

MODULE 2

Understanding mental health and mental illness

Overview

Many young people do not know basic facts about mental health and mental illness. In fact, many people confuse the terms mental health and mental illness. Before thinking about the problems that occur in the brain when someone has a mental illness, it is helpful to think about how the brain functions normally. In this module, students will be introduced to the basics of brain function, and will learn that the brain processes and reacts to everything we experience. Its activities initiate and control movement, thinking, perception, involuntary physiological processes, as well as emotions. Students will learn that the brain function determines both mental health and mental illness, and that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Learning objectives

In this lesson students will learn:

- Some of the basic concepts involved in normal brain function, and the role the brain plays in determining our thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- That mental health and mental illness both include a wide range of states
- That having a mental health problem is not the same thing as having a mental illness
- Some of the language of mental health and mental illness

Major concepts addressed

- Everyone has mental health regardless of whether or not they have mental illness
- The brain is responsible for our thoughts, actions and behaviours
- Changes in brain function cause changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviours that can last a short or long time
- A mental illness affects a person's thinking, feelings or behaviour (or all three) and that causes that person distress and difficulty in functioning
- Mental illnesses have complex causes including a biological basis and are therefore not that different from other illnesses or diseases. As with all serious illnesses, the sooner people get help and treatment for mental illness, the better their long and short-term outcomes.
- Many of the major mental illnesses begin to emerge during adolescence

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Preparation

Activities

- Activity 1: Language Brainstorm (20 mins.)
- Activity 2: PowerPoint presentation: (25 mins.)
Mental health and mental illness: The common basis

Teacher background:

- Read through the activities and definitions provided
- Preview Part 1 of the PowerPoint Presentation:
Mental health and mental illness : The common basis

In advance:

- Set up computers or projector to show PowerPoint presentation
- Photocopy handouts for Activity 1, one for each student

Materials required:

- Handout Activity 1 Definitions.
- Flip chart paper, markers and tape

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It's important to emphasize that there are no wrong answers in a brainstorm. This exercise is all about opening up a discussion. Tell students that don't have to agree with or believe in the ideas or names they offer.

Activity 1:

(20 mins.)

Language Brainstorm*

Purpose:

- To provide an icebreaker that encourages students to participate in an open discussion about a topic not often addressed in the classroom
- To get an idea of students' knowledge about mental health and illness and what their fears and misconceptions might be
- To highlight the ways we tend to conceptualize mental illness
- To set the stage for introducing information on mental health and mental illness in the next activity

How to:

- 1) Divide the class into 4 groups.
- 2) Give each group a piece of flip chart paper with one of four terms written at the top: Physical health / Mental health / Physical illness / Mental illness.
- 3) Give the groups five minutes to brainstorm all the words that come to mind when they see their term.
- 4) After five minutes, ask groups to tape their sheets up on a wall for all groups to see.
- 5) Ask one student from each group to read out their list for the whole class.
- 6) Ask students what they notice about the type of words used on each sheet.
- 7) Discuss the similarities and differences in student responses to mental and physical aspects of people's health.
- 8) Ask students to suggest some reasons for these differences.
- 9) Give students handout of definitions of mental health and mental illness and lead a brief discussion on the definitions.

*Adapted from Lesson 1: *Understanding Mental Illness*. *MindMatters*, Pg. 17.

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Activity 1

HANDOUT

Definitions

Mental Health

“Mental health is the emotional and spiritual resilience that enables us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment, and sadness. It is a positive sense of well-being and an underlying belief in our own and other’s self worth.” (*Health Education Authority, UK, 1997*)

Who’s got mental health?

Everyone – we all have mental health just like we all have physical health. People with mental illness also have mental health, just as people with a physical illness also have physical well-being.

Mental Illness

Mental illness is a term that describes a variety of psychiatric (emotional, thinking and behavioral) problems that vary in intensity and duration, and may recur from time to time. Major mental illnesses include Anxiety, Mood, Eating, and Psychotic Disorders. Mental illnesses are diagnosable conditions that require medical treatment as well as other supports. (*www.cmha.ca*)

Mental Health Problems

Mental health problems refer to the more common struggles and adjustment difficulties that affect everybody from time to time. These problems tend to happen when people are going through difficult times in life, such as a relationship ending, the death of someone close, conflict in relations with family or friends, or stresses at home, school or work. Feeling stressed or having the blues is a normal response to the psychological or social challenges most people encounter at some time or another. Mental health problems are usually short-term reactions to a particular stressor, such as a loss, painful event, or illness. (*Mental Illness Foundation, 2003*).

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Activity 2:

(25 mins.)

PowerPoint presentation - Mental health and mental illness: The common basis

Purpose:

- To provide an introduction to basic brain functioning for students to help them understand that the brain controls our thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- To illustrate that mental health and mental illness are related to each other, but that they are not mutually exclusive
- To show that some changes in brain function cause changes in thoughts, feelings and behaviour that last a short or a long time.

How to:

- If using the web version of the presentation, log on to the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca/highschoolcurriculum and see Module 2/Activity 2: Mental health and mental illness: The common basis.
- If you're using the CD version enclosed with the printed resource, insert the CD into the computer and go to Module 2/Activity 2: Mental health and mental illness : The common basis.
- Play the presentation, pausing if needed.