, encourage the kids to take a moment to be calm and reflect and breathe deeply.

Children have been found to actively worry about their parents, whether they are happy and whether they have enough money, by allowing more honest and open conversations to take place, we may be able to help our children feel a little less stressed or anxious.