

MODULE 1.3

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

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What is mental health?

Objectives

- School staff understand the importance of mental health and wellbeing, its impact on student participation, learning and academic outcomes.
- School staff understand the significant contribution schools can make to supporting student mental health and wellbeing through a whole-school community approach.

Outcomes

- Enhance understanding of what mental health and wellbeing is and the factors affecting it, particularly during adolescence (knowledge – e.g. looking below behaviours to understand what is going on for young person).
- Appreciate the importance of positive mental health and wellbeing to students' life at school, including their participation, learning and academic outcomes (knowledge – why student mental health and wellbeing is important to schools).
- Value the contribution that school staff make to supporting student mental health and wellbeing (attitude – this is something staff are responsible for and can do something about).
- Increase awareness of the ways a whole-school community approach can most effectively support positive student mental health and wellbeing (skills – what they can do).

Key messages

- Positive mental health and wellbeing is important for young people's ability to enjoy life, cope with the challenges they face, learn, engage with peers and adults and be well prepared for the future.
- Mentally healthy students arrive at school ready to engage in learning and school activities and are more likely to achieve success.
- Schools are already engaged in activities that enhance students' mental health and wellbeing.
- When schools have a whole school plan to actively promote students' positive mental health and wellbeing there are many benefits to students, families, school staff and the broader community.
- There are many ways secondary school staff can promote students' positive mental health and wellbeing in their day to day work.

Why improve mental health in secondary schools?

The importance of mental health in all our lives



Mental health is a positive and productive state of mind that allows an individual to respond to the challenges of everyday life.

When we have positive mental health we are more likely to enjoy relationships, benefit from opportunities and contribute productively to society.

However, mental health can't be taken as a given. We are all vulnerable to changes in mental health, whether relatively minor and temporary, or significant in duration and impact.

Why target secondary schools

If you wanted to improve the mental health of a national population, then a great place to begin is in school: almost everyone goes to school for an number of years, and in many communities schools are a central social hub.

Secondary schools in particular span a crucial transition into adulthood. During adolescence some young people are under stress as they adjust to their changing bodies, negotiate a complex web of social interactions and respond to changing expectations of family, school and society.

Research has shown that positive and planned action taken by schools can directly improve and support their students' mental health as:

- **mentally healthy students arrive at school ready to learn, cope with the many demands of the school day, engage socially and are more likely to achieve educational success**
- **the impact of positive mental health action in school can extend well beyond the student's school life**
- **while most students are in good health and cope well with the demands of their lives, around 10-20 per cent of young people in a given year might experience a mental health difficulty of some kind. If you work in a school, you are almost certain to encounter at least one student struggling with their mental health, so a degree of planning and preparedness is essential.**





Benefits to individuals

Positive mental health strategies can help all staff, parents and students develop a greater sense of connection and belonging, as well as an increased sense of control, confidence and self-efficacy.

Also, by promoting positive mental health and taking action when small issues appear, we can help prevent the development of more serious mental health issues.



Benefits to schools

Schools with greater levels of mental health tend to have higher academic performance, increased enrollment, better retention of students, and a positive culture that generates positive word of mouth amongst the wider community.

How do we understand mental health?

