WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

Does this seem like a funny question with an obvious answer? When we talk about mental health there is actually a great deal of confusion and really no definitive definition. We often immediately think about mental health problems or mental illness. However, mental health is not just the absence of a mental disorder. That is only part of the picture. Go ahead and come up with a definition. Does it mean you are usually happy or at least feeling okay? That you function well emotionally and in your daily life 99% of the time? Have you actually considered what it means to be mentally healthy and is this important to think about?

What is mental health? It includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Everyone has mental health and let's think of it as the way we feel about our self and people around us. It is our ability to make and keep friends. It is our ability to learn from others, from experiences and to develop psychologically from those experiences. It affects how we think, feel, and act. Mental health determines how we handle difficulties, interact and relate to others, and how we make decisions. Good mental health is essential to positive self-esteem, confidence, and belief in one's self. It is important at every stage of life from early childhood until the end of life.

In other words mental health is this:

You care deeply about yourself and for yourself. You look after your physical health. You see yourself as valuable and know you have the right to exist. You are reasonable - not harsh - with yourself.

This all sounds good but none of us can achieve this standard every day. Does that mean we are not mentally healthy? No! Keep in mind that mental health is a continuum, or a spectrum and this applies to all of us. Some days we may feel on top of the world and others we may feel as low as a bottomless pit. We are not machines and being human means we vary emotionally day-to-day and week-to-week. What is important is that most of the time we are toward the middle or better part of the continuum. We are mentally healthy if lows are appropriate for a situation such as death of a loved one or loss of a job. It would NOT be healthy to feel great at a time like this. Mentally healthy people sometimes feel low for no apparent reason. As long as this abates in a day or two it should be considered normal. Mental health is hard to determine during adolescence. Teens are notoriously moody. A healthy teenager can feel great and terrible in a single day. This alone is not a sign of an emotional problem.

Does mental health impact your overall health and longevity? Yes indeed. Mental health and physical health go hand in hand. Mental disorders are linked to higher risk for other diseases, intentional and unintentional injury. Studies over the last 20 years suggest life expectancy for people who suffer with mental illness is **20% less** than people who are mentally healthy.

To stay on the positive side of the mental health spectrum, good mental health should be part of an overall healthy lifestyle:

- Exercise
- Be engaged in meaningful relationships
- Practice good sleep hygiene
- Have a positive attitude
- Develop good stress management techniques
- Avoid being over committed
- Save time for fun
- Participate in meaningful community activities
- Seek professional help when needed

At Affiliated Clinical Services, we believe helping people to achieve their optimal mental health to be one of our most important goals. Our therapists know the tenets of good mental health and provide tools to help you regain those feelings of confidence and wellbeing.

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