

Overview of "Mental Health"

Conceptual Tool



Part of the Student Led Initiatives Toolkit.

Introduction

About the Tools and Toolkits

These tools and toolkits are hosted by **Healthy Campus Alberta**, a provincial community of practice committed to cultivating caring campus communities in Alberta. Originally developed by **Alberta Campus Mental Health Innovation** (an initiative carried out by the **Alberta Students Executive Council**), the tools and toolkits are learning-focused, living documents that serve to support our community of practice.

About the Student Led Initiatives Toolkit

This toolkit was developed for student leaders in post secondary institutions who are planning and implementing student mental health initiatives on their campus. Others who are planning and delivering post secondary mental health initiatives may also find the toolkit useful for their purposes, including those aimed at students as well as faculty and staff, or those aspiring to take their institution to a new level of mentally healthy campus. It will be particularly useful to understand the roles and contributions that students, student leaders and student associations can make in advancing the impact of mentally healthy campuses.

Overview of "Mental Health"

Helping people to be comfortable talking about and taking action on mental issues is complicated because the terms are used in so many different ways. Clarifying what you mean by these terms is important for you to be purposeful about choosing your strategies for supporting students and other members of a campus community. It also helps you better understand how you want to orient your evaluation and learning. Understanding key definitions helps you orient a mentally healthy campus strategy around a core narrative, bringing coherence to actions.

After reading this conceptual tool, you will be able to...

1. Define key concepts: mental wellness, mental illness, and mentally healthy campuses.
2. Identify how having common understandings of key concepts can contribute toward a mentally healthy campus strategy.
3. Access important resources on postsecondary student mental wellness.

It's Normal for Humans to...

Recognizing normal human experiences and brain development in the context of mental wellness and illness helps us understand why systemic factors matter more than individual willpower and behavior. It is key for students to recognize which stressors are more impactful for them, what they're already doing to cope, and the difference between mild, moderate and severe levels of stress, anxiety, and other emotions. That helps us know what actions are most appropriate to take, which habits are helpful and which we need to change in mental health initiatives.

Humans experience stress and emotions.

Some degree of stress is necessary to life. Sometimes we add to our own stress level – such as not getting enough sleep, not eating nutritiously, isolating ourselves from others, or letting negative thoughts pervade our minds. This makes us less able to cope when stressors in our external lives are added. How we respond to stress, and whether we access support from friends, family and sometimes others is the key.

Emotions can include fear, anxiety, grief, happiness and others. *Grief*, the experience of loss, influences both mental and physical experiences. We have a tendency to avoid processing these losses, and over time that can take a toll. Sometimes it helps to seek grief counselling as a support in the course of our journey. Anxiety and fear are closely related. While *fear* relates to threats in the moment, *anxiety* is about anticipating a threat that may or may not happen in the future. Experiencing occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. Short-term stress relief activities, like meditation, creative activities or talking about it to a friend or peer supporter. can be enough to 'bounce back' to normal.

Humans move through developmental stages.

It's also normal for humans to move through developmental stages, both physically and mentally, throughout our lives. Brain development occurs over a longer time than previously thought. The later years involve development of executive functions, which influence adaptive skills such as planning and self-regulation. Advances in neurological research demonstrate our ability to continuously to learn and make decisions, and to find ways to regulate stress and improve mental wellness in productive ways.

Humans develop skills and attitudes towards these normal experiences.