Need for a shared understanding

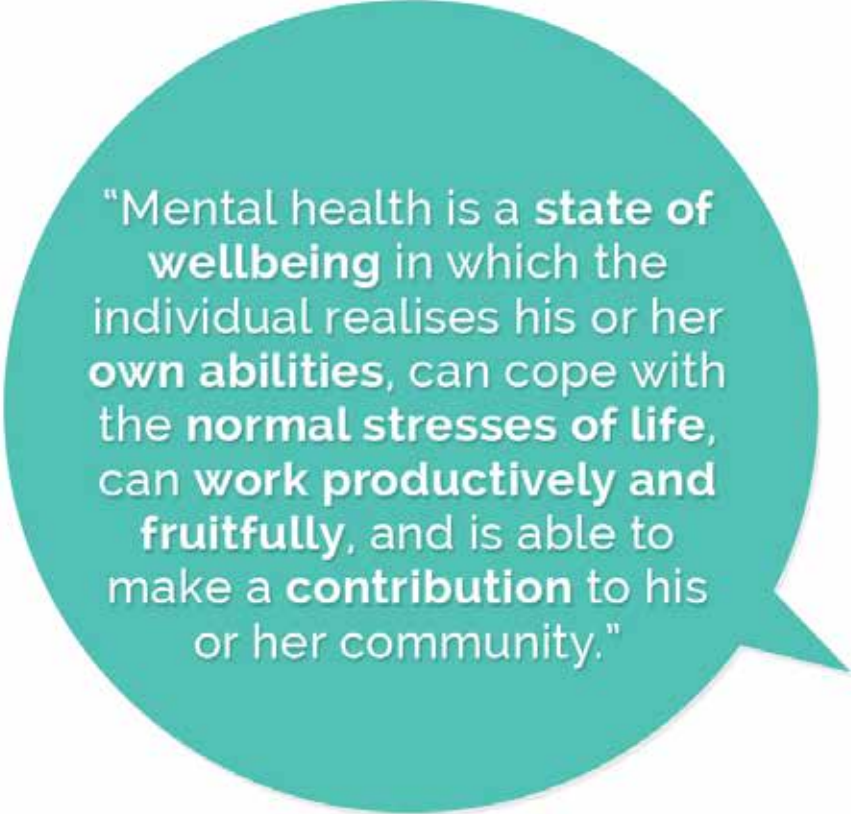


If you want to take a strategic approach to improving mental health in your school, you need to know precisely what you are trying to change, and what results you expect to see from any actions that you take. To do this you need a clear, practical understanding of mental health.

Having this understanding helps align the efforts of school staff so that each individual acts in a consistent and targeted fashion. This consistent action can then be adopted by parents and students, so that the overall strategy becomes self-reinforcing.

WHO definition of mental health

There are a variety of definitions of mental health which overlap in many areas, and have occasional differences in coverage or emphasis. A good example is the definition provided by the World Health Organisation:



“Mental health is a **state of wellbeing** in which the individual realises his or her **own abilities**, can cope with the **normal stresses of life**, can **work productively and fruitfully**, and is able to make a **contribution** to his or her community.”

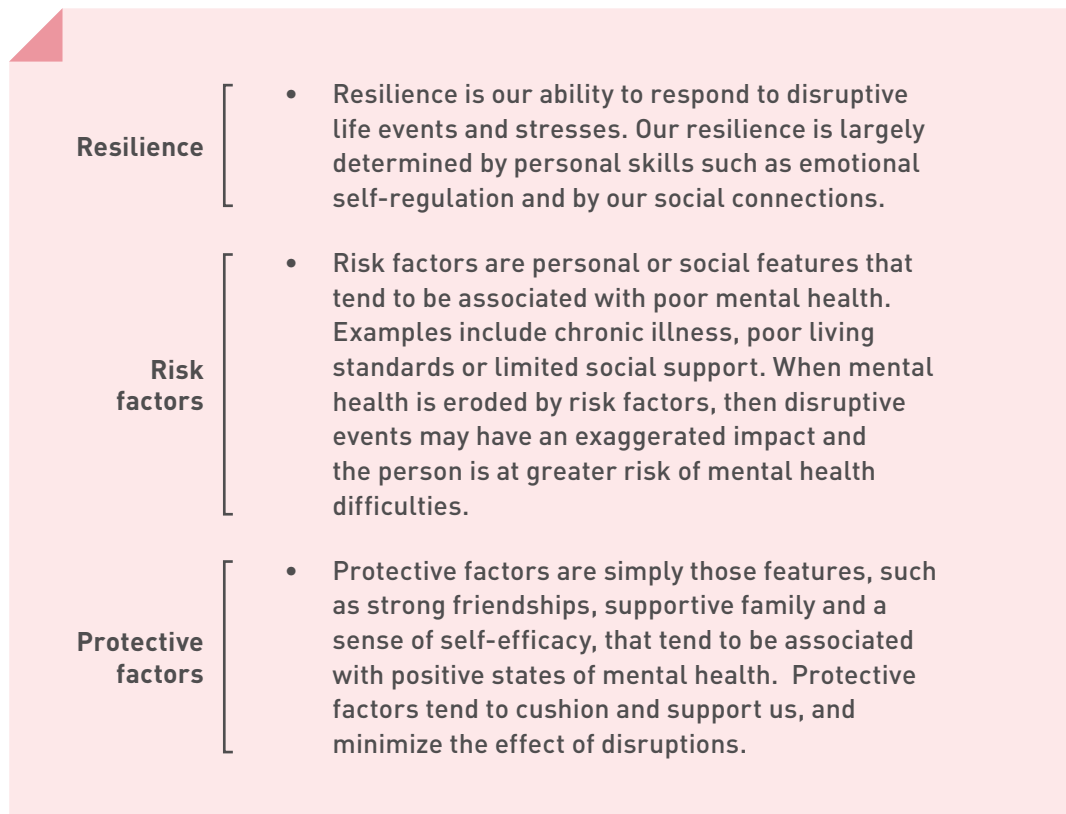
Source: World Health Organisation. (2014).

