

# Mental Health and Mental Illness

## In This Chapter

- How do psychologists define mental health?
- What is stress and how can we deal with it?
- What are the various kinds of emotional or mental disorders?
- How can mental illness be treated?

## Key Terms

mental health

stress

stress cognitive appraisal

mental illness

generalized anxiety disorder

phobia

obsessive-compulsive disorder

major depression

bipolar affective disorder

schizophrenia

personality disorders

Are mental health and mental illness entirely separate conditions at opposite ends of a see-saw, or do they blend and merge more gradually along a continuum of well-being? Distinctions between mental health and illness may not be as clear cut as we think. Although psychologists use their knowledge of mental processes, behaviour, emotions and motivation to help people who are having problems, human beings are complicated creatures, and it is not always easy to determine when they need psychological help. Psychologists often start with a focus not on mental illness, but on mental health. By determining the characteristics of mental “wellness,” they are better able to assess the scale and complexity of psychological problems.

Mental wellness involves experiencing a wide range of emotions. Examine the “emotional temperature” thermometer below and discuss the following questions with your group:

- Have you felt all of these emotions in one day?
- Which emotion do you feel most frequently?
- How would you define the term “emotionally normal”? At what point do changes in mood or emotions become “emotional instability”?
- What causes the emotions of people to change?
- What role should society play in assisting people who frequently exhibit emotional instability?
- How would you advise someone who asked for your assistance because he or she was experiencing emotional instability?



# Mental Health

Does **mental health** mean having no problems? No, but it does imply an ability to recognize the nature of these problems and to deal with most of them before they get out of hand. Although mental health is not related to intelligence or expertise, it does suggest the capacity to use the abilities we have in ways that allow us to function in a state of mental and emotional well-being. What are the characteristics of a healthy mind? Psychologists have suggested the following indicators of mental health:

- Mentally healthy people generally observe and understand what is going on around them.
- They judge their own reactions and capabilities realistically.
- They are aware of their own motives and feelings and can control their behaviour.
- They may sometimes act without thinking about consequences, but they can restrain their impulses when necessary.
- While they may not always behave as society expects, they do so deliberately and with a reason.
- They appreciate their own worth and feel accepted by others in their lives.
- They are capable of forming close and satisfying relationships with others and of being sensitive to others' needs as well as their own.

What if we do not always have all of these characteristics? Does it mean that we have a psychological or an emotional disorder? Not at all. There are times in all of our lives when stress or problems prevent us from functioning as well as we would like. This list is simply a guideline, a rough assessment of what it means to be mentally healthy.

## Stress

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the events in your life? If you have, then you are definitely familiar with stress. Mentally healthy individuals experience stress as a normal part of life. **Stress** is a physical and psychological response to circumstances in the environment that test our ability to cope. It can be a response to such varying situations as an upcoming test, a job interview, a graduation, a first date or a family argument.

### Physical Responses to Stress

Much of our knowledge of stress comes from the work done by Canadian researcher Hans Selye (1907–1982). Selye identified and developed the

### Focus Questions

What is mental health?

What are the indicators of mental health?

### Connections

How does our ability to fulfill our needs contribute to a state of mental and emotional well-being? (See Chapter 4, pages 80–81.)

### Focus Questions

What is stress?

How do we respond to stress, both physically and emotionally?

What causes stress?

How can we learn to cope with stress more effectively?

**Figure 5-1**

General Adaptation Syndrome. Stress is the body's physical and emotional reaction to painful events in the environment. Selye proposed that this reaction to prolonged stress progresses through three stages: alarm (A), resistance (B) and exhaustion (C).

**syndrome**—a group of symptoms that consistently occur together

**adrenalin**—a hormone affecting circulation and muscular action, causing excitement and stimulation



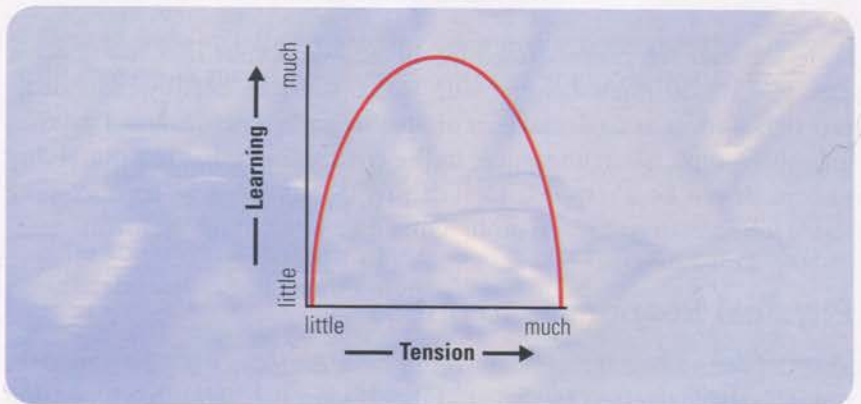
idea of psychological stress. Born in Vienna, he spent his professional career at McGill University in Montreal. At McGill, Selye exposed laboratory animals to a variety of physical and psychological stimuli such as heat, cold, pain and restraint. Selye found that no matter what stimulus he applied, the animals exhibited similar physiological responses, which he called stress.