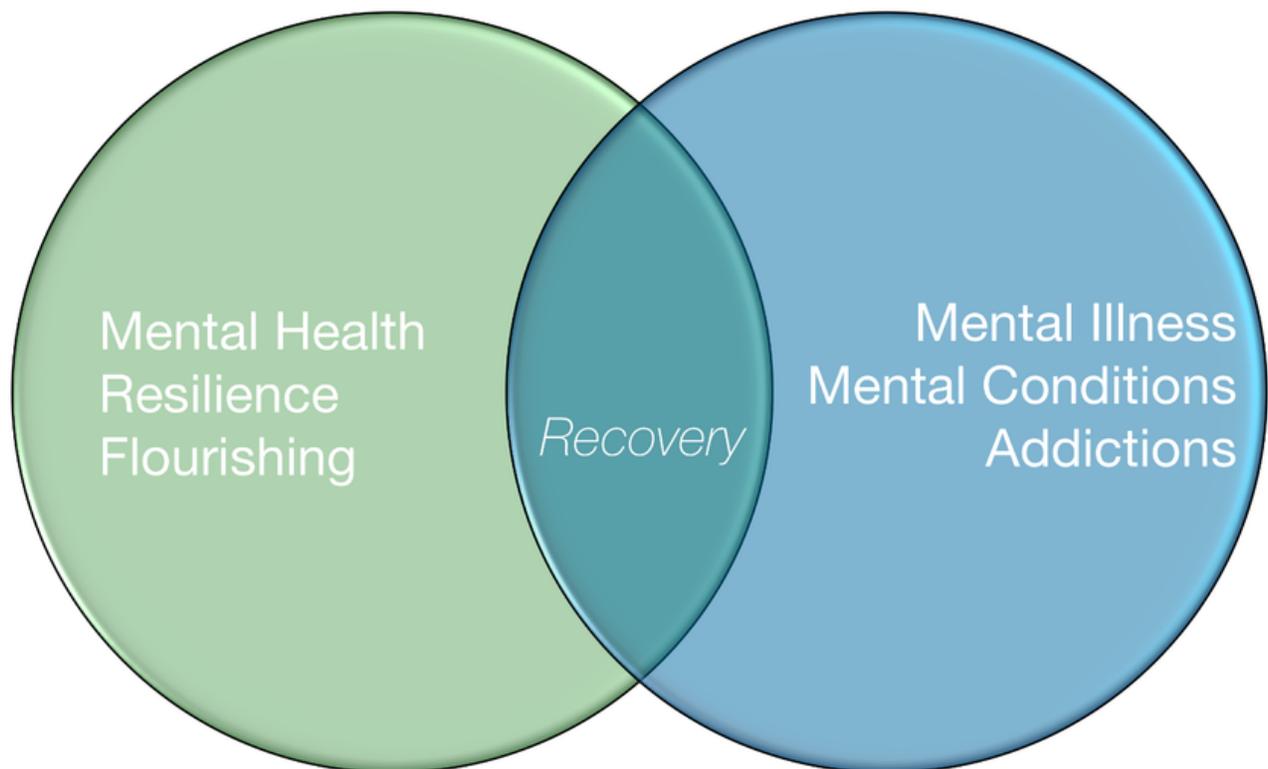
Part of success in postsecondary education is developing better habits and attitudes to cope with the increased stress and emotions. The life stage of ages 18 –24 is one that usually involves navigating many transitions. Developing healthy habits and attitudes is so important for students – it isn't just to survive the years of post secondary education. It will hold long term benefits for careers and later stages of life.

Understanding Mental Wellness

There are five key foundations that are important to understanding mental wellness:

1. Mental wellness and mental illness or issues are not opposites, but are a continuum;
 2. Mental wellness is process as well as a state;
 3. Mental wellness is both individual and collective;
 4. Mental wellness relates to brain development and observable behaviours and states;
- We are influenced by, and influence, our environments. We contribute to, as well as benefit from positive enabling environments.

This visual may help to see the difference between but relationship of mental wellness and mental illness. Although mental illness and mental health/wellness are separate concepts, they are overlapping and exist on a continuum/



View the Framing Mentally Healthy Campuses Conceptual Tool for a deeper exploration of these foundations.

Understanding Mental Wellness - cont.

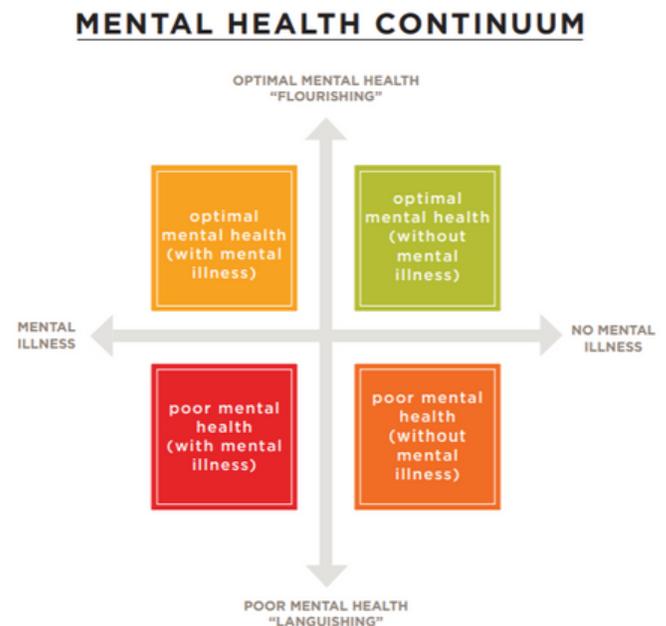
This conceptual tool describes five aspects of mental wellness:

