What is mental health?

Mental health refers to how people feel about themselves emotionally, socially and spiritually, and about their ability:

• to cope with everyday life and the stressful events that may come up
• to reach the goals they have set out for themselves
• to go to work and work productively
• to be a part of the community they live in

Mental health means much more than whether a person suffers from a mental illness. The World Health Organisation includes mental health in their general meaning of health, which is defined as a state of total physical, mental and social wellbeing.

What is social and emotional wellbeing?

Indigenous people usually take a holistic view of mental health similar to the World Health Organisation definition; in other words, they believe in a whole-of-life approach to the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the community. Today many health services in Australia use the phrase ‘social and emotional wellbeing’ when they talk about mental health in Indigenous communities to reflect the holistic way of thinking Indigenous people have.

More detailed information about social and emotional wellbeing in Indigenous people can be found at:
http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/sewb_review
What is a mental illness?

Mental illness is any kind of mental disorders or sicknesses people can suffer from, such as:
- thought disorders - how we think about things
- mood disorders - how we are feeling
- behaviour disorders - how we act at times

To class a patient's illness as a mental illness, a doctor must be able to see that the person is not coping well psychologically, socially, at work, or personally. A person may not be able to carry out their duties at home or work without getting angry or sad. This does not mean that they cannot cope with everything. They may have trouble with just one part of their life, for example, work. With mental illnesses, people may suffer from one or more disorders at the same time, referred to as co-morbidity.

What things in our everyday lives affect our mental wellbeing?

Like general health and illness, people's mental health is influenced by many complex social, environmental, economic and biological factors. These factors often work together and may affect just one person or, in some cases, whole communities may be affected. These factors can have a negative impact on a person's mental health and may lead to:
- exclusion from social gatherings
- mental or emotional strain
- emotional abuse

On the other hand, these factors can have a positive impact on an individual's mental health by:
- improving the environments they are a part of, for example, school, work or home
- increasing the person's self-esteem or the sense of who they are
- allowing social relationships with others to develop

The environmental, social, economic and biological issues that can negatively affect the mental health of people and the communities they live in include:
- low levels of income
- low levels of education
- poor housing
- risks of violence
- physical illnesses (health problems)
- unhealthy lifestyles (not eating well or drinking too much alcohol)

- discrimination
- lack of adequate transport

When it comes to treatment for mental health illnesses, it is important that these factors are taken into account.

How is culture important to the understanding of mental illnesses?

Australia is made up of people from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This diversity in culture and language can influence:
- how people seek help
- how mental illnesses are expressed
- how a person's symptoms are diagnosed and treated

It is important that health clinicians are aware that both the clinician's and the patient's culture can affect the understanding of a mental illness. When looking at the mental health issues of different cultures or even within the same culture (e.g. Indigenous culture), it is important that the way people express emotion, thoughts and behaviours is understood. The clinician may need to decide whether the tools he or she uses to establish the presence of a mental illness are right for all their patients. If they decide that these screening tools are not correct for a particular person then a new set of guidelines for the tools needs to be created.

What different types of mental illnesses are there?

People show many different warning signs, for example sadness, that indicate that they are suffering from a mental illness. These warning signs help clinicians identify the particular mental illness a person is experiencing. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, produced by the American Psychiatric Association, is one of the tools used by clinicians to determine mental illness in children and adults. The mental illnesses described by this manual include:
- mood disorders - how a person feels, such as long periods of depression or excitement
- anxiety disorders - when people worry too much about an event that may or may not take place in the future
- substance related disorders - irrational behaviour resulting from the harmful use of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and illegal drugs
- psychotic disorders - distortion of a person's sense of reality
• cognitive disorders - inability to think and reason (e.g. Alzheimer’s disease)
• developmental disorders - suffered by a young child (e.g. behavioural problems or learning problems)
• personality disorders - related to an individual's personal, private thoughts and actions and may lead to self-harming behaviours and emotional pain
• other disorders may influence eating habits, sleep, sexual performance and how a person controls their feelings and behaviours.

