

CHAPTER 1

Conceptualizing Mental Health and Illness

Chapter Overview

In this chapter students are introduced to concepts related to mental health and illness. Defining mental health and mental illness is a complex task and rather than being provided with definitive answers about what constitutes health and illness, students are asked to consider “big questions” about these challenging concepts. Two definitions are provided: One from the World Health Organization, which focusses on the sense of well-being, functional capacity of individuals, and ability to socially contribute, and another from the DSM 5 which speaks to disturbances in cognition, emotion, or behaviour which are associated with distress, abnormality, or dysfunction. Both of these are critically evaluated, and the chapter suggests that all these concepts are mediated by social definitions of “normal” and by an individual’s resources, community, and environment, and therefore a universal definition may not be possible.

A brief description of theoretical models that help us understand and explain causes and treatments for mental health problems is provided. The biomedical model focusses on physical causes of mental illness, particularly neurological dysfunction. The psychological-behavioural model focusses on harmful patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving and suggests that psychotherapy is the most useful response. The social model of mental illness focusses on the social construction of mental health and illness and points to social interventions as appropriate responses. The biopsychosocial model integrates all these factors, as well as the **social determinants of health**, in order to understand the origins of mental illness and how best to respond to it. It is noted that most practitioners rely on more than one of these models in their practice. The types of professionals who treat and support people with mental illness are also described.

The diagnosis of mental illness, using tools such as the DSM and the ICD is discussed, and the chapter provides information on how the diagnostic criteria in the DSM are developed. These diagnostic categories and criteria are powerful tools because they often determine who is and who is not considered to have a mental illness, which can have significant implications for stigma and access to treatment. Clinical scales also provide information about whether a person may have a mental illness; however, these tools, as well as the DSM/ICD are an adjunct to clinical judgment and the practitioner’s perception of whether the symptoms and behaviours being evaluated are “normal”. The text points out that clinicians bring their own biases and opinions to the process of diagnosis, which when combined with bias in diagnostic criteria, may result in disproportionate diagnosis among marginalized groups.

The chapter concludes with a discussion about the importance of mental health, noting that our ideas about mental health are important social constructs, influence our overall well-being and functioning, and are a way of making sense of the spectrum of human behaviour.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter the student should learn to do the following:

1. Be able to describe and critically evaluate different definitions of mental health
2. Be able to distinguish between the biomedical, psychological-behavioural, social, and biopsychosocial models of mental health and illness
3. Be able to describe the types of treatment methods typically used within different models of illness
4. Be able to describe the biopsychosocial model of mental health and illness and explain how it is connected to social determinants of health
5. Be able to differentiate the qualifications and types of care provided by different practitioners in the mental health field
6. Be able to identify different sources of bias in diagnosis and explain how these might lead to harm for marginalized populations
7. Be able to explain why certain demographic groups might be more likely to be diagnosed with particular illnesses than other groups
8. Be able to explain why mental health matters, clinically, socially, and legally

Video Links

Appuhamy, R. (n.d.). **Social determinants of health: An introduction.**

The Social Determinants of Health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live and age. They have a large influence on our health. They also determine health inequities, which are the unfair and avoidable health differences between different groups of people. This 6 minute video looks at the social determinants of health, what they are, how they impact health and a useful framework to understand them.

<https://www.longwoods.com/audio-video/all/Youtube/7556>

Insel, T. (2013). **Toward a new understanding of mental illness**

https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_insel_toward_a_new_understanding_of_mental_illness/transcript?language=en

In this 13 minute video, the director of National Institute of Mental Health, discusses the neurological foundations of depression and schizophrenia and argues in favour of biomedical research that could reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with these illnesses.

McCarroll, S. (2017). **How data is helping us unravel the mysteries of the brain.**

https://www.ted.com/talks/steve_mccarroll_how_data_is_helping_us_unravel_the_mysteries_of_the_brain

In this 17 minute video, geneticist Steve McCarroll discusses efforts to make an atlas of all the cells in the human body so that we can understand in precise detail how specific genes work, especially in the brain. He shares his team's progress -- including their invention of "Drop-seq," a technology that allows scientists to analyze individual cells at a scale that was never before possible -- and describes how this research could lead to new ways of treating mental illnesses like schizophrenia.

Pacific Psych and Comp Health Clinics. (2017). **What is the biopsychosocial model?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWNHy4A3W-Y>

In this 5 minute video, the biopsychosocial model of mental health and illness is described, with examples of how different characteristics and experiences of individuals might influence health.

In Class Exercises

Group Activity: Divide the classroom into groups and assign each group one of the frameworks discussed in this chapter, (Biomedical model, Psychological Behavioural Model, Social Model, and Biopsychosocial Model). Ask each group to list 5 advantages and 5 disadvantages of the model assigned to them with respect to diagnosing and treating mental illness.

Classroom Discussion: Provide students with a list of the Social Determinants of Health. Go through each item on the list and ask students to provide examples of how each of the determinants might influence mental health and mental illness.

Small Group Discussion: Ask groups to look up and compare the DSM and WHO definitions of mental health. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each definition? Groups should record their answers and share with the large group.