



## What is Mental Health?

Many people, when they hear the term mental *health* think of mental *illness*. But mental health is far more than the absence of mental illness.

Mental health is something all of us want for ourselves, but you may not be aware of why it is important or what it means. When we talk about happiness, peace of mind, enjoyment or satisfaction in life, we are also talking about mental health.

Our mental health affects our everyday life. Think for a moment about how difficult it can be to focus on work if you're worried about your family. Your mental health is affecting (however minimally) your work. Mental health involves the overall way that people get along—with their families, at school, on the job, at play, with their peers, and in their communities. It involves the way that each person balances his or her needs, ambition, abilities, ideals, feelings and conscience in order to meet the demands of every day life.

Mental health has to do with three major things. How you feel about 1. yourself 2. other people, and 3. how you are able to meet the demands of everyday life

There is no line that neatly divides the mentally healthy from the unhealthy. There are many different degrees of mental health. No one characteristic by itself can be taken as evidence of a mental illness. And nobody has all the traits of good mental health all the time.

One way to describe mental health is to describe mentally healthy people. Just *knowing* what mental health is doesn't mean you can go out and *be* mentally healthy, but knowing *can* help you to understand it.

### **These are the primary characteristics of people who are mentally healthy:**

**They feel good about themselves.** They are not overwhelmed by their own emotions. They can take life's disappointments in stride. They have a tolerant, easy-going attitude toward themselves as well as others and they can laugh at themselves. They can accept their own shortcomings and respect themselves. They feel able to deal with most situations and take pleasure in simple, everyday things.

**They feel comfortable with other people.** They are able to give love and to consider the interests of others. They have satisfying and lasting personal relationships. They like and trust others and believe that others will like and trust them. They respect the many differences they find in people. They do not take advantage of others, nor do they allow others to take advantage of them. They feel that they are part of a group, that they belong, and they feel a sense of responsibility to fellow human beings.

**They are able to meet the demands of life.** They do something about their problems as they arise. They accept their responsibilities. They shape their environment whenever possible; they adjust to it whenever necessary. They plan ahead and do not fear the future. They welcome new experiences and ideas. They make use of their talents and set realistic goals for themselves. They are able to make their own decisions and are satisfied with putting their best effort into what they do.

I think the most important thing to remember as you think about your mental health is that you have the power to change it. Your mental health is not something that is given to you at birth; it has developed and changed with you. One of the most important steps that you can take in life is accepting responsibility for your life; for your successes, your failures, and your happiness. Once you have accepted that, the key is recognizing when you need help. Keep telling yourself that it takes courage and strength to ask for help. Remind yourself of that fact until you believe it.