This definition suggests what mental health looks like, and makes it clear that this positive state is more than just the absence of mental illness.

Making the definition practical

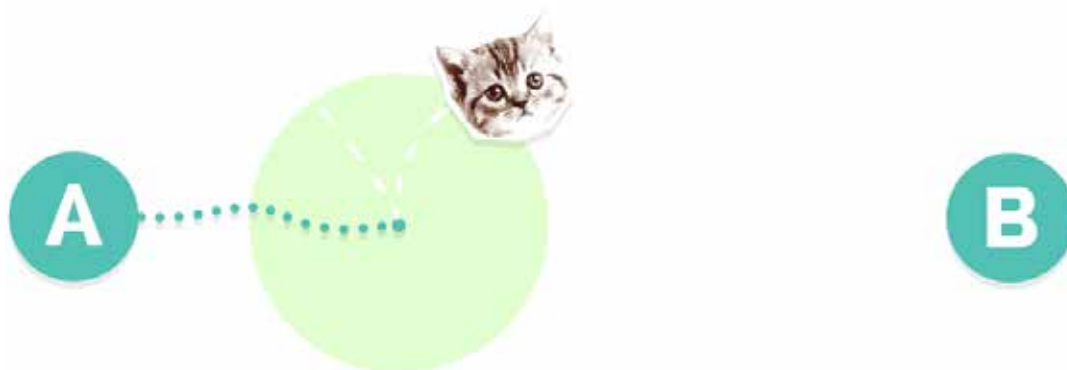
Positive mental health sounds great, but how could you possibly go about developing something so broad?

We can break mental health into resilience, risk factors, and protective factors:



In a school context we can promote positive mental health by explicitly teaching resilience skills and by promoting those protective factors within the school's control.

While it is worth having an awareness of the risk factors in any student's life, it is not always possible for a school to reduce or remove them. However, it's worth noting that protective factors in school can offset risk factors elsewhere in a student's life — meaning that action taken in school can have a significant impact.



Resilience

Resilience is the ability to respond positively to stress and adversity.

This does not mean being untroubled or endlessly happy. Every single person suffers adversity to varying degrees; resilience is the process by which we interpret, respond and either overcome or adapt to that adversity.

Resilience is not a fixed trait. It is the product of a range of personal skills, such as managing emotions, interpreting situations accurately and taking action on a plan. Many of these skills can be learned and explicitly taught in schools on a day to day basis.

Resilience development is explored thoroughly in Component 2 Student skills for resilience.

Risk and protective factors

There are a number of risk and protective factors, at the individual, family, peer, school and community levels.

The presence of protective factors in a person's life, regardless of the number of risk factors, lowers the level of risk for developing mental health difficulties.

Risk factors such as family disharmony, peer rejection, trauma and socio-economic disadvantage are typically outside a school's control, so it makes more sense to focus effort and attention on protective factors.

Protective factors such as supportive and caring parents and carers, strong social and emotional competencies, sense of belonging at school and academic achievement can be promoted from within school, and act to strengthen or support positive mental health, even in the face of adversity.