1. There are multiple, interdependent aspects to mental wellness, including emotional, cognitive and relational aspects. These develop along their own trajectories and influence each other.
2. Different people prize different aspects of wellness.
3. Mental wellness skills and assets are learnable.
4. You can build mental wellness skills even further – from Resilience to Life Assets.
5. Mental wellness relates to the collective as well as to an individual – a Mentally Healthy Campus as a collective expression of mental wellness.

Multiple, interdependent aspects

There are multiple, interdependent aspects to mental wellness and these develop along their own trajectories. The *emotional realm* includes feelings and functioning, such as positive feelings (e.g., happiness), positive psychological functioning (e.g., self-acceptance), and positive social functioning (e.g., social integration). The *cognitive realm* includes developmental stages of cognitive abilities to resolve situations with higher ambiguity and complexity. The *relational realm* includes a sense of belonging, referring to attitudes and skills for relating to others. *Indigenous ways of knowing* define mental wellness as the balance of the mental, pyhysical, spiritual, and emotional.

The emotional, cognitive and relational aspects of wellness develop along their own trajectories, separate from mental illness, addictions or mental issues the person may have. This is the basis of Keyes' model, recognizing that mental health and mental issues are not opposites, but two separate continua. Wellness does not mean no illness. Developing greater degrees of wellness isn't just for people who have no symptoms of mental illness. The Mental Health Commission of Canada describe the process of developing wellness after an illness or addiction as a recovery process.



View the [Alberta Post-Secondary Mental Health and Addiction Framework](#).
View the [First Nations Mental Health Continuum Framework](#).
View the [Mental Health Strategy for Canada](#).

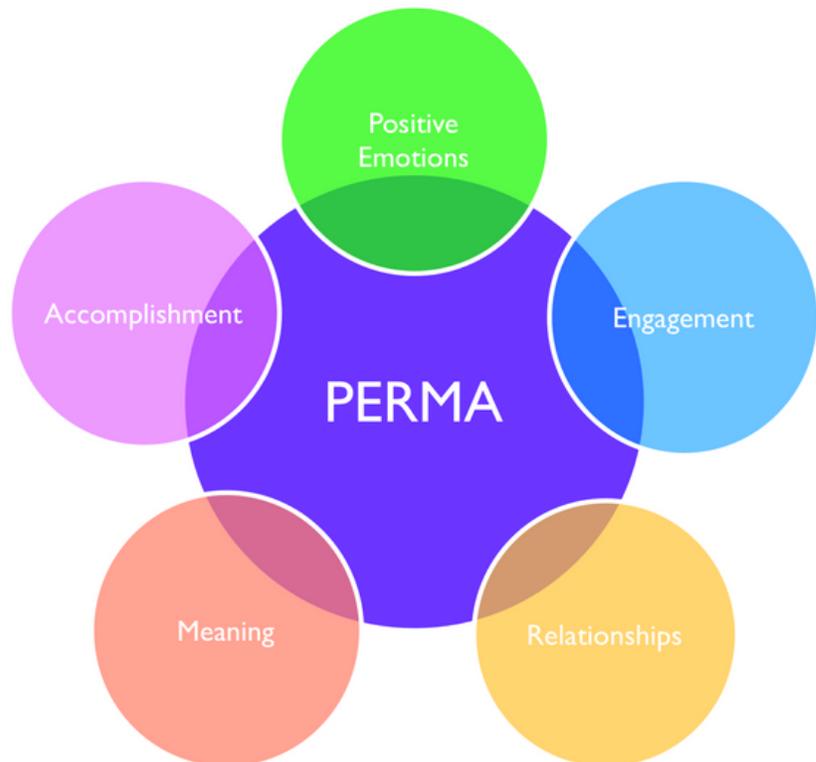
Understanding Mental Wellness - cont.

