

# What is mental health and why is it important?



Mental health is an important part of your overall health and well-being. It includes your emotional, psychological and social well-being and affects how you think, feel and act. Your mental health determines how you handle stress and relate to others and the everyday choices you make. Being mentally healthy can promote productivity and success in work, school, parenting, caregiving and other important aspects of your life.<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous myths about mental health that contribute to harmful attitudes and fuel stigma about mental illness. Take the following quiz to see if you can separate the myths from the facts.<sup>2</sup>

## Self-assessment: Test yourself

Mark “True” or “False” for each statement.

Correct answers are provided at the end of this handout.

1. Poor mental health is the same as mental illness.	T	F
2. Poor mental health increases the risk for long-lasting (chronic) physical conditions, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer.	T	F
3. Mental health does not change over time.	T	F
4. Mental health disorders and illnesses are not that common.	T	F
5. People with mental illness are violent and dangerous.	T	F
6. Genetics/family history is the primary cause of mental illness.	T	F
7. Mental illness cannot be treated.	T	F
8. Depression affects more than 264 million people worldwide.	T	F

## Supporting mental health and healthy lifestyles

Actions are needed to create living conditions and environments that allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles. Some that could promote improved mental health include the following<sup>3</sup>:

- awareness campaigns to change the culture of mental health so that all of those in need receive the care and support they deserve
- mental health interventions at the workplace, such as stress prevention and management programs and programs to build resiliency
- early childhood interventions to help young children build social and emotional skills
- social support for elderly people
- programs targeted to people affected by emergencies, disasters or other traumatic events
- violence prevention at home, work and in the community



## What can you do?

Make a commitment to learn as much as possible about mental health and do your part to reduce the stigma.

## Answers to quiz

1. **False.** Although the terms are often used interchangeably, poor mental health and mental illness are not the same. Mental illnesses are conditions that affect a person's mental health, such as anxiety, depression or bipolar disorder. A person can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with a mental illness. Likewise, a person diagnosed with a mental illness can experience periods of physical, mental and social well-being.
2. **True.** Poor mental health and mental illnesses, especially depression, increase the risk for many types of physical health problems, particularly long-lasting conditions such as stroke, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Similarly, the presence of chronic conditions can increase the risk for mental illness. Mental health and physical health go hand in hand. Both are equally important parts of overall health.
3. **False.** A person's mental health can change over time. When the demands placed on a person exceed his or her resources and coping abilities, mental health can be negatively impacted. For example, if someone is working long hours, caring for an ill family member or experiencing economic hardship, poor mental health can result. Fortunately, poor mental health can improve and people with mental illness can recover.<sup>1</sup>
4. **False.** The *Global Burden of Disease* study estimated that 792 million people live with a mental health disorder. This is slightly more than one in 10 people globally.<sup>3</sup> Although huge numbers of people are affected, mental health disorders often remain hidden and neglected. Mental disorders and illnesses are more common in vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as poor populations, people with chronic health conditions, minority groups and persons exposed to conflict, disasters or other emergencies. Rates of mental illnesses tend to increase after war and other major disasters.
5. **False.** The vast majority of people with mental illness are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. In fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population.<sup>1</sup>
6. **False.** The specific causes of most mental illnesses are not known. Many risk factors have been identified or suggested. These include biological factors (such as brain trauma), psychological factors (such as stressful events) and social/cultural factors (such as poverty). A family history of mental and addictive disorders also can increase risk. However, even for those with genetic risk, environmental factors can play a significant role in whether or not a person develops a mental illness or in the severity of an illness.
7. **False.** Mental illness can be treated. Research shows that people with mental illness can get better and many recover completely.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, an estimated 76 to 85% of people suffering from mental illnesses in low- and middle-income countries lack access to the treatments they need.<sup>3</sup>
8. **True.** Depression is a common illness worldwide. All ages suffer from depression. It is a leading cause of disability around the world and contributes greatly to the global burden of disease.<sup>4</sup>

### Sources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Learn About Mental Health – Mental Health Basics, 2018.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Quiz: Mental Health, 2018.
3. Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. *Global Burden of Disease*, 2017. Available from [www.ourworldindata.org/mentalhealth](http://www.ourworldindata.org/mentalhealth); accessed on 7-14-2020.
4. World Health Organization. Fact sheet: Depression, 2020.

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