You will find that each component of MindMatters shows you how to enhance specific protective factors.

Component 1	[Looks at positive school community, inclusion and connectedness.
Component 2	[Looks at personal resilience and student empowerment.
Component 3	[Addresses relationships with parents and families.
Component 4	[Looks at help-seeking and community support.

What is the relationship between mental health and mental illness?

Mental health as a continuum

Our mental health is not fixed or static; it can change depending upon a range of circumstances. Imagine a continuum with positive mental health at one end, emerging mental health difficulties in the middle and more serious mental health disorders at the other end. Depending on circumstances, an individual can move back and forth along this continuum.



This movement is influenced by a complex interplay of social, psychological, biological and cultural elements in each individual's life.



Mental health difficulties

Mental health difficulties are a broad range of cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that may cause concern or distress. They are relatively common and may include symptoms that do not meet the threshold for a diagnosis, but nevertheless can cause distress and disruption to functioning.

Mental health disorders

Mental health disorders describe a clinically recognisable set of symptoms or behaviours which cause distress and functional impairment, and typically persist for a prolonged period of time. Mental health disorders must be diagnosed by medical experts using criteria set out in clinical diagnostic manuals such as Diagnostic and statistical manual 5 or International classification of disease 10.



Risk and protective factors do not guarantee fixed outcomes

Mental health is shaped by risk and protective factors, but the presence of particular factors — good or bad — does not guarantee any specific outcome.

A person with a large number of protective factors and no risk factors might still have poor mental health, while another person who seemingly has all the odds stacked against them might have very robust mental health.

Risk and protective factors reflect probabilities, not certainties.



Mental health difficulties vs normal adolescent behaviour

Bear in mind that as a normal part of their development, adolescents are undergoing a number of complex biological, cognitive and social changes that can cause strong reactions to common life experiences or stressors. Often young people in this situation will benefit from support and monitoring, but it may not be helpful to view them as having a mental health difficulty.

Modules 4.1 How schools help students and **4.2 Youth mental health difficulties** go into much more detail about specific mental health disorders most commonly experienced by adolescents.



How common are mental health issues?

Mental health issues are more common than you might think. While different studies produce different results, you can safely assume that in any given year about 10-20 per cent of adolescents will experience some sort of difficulty with their mental health, which typically includes anxiety, depression, substance abuse and behavioural issues. A much smaller proportion will have clinically-diagnosable disorders.

However it is very clear that while the majority of young people are fine, a sizeable minority are struggling and could use support. By offering this support early we can help prevent a mental health difficulty escalating into something more serious. Many adult mental health disorders can be traced back to difficulties experienced in adolescence, which at that time were small enough to go unnoticed.

What does mental health look like at school?

Positive mental health at a school level

There is no single, uniform state of positive mental health. It will look different for each individual as much as each school.



However, we could say that in general those schools with positive mental health tend to have a strong sense of community that encompasses staff, students and families. Individuals have close relationships that keep them bonded to the school, and generally everyone feels like they belong and have something to contribute. Ideally individual differences are not just tolerated, but embraced and celebrated.

In terms of school performance metrics, positive mental health has been shown to improve attendance, reduce behaviour management issues and increase academic performance.

The school is not a utopia; it experiences internal and external struggles and conflicts. At any give point in time there will be members of the school community struggling with some sort of difficulty. However a school with positive mental health tends to respond to these issues in a way that improves relationships and builds personal resilience.



Positive mental health at an individual level

At an individual level, mentally healthy students are likely to be the ones who eventually bounce back from setbacks or disappointments, and can find a way to get what they need from the adults and peers around them. They will probably have strong connections with family members, other adults and friends.

They will display a range of positive attributes and capabilities, including optimism, confidence, social skills, positive mood, self-belief that they can do things and positive self-identity.



Poor mental health at an individual level

Students experiencing mental health difficulties will find the school environment particularly demanding and may not be able to actively engage with school work, concentrate on tasks, tolerate uncertainty or demands, engage with social networks, and cope with the daily demands of study.

Remember: anyone can have a mental health difficulty at any time. These are not personality traits; they are experiences that many of us have. Sometimes we resolve these difficulties by ourselves, and sometimes we could use extra support.