Selye developed a theory called the General Adaptation Syndrome to explain reactions to long-term stress. This syndrome consists of three stages: alarm, resistance and exhaustion. In the alarm stage, the organism recognizes the existence of a threat. The body reacts by producing hormones such as adrenalin to ready itself to fight or flee from the cause of the stress. If the stress persists, then the body enters the second stage—resistance. During this stage, physiological changes stabilize, or level off, as the organism becomes accustomed to the threat. Yet, hormone production and other physical responses remain high. While the body is better able to deal with the original source of the stress, it has much lower resistance to other stresses that come along. In the third stage, exhaustion, the body's resources are wearing down. The glands lower their supply of adrenalin, the body's immune system loses its ability to prevent disease, and physical illness—and sometimes death—may result. Because Selye's research led to recognizing the link between stress and physical illness, researchers continue to investigate this strong connection. (See Figure 5-1.)

Selye also developed the idea that not all stress is bad; in fact, some stress is necessary and actually feels good. This is "positive" stress, which Selye called "eustress." Examples include competing in an athletic event, falling in love or working hard on a project you enjoy. Instead of avoiding stress altogether, Selye claimed, people should search for eustress and deal more effectively with negative stress.

**Figure 5-2**

Studies show that some stress is actually good for you. This graph shows that too little stress is just as damaging as too much stress. In other words, feeling a little stressed before an exam is probably a good sign; but too much stress will be counterproductive.



## How Vulnerable Are You to Stress?

In your notebook, score each item from 1 (almost always) to 5 (never) according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

1. I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day.
2. I get seven or eight hours of sleep at least four nights a week.
3. I get and receive affection regularly.
4. I have at least one relative within 50 kilometres on whom I can rely.
5. I exercise to the point of perspiration at least three times a week.
6. I have an income adequate to my basic expenses.
7. I get strength from my religious beliefs.
8. I regularly attend club or social activities.
9. I have a network of friends and acquaintances.
10. I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters.
11. I am in good health.
12. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.
13. I have regular conversations with the people I like about domestic problems (e.g., chores, money, daily life).
14. I do something for fun at least once a week.
15. I am able to organize my time effectively.
16. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee, tea or cola a day.
17. I take quiet time for myself during the day.

To get your total, add up your score for each item and subtract 17. Any number over 25 indicates vulnerability to stress. You are seriously vulnerable if your score is between 44 and 68, and extremely vulnerable if it is over 68.

If your score is over 25, make a list of steps you can take to cope with stress, based on the text on pages 95 and 96.

## Causes of Stress

Stress can be caused by a number of factors: those that signal the loss of an important relationship, such as divorce; events that produce a sense of helplessness, such as a tragic accident; and factors that pose a long-term threat, such as a lingering illness or the loss of a job. Stress can also be caused by catastrophic events such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods, or by life transitions, such as changing schools, getting married or starting a new job. Even a series of positive events can be extremely stressful.

Too many minor irritations and problems can also add up to major stress. Physical problems such as flu, headaches and backaches have been tied to the stress brought on by daily life. A major source of stress in most people's lives is having to decide between conflicting choices. Even if both choices are desirable, the act of choosing can produce anxiety and uncertainty. Although there may not be a satisfactory solution to some of the conflicts in everyday life, understanding the cause of the stress can help us cope.

### Connections

Why would following a decision-making process help to alleviate stress? (See Chapter 3, pages 65–66.)



**Figure 5-3**

Do you think teenagers have more or less stress in their lives than adults?



#### CASE STUDY

1. According to the article, what can be done to overcome shyness?
2. Relate an experience in which you felt shy. Describe your physical response to the situation.

The following case study looks at how shyness can be a source of stress for some young people.

### Stage Fright Every Day

Vanessa Venditello regrets missing out on her childhood. She was so shy that she couldn't even wear a bright yellow top for fear of standing out. Afraid to ask questions because she didn't want to be yelled at or have her classmates think she was stupid, Venditello kept her thoughts to herself. "I wanted to just hide and I thought that everybody was laughing at me," the 19-year-old recalls. "Whether it was true or not, that's the way I felt. Because of that, I was quiet and kept pretty much to myself. I hated it."