Different People Value Different Aspects

Everyone has a personal perspective on what 'wellness' means to them, and this can vary in different situations or at different ages. While most have a mixture, for some, relationships with family and friends is most important, for others it might be their cognitive competencies, or their physical energy, or stamina. For others it is their sense of belonging. The preferred balance of all aspects is personal. Illness on the other hand, is professionally defined. While there are assessment tools for various aspects of wellness, they may be limited to one professional view and not reflect all that a person values. Our cultural background will influence our worldview of what we consider wellness or illness. But an overarching understanding of what wellness is emerging. The field of positive psychology has chosen to move beyond the disease model and focus on people with illness that has dominated psychology.

But an overarching understanding of what wellness is emerging. The field of positive psychology has chosen to move beyond the disease model and focus on people with illness that has dominated psychology. One model describes five elements essential to human wellbeing, with the acronym PERMA:

- P = Positive emotion
- E = Engagement
- R = Relationships
- M = Meaning
- A = Accomplishments.



Watch a [TEDTalk on the PERMA Model.](#)

Understanding Mental Wellness - cont.

Mental Wellness Skills and Attitudes are Learnable

Developing mental wellness isn't much like going to a professional to be treated for a disease – mental wellness skills attitudes and knowledge all develop through learning and improving self-awareness. An investment in developing mental wellness pays off in many parts of our lives. Employers are demanding emotional, psychological, cognitive, and relational competencies. Understanding how to contribute to our brain development also helps to build the foundation for higher level thinking, planning and self-regulation and strengthens the other mental wellness competencies. Learning goes beyond coping in the moment, or simply doing activities without understanding why they are important or relevant. To learn from experience, we must pay attention to our experience – as if seeing the actions we take as a kind of experiment – worth watching for the results the actions produce in different situations.

Different things work for different people so the first key to action learning is paying attention to some key things:

Which types of stress, or which times of day, week, or year are most challenging for you, and how does a combination of stressors impact?
Which types of stress relief work in the moment (breathing fully, some creative activity etc.) and which types aren't as helpful for you?
Which types of stress management help as basic life practices (e.g., eating nutritiously, proper sleep, exercise, creative activities) and what types aren't so useful for you?
How you best organize stress management practices to work in your life so you use them consistently, as a practice (scheduled blocks of time, multiple-outcome practices such as standing desks, short breaks to move, ceremonial practices)?
Acknowledging and celebrating progress helps keep your momentum going. Which ways of learning from experience, recognizing your progress and identifying possible adaptive actions work best for you?

This isn't a completely linear situation – behaviour alone won't necessarily create an impact – so paying attention to these things in different contexts is important. The continuous process of learning from experience and adapting is what makes mental wellness a process as well as a state, and what enables us to develop to our fullest potential. Since we learn from each other in our social environment, this process also involves supporting one another. Practice, and reinforcing what works will help you become more and more able to regulate stressful activities, so you can reliably access these strategies even when under pressure.

Understanding Mental Wellness - cont.

From Resilience to Life Assets

Some use the term 'resilience' to describe mental wellness – 'bouncing back' after a stressful event, ambiguous situation or a challenging time. Being resilient does not mean that you don't experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have or are experiencing stressful events or trauma. And it isn't about controlling the stress (trying to control it actually can make it more stressful). It's about regulating stress and your response. Resilience involves a number of actions. In addition to connecting with resources such as caring and supportive relationships that a person has developed over time, one can use coping or stress management tools to regain their usual functioning state. Combinations of mind-body activities such as yoga or meditation, creative activities such as art (even colouring), breathing exercises, movement of different kinds, socializing with trusted friends and colleagues are all activities that might equally be used for stress management or prevention – the key for resilience and mental wellness is to recognize what works for you.

Taking action to bounce back to one's usual functioning state is important. However, a person who is more purposeful about using growth oriented resilience practices and continuously learning from their ongoing experiences can advance from "bouncing back" to "bouncing forward". This helps a person to improve substantially over time through increasing developmental stages.