A warning about jumping to conclusions

How easy is it to judge the mental health of a particular student?

That student who has lots of friends, has a great family and is always handing out high-fives and playing sport at lunch — would you be concerned about them? Probably not.

What about the withdrawn student who rarely talks in class, seems to have few friends and spends a lot of time alone — you might be much more concerned about them.

In the meantime, there's another student who is so uncooperative and disrespectful that you have labelled them a "bad kid" — would you think about them at all?

The fact is that you couldn't make an accurate assessment of any of these young people without considering a whole host of factors. Quite possibly the first student is very skilled at hiding a deep depression that has them contemplating suicide. The second student might enjoy being alone and have a rich inner life they find satisfying and fulfilling. The third student might have lost a parent and be struggling to form relationships.

You need to resist any impulse to jump to conclusions about the presence or absence of mental health issues.

Module 4.3 When should I be concerned? goes into greater detail about what indicators should give you concern.



How does MindMatters improve mental health?

A comprehensive framework

MindMatters provides a framework for improving mental health across an entire school.

It breaks positive mental health into manageable components and provides broad strategies on how each can be addressed.

It provides school staff with a shared language and model so that everyone can act consistently and maximise the impact of their efforts.

It acts as a portal to the best resources, whether they be agencies, programs or research, so that schools can get high-quality information and support as needed.



Promotion, prevention and intervention

The best mental health strategy is the one that prevents issues from arising in the first place, so MindMatters approaches mental health in three ways:

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Promotion | [| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By creating a positive school environment, schools can build awareness of mental health in students and staff and encourage preventative action and help seeking. |
| Prevention | [| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By using strategies to develop resilience, inclusion, connection and empowerment schools can help minimise the emergence of mental health difficulties and disorders. |
| Intervention | [| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By having informed policies and procedures, school staff can intervene early and respond effectively to students struggling with mental health difficulties. |



Resilience

Resilience is our capacity to bounce back from disruptive life events. This capacity is formed by a range of personal skills and social connections, many of which can be deliberately developed.

Component 2 Student skills for resilience

of the framework describes how schools can help students develop resilience in everyday life, as well providing advice on how to successfully implement a formal resilience building program.

Protective factors

MindMatters orients you towards a number of powerful protective factors that are within school control:

- creating a positive school culture **(Component 1)**
- helping students develop self-empowerment **(Component 2)**
- developing strong relationships with families **(Component 3)**
- encouraging help-seeking **(Component 4)**
- developing relationships with support agencies **(Component 4)**.



Small actions, big impact

MindMatters is a comprehensive framework and it benefits from thoughtful planning and implementation. However, implementation does not have to be onerous. Positive mental health is about developing skills for resilience and building strong relationships, and these don't require great effort or resources to get started.

Often school staff can take small actions that have a big impact on staff and students alike.

What do I do next?

Start now with Quick wins

If you want to start right away, read the **Quick wins** document in this module. It gives you simple things you can do right now to improve both your mental health and that of your students.



Go deeper with further reading

In this module we have given you a high-level introduction to a big subject. If you want to go deeper, you can explore the external resources linked from the module page, including policy documents and research reports.

These resources are not critical, but if you want to deepen your understanding they are a great starting point.



Start or join your school action team



If your school already has a MindMatters action team, you could consider joining it. You don't have to go to every meeting, but it can be a good opportunity to discuss school culture and mental health issues with colleagues.

If your school doesn't have a MindMatters action team, you could consider starting one! You'll find advice on how to start a team and what it can do in **Module 1.1 Getting Started**, and/or by attending a briefing.

Go to Module 1.4

MindMatters is structured for maximum flexibility, so in theory you could go to any module you like and find something useful that you can put into practice. That said, the most logical progression from this module is to go to **Module 1.4 Relationships and belonging**.



MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

References and key readings

Sanson, A.V., Havinghurst, S.S. & Zubrick, S.R. (2011). The science of prevention for children and youth. *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 10, 79-93.

World Health Organisation. (2014). Mental Health: Strengthening our response. Retrieved from www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/