This is a general overview of the many disorders that can affect the mental health of people. In some cases people may experience one or more of these disorders at the same time (co-morbidity). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders uses a multidimensional method to diagnose a mental illness because there are many dimensions or factors in a person's life that can work together to affect their mental health. There are five aspects or, as clinicians call them, axes for assessing mental illnesses:

• Axis 1: Clinical syndromes - what the clinician believes the diagnosed mental illness is, for example, depression or dementia
• Axis 2: Developmental disorders and personality disorders covered earlier.
• Axis 3: Physical conditions - health conditions that can produce signs of a mental illness, for example, brain injury
• Axis 4: Severity of psychosocial stressors - events that are taking place in a person's life (e.g. loss of a loved one or a new job), how these affect any existing disorder and a person's ability to cope overall.
• Axis 5: Highest level of functioning - How well a person carries out their day-to-day duties which can help to determine the treatment given by a clinician.

What causes mental illnesses to occur?

It is still unclear what actually causes a mental illness to develop. Studies show that it can be many factors working together, including genetic, biological, psychological trauma or environmental factors.

Genetic

The genetic makeup of a person influences how they think and act. Our genes come from our parents so if our parents or grandparents suffered from a mental illness we may be at risk of experiencing a similar problem. This does not mean that because a parent suffers from a mental illness his or her children will, there may just be a higher risk of it occurring.

Biology

The brain is made up of millions of nerve cells. How well these nerve cells communicate with each other determines how people think and act. These nerve cells use chemicals called neurotransmitters to communicate with each other. For the brain to have a good means of communication, these chemicals need to be well balanced. When a person is diagnosed with a mental illness it is often discovered that these chemicals are not well balanced.

Quite often people who suffer from a mental illness may have been involved in an accident (e.g. motor vehicle) or have been physically unwell (e.g. a virus), which leads to brain damage and the development of a mental disorder.

Psychological trauma

If in the past, say during childhood, a person experienced a traumatic event like emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or the loss of a loved one, this may cause a mental illness to develop during adolescence or as an adult.

Environmental stressors

Stressful life events, for example, death or divorce can result in the development of a mental illness in a person who may already be at risk of developing mental health problems.

As mentioned, one or more factors may work together to cause a mental health illness. It is therefore important that health clinicians look at all the events that are happening in a person's life before they make a decision on the mental wellbeing of the person.

What strategy does Australia have in place for the mental health of its nation?

The Australian government has developed an ongoing plan to boost and change, where needed, the mental health system. This plan applies to all Australians. The present National Mental Health Plan for 2003-2008 aims to:

• advance the mental health of all Australians
• prevent mental illnesses from occurring
• support the individuals, families and communities affected by mental illness to reduce its harmful effects
• protect the rights of people suffering from mental health problems

Included in this plan are programs for Indigenous Australians. The Australian government knows that to put this plan into action all levels of government need to work together.
The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet is an innovative Internet resource that contributes to ‘closing the gap’ in health between Indigenous and other Australians by informing practice and policy in Indigenous health.

Two concepts underpin the HealthInfoNet’s work. The first is evidence-informed decision-making, whereby practitioners and policy-makers have access to the best available research and other information. This concept is linked with that of translational research (TR), which involves making research and other information available in a form that has immediate, practical utility. Implementation of these two concepts involves synthesis, exchange and ethical application of knowledge through ongoing interaction with key stakeholders.

The HealthInfoNet’s work in TR at a population-health level, in which it is at the forefront internationally, addresses the knowledge needs of a wide range of potential users, including policy-makers, health service providers, program managers, clinicians, Indigenous health workers, and other health professionals. The HealthInfoNet also provides easy-to-read and summarised material for students and the general community.

The HealthInfoNet encourages and supports information-sharing among practitioners, policy-makers and others working to improve Indigenous health – its free on line yarning places enable people across the country to share information, knowledge and experience. The HealthInfoNet is funded mainly by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. Its award-winning web resource (www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au) is free and available to everyone.

Director
Professor Neil Thomson

Address
Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet
Edith Cowan University
2 Bradford Street
Mount Lawley, WA 6050

Telephone
(08) 9370 6336

Facsimile
(08) 9370 6022

Email
healthinfonet@ecu.edu.au

Web
www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au

**Featured Artwork**

**Munbanda**

by Doris Gingingara.

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