"Assets" isn't a common term to hear when talking mental wellness. Having reliable access to emotional, cognitive and relational capabilities helps you demonstrate your potential for more challenging work, to develop better relationships, and to be a more compassionate citizen. Committing to moving from resilience to assets requires more attention to self-discovery of deeper patterns and developing growth-oriented resilience.

Resilience  **Life Assets**

Growth oriented resilience, or purposefully and continuously improving one's skills, attitudes and knowledge aims to develop more effective ways for coping and even thriving in the face of greater ambiguity and stress. If a person takes the time to understand their own particular patterns and underlying assumptions, then they can call upon those strategies consciously and effectively under stressful conditions. This makes those understandings and skills an asset.

Understanding Mental Wellness - cont.

Collective Mental Wellness

Mental wellness is a characteristic of a collective, not just an individual. So we can consider what constitutes mental wellness of a family, community, society as well as places such as a campus, a school, or a workplace. Having significant differences between some groups in a community, society or campus is not a sign of mental wellness of that collective. The social norms that make up a culture are an important characteristic and strategies such as social justice, advocating for policy changes that reduce or eliminate the structural factors that keep those differences beyond the capacity of an individual to influence are important to the mental wellness of both individuals and the collective.

“Health promoting universities and colleges transform the health and sustainability of our current and future societies, strengthen communities and contribute to the well-being of people, places and the planet. Health promoting universities and colleges infuse health into everyday operations, business practices and academic mandates. By doing so, health promoting universities and colleges enhance the success of our institutions; create campus cultures of compassion, well-being, equity and social justice; improve the health of the people who live, learn, work, play and love on our campuses; and strengthen the ecological, social and economic sustainability of our communities and wider society.”

-The Okanagan Charter

So What? How does this influence my student-led mental health initiative?

You may choose to frame your strategy around mental wellness rather than mental illness. That would mean that you are concerned with how all students build mental wellness whether or not they are starting from a place of having symptoms of mental illness or issues. Those with mental illness or issues can build mental wellness / resilience in associating with their illness. Those who have no such symptoms can build their mental wellness / resilience to manage and learn from their experience of stress and distressing emotional situations.

Because it is critical for each of us to understand ourselves and how we learn, it is important to help students to understand why they take what actions and how to assess whether those are working for them, not just to supply solutions. Understanding mental wellness can also help you advocate for resources to undertake activities related to building mental wellness as well as treating or preventing mental illness, addictions and mental issues.

Understanding Mental Illness, Addictions, and Stigma

Mental Illness

The term 'mental illnesses' can relate to a wide variety of conditions or experiences. Traditionally these focus on an individual, though the impacts will be felt more broadly across the person's family and close network. Some mental illnesses occur on a spectrum from mild to severe and at the mild end can be part of life's normal lows. While all mental issues might be considered as having a spectrum, the more common ones are anxiety and depression. While we usually think of mental illness as a characteristic of an individual, it is possible to apply the concept to a group, community or society.

Addictions

Addictions are illnesses, not failures of will or character. Actions more consistent with normal use (e.g. alcohol as substance use), can spiral into addictive behaviour when use becomes continued, or acts become compulsive and interfere with ordinary life responsibilities such as school, work, relationships or health.

Stigma

Being stigmatized or marginalized can impact a person's sense of belonging, self worth and self-confidence or shame. They also impact the person who is doing the stigmatizing although that may not be recognized. Social norms as well as physical environments and structural factors such as policy all influence the degree to which a person or group is excluded or limited. While your particular initiative might highlight stigma of mental illness, the broad range of marginalization crosses racism, socio-economic challenges, and social norms that privilege strength over weakness.

So What? How does this influence my student-led mental health initiative?

You can frame your initiative around mental illness, addictions and mental issues and focus on the subset of students who are at risk or who have illness, addictions and issues. This is a very common way to frame a strategy. Even if you do not wish to provide the professional services associated with treatment or supporting students at risk, there are many strategies that students have employed to increase accessibility, knowledge or reduce the stigma associated with having a mental illness.



View the rest of the Student Led Initiatives Toolkit.