

Introduction to Mental Health

This video series was produced from the Autism Mental Health Literacy Guide by the Autism Mental Health Literacy Project (AM-HeLP) Group.

This video is one of six in the series about different aspects of autism mental health literacy. For this video, we will talk about: “Understanding Mental Health.”

Mental health is a person’s ability to feel, think, and act in ways that help us enjoy life and deal with difficulties.

Why is this important?

Everyone has mental health. Your mental health is made up of many different components. Learning about mental health can help you understand your own and others’ experiences.

Our mental health is not permanent. It can change day-to-day.

Testimonial – “Mental health is the intersection of you and the things that make you - your environment, family, friends, biology, circumstances, education, socioeconomic class, genetics. It's the way that you respond to life. We often talk about mental health in terms of poor versus good, but it's much more useful not to put labels or values on it. Everyone has mental health, and everyone needs to look after it.” – Alex Echakowitz, Adviser

We may feel better some days and worse other days. Mental health depends on the person, their context, and their responses to those contexts. Context can be:

- Our environment that surrounds us, like the physical space we are in, where we are, or who we are with.
- It can also be the stressors that impact our daily lives, like transitioning from one activity to another, different life events, or hard tasks.
- Or it can be the different resources available to us when we need it, such as family, friends, services, safe housing, or food.

We can move between different mental health states. We can look at mental health on two kinds of continuums: A negative mental health continuum and a positive mental health continuum.

First, we can look at the diagram from left to right. We can think of mental health on a negative spectrum, going from low levels of negative mental health to high levels of negative mental health. A person may have low levels of distress or a lot of distress, or anywhere in between.

Distress is an experience of negative feelings that is often a signal of stress.

Stress can come from many places, like feeling excluded, going to a job interview, or writing a test.

Testimonial – “Sometimes distress can cause me more extreme anxiety and make me more prone to outbursts and meltdowns. Sometimes if distress is too much it can actually lead to physical pain.” – Tom Jackman, Adviser

When a person’s stressors are too intense, or those stressors do not go away, or if the stressors outweigh the support a person has available to them, they can develop mental health problems. This is the idea of thinking of mental health as spanning from no distress to high levels of distress. The absence of distress doesn’t mean that you are feeling a lot of good feelings though. It just means you don’t have a lot of distress.

Next, we can look at the diagram from top to bottom. We can think of mental health on a positive spectrum, going from high levels of well-being to low levels of well-being. Well-being is not just about how much distress a person has. It is about the positive feelings and experiences they have.

Sometimes, you can experience lots of well-being, like when you are feeling satisfied with your life and have a sense of purpose, you accept yourself, or feel included by others or society – some people call this psychological and social well-being.

Testimonial – “To me, positive mental health is learning about what works for you. I used to think of mental health as suffering - you know, people suffering from depression, people suffering from anxiety, and suffering from different diagnoses. However, through my research, I learned that we all experience mental health. We all have a baseline, and we can learn what we need, and what we need to make us happy and better cope.” – Todd Simkover, Adviser

Low positive mental health means you may not often experience positive emotions or life satisfaction. Just because you have low positive mental health, it doesn’t mean that you have a lot of distress. But it does mean that you aren’t experiencing a lot of positives. And people can experience distress while experiencing positive well-being.

People can be in any part of the diagram.

Some people may not experience much distress and have high levels of positive mental health.

Others can experience positive mental health and experience distress at the same time.

Some people can experience low positive mental health but also not experience a lot of distress.

While others can have low positive mental health and have mental health problems. And depending on our situation, we can move along these continuums.

When talking about mental health, one key takeaway is that it is experienced differently by each person. No two mental health experiences are the same.

Knowing more, helps more.

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More information can be found in **Section 2** of the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism.

To learn more about AM-HeLP and to read the Mental Health Literacy Guide for Autism visit: <https://www.yorku.ca/health/lab/ddmh/am-help/>

Watch the animated video: <https://youtu.be/nemLrPZnGa8>

Credits

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