According to Katherina Manassis, a psychiatrist at Toronto's Sick Children's Hospital, the biggest misconception about shy people is that they are happy by themselves and do not want friends. "Shy people are terribly eager to have friends, but they're afraid that if they go into social situations, they'll be embarrassed, humiliated or laughed at," she says.

A child's learning environment plays a huge role in character development, says psychotherapist Karyn Gordon. "If your parents are shy and you use them as models, you can learn that's how you communicate." However, a person who was shy as a child can take small steps forward. Nineteen-year-old Mason Marchildon can now confidently voice his opinions and comfortably socialize with his peers. But he used to be shy and admits he still feels timid in unfamiliar situations. "I can't say I feel comfortable being introduced to or talking to someone whom I don't totally know," he says. Marchildon knows shyness is still a problem when it prevents him from speaking his mind. "I get into situations where I don't feel comfortable expressing fully what I feel."

There are ways to overcome shyness and everyone can learn to interact with others. Even if it makes your stomach turn inside out to contemplate doing so, Manassis advises shy people to face their fears to make them disappear. "Try and go into situations that involve other people," she advises, "and if that's hard, see if you can get a friend or family member to go with you."

Gordon says getting involved in extracurricular activities really helps. "It's painful at first because it's unfamiliar and outside of your comfort zone," she acknowledges, "but when you get involved in something, you feel a sense of belonging, which is really important in building up self-esteem."

Ultimately, it is up to shy people to take the initiative to change if they want to beat their insecurities. That first step is often the hardest, but shy people's anxieties often dissipate once they are actually interacting instead of just anticipating a frightening unknown. The realization that she had to make an effort to make friends motivated Venditello to conquer her shyness. "People aren't gonna come to you," she says. "You have to go to them. Don't be afraid of them and don't be afraid of what they're gonna think or what they're gonna say." Above all, she believes you should not allow shyness to limit you. "If you're determined to do something, don't think you should let anything stand in your way. Why not do what you want to do in your childhood, 'cause when you grow up, you can't ever be young again."

## Coping with Stress

Stress researcher Richard Lazarus views stress as whatever is considered a threat to one's safety or well-being. In order to determine one's level of stress, he has developed a two-step process called **stress cognitive appraisal**. In the primary appraisal, the individual assesses the degree of threat that is present; during the secondary appraisal, the individual chooses a way to deal with this threat. Lazarus believes that the amount of stress people feel in a given situation will vary depending on the balance between these two factors. When harm and threat are high and resources to deal with these factors are low, they experience high stress. When harm and threat are low and resources are high, they experience moderate or low stress. This approach suggests that it is far more difficult to cope with stress caused by factors over which we have little control.

Some ways of handling stress are positive and lead to either solutions or healthy ways to live with stress. Others are negative because they fail to deal with the problem, or they lead to unhealthy reactions to stress. Kicking the dog, yelling at your sibling or simply running away may be tempting as short-term solutions, but they do little to relieve the problem. More effective techniques for coping with stress involve removing or altering the source of the stress, or changing your own mental or physical reactions to it. For example, if your stress is caused by a relationship, both you and your partner could get together to analyze what causes stress in the relationship and then discuss possible solutions. Of course, not all

**dissipate**—lessen almost to the point of disappearing

From "Overcoming Pain of Shyness" by Christl Dabu

### Connections

Which problem-solving strategies would you find most useful in coping with stress? (See Chapter 3, page 65.)



**Figure 5-4**

Physical exercise, doing the things we love or just talking and confiding in others all help to alleviate stress during hard times. How do you cope with stress in your life?



### Connections

How can the power of perception change your reactions to stress? (See Chapter 3, pages 46–49.)

relationships can be dealt with in this way. If no adequate solution can be found, you may have to consider ending the relationship.

Often small changes that make you feel more in control can make a big difference. In one study, it was found that nursing home residents experienced a great deal of stress because they felt that they were no longer in control of their lives and daily routine. When the conditions were rearranged so that the residents had some control over their daily lives, they became mentally happier and physically healthier.

Some stresses cannot be removed or changed. For instance, you may find that you do not have as much time as you need to study for the upcoming examinations—but you still have to write them. Or, you may have an unpleasant part-time job that you cannot leave because you need or want the money. But you can change your mental reactions to such stresses. You can put into perspective the importance of one test or one bad encounter on the job. You can learn to plan ahead and to manage your time more efficiently. You can seek support and advice from others you trust. These are positive approaches to circumstances that cause stress.

Stress reactions are physical as well as mental and emotional. Ways to change these physical reactions to stress will vary from one individual to another. One person may find that vigorous exercise is one way to let off steam; another may find that listening to music, talking to a friend or engaging in a hobby or sport is a way to ease tensions and, sometimes, find solutions.