

What is Mental Health?

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, social being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. (www.mentalhealth.gov) Therefore it is not static: different feelings, thoughts and acts can affect how we respond to stress, relationships, make choices, etc.

How can we be proactive about our Mental Health?

By the all encompassing name, let's remember that Mental Health is a dimension or spectrum leading to the near perfect mental health to the abnormal. If we think of it as a spectrum versus on off switch we could expand our thinking to consider adding "basic" mental health practices like our basic health practices like washing, brushing our teeth, eating well and exercising, but for mental health here are some regular, common steps we should be doing.

Emotions:

- Practice noticing and identifying emotions even small ones.
- Review and reflect on how you react to different emotions.
 - Are you eagerly able to identify all emotions?
 - Are you able to respond to some emotions better than others? For example, if you are hurt, angry, or sad because of something that has happened in a friendship, are you able to notice, think through all sides (own and others involved), and reach out to the person to discuss as necessary?
 - Or are there some feelings or situations that are more challenging for you and result in you acting in a way you regret like blowing up or avoidance?
- Stress: Do you regularly evaluate your stress and have different healthy methods of responding to increased acute stress and longterm stress?

Connections with others: The most noticeable characteristic shared by people who are very happy is strong connections with their family and friends and a value and commitment to spend time with them (Seligman & Diener)

- Maintaining friendship & healthy relationships: Strive for consistent communication with your friends both near and far.
 - Face to face is usually the easiest way to maintain a connection
 - Next would be electronically face to face (think face time and google hangouts)
 - Texts, comments on social media, sharing content on social media or through texts. These techniques are used to augment communication and possibly ways to show someone you are thinking of them in times when you are overscheduled. They will not really maintain close relationships if it is the only method used.
- Plan and participate in shared fun. (This is more complex during a pandemic, but you can do things solo while in constant communication like Netflix watch party, taking a walk separately but talking together on the phone, work on a craft together on face time, play online games together on face time).

- Strengthening your friendships & healthy family relationships
 - Reach out when you need support. Be vulnerable. Share your appreciation for their support and their person for being there for you.
 - Offer and provide support when it is needed by listening empathetically, being present through hardship and loss, and recognizing, appreciating, and helping them strengthen their character strengths.

Values and Purpose: Values are a person's principles and/or standards of behaviors. Think of it like a guidepost for developing into the person you want to be helping you move toward fulfillment. Our values are also a way to develop self-esteem and resilience

- Do you know your values? Would you like to explore this area a little more? [Life Values Inventory](#) is a research based assessment available free online (supported by a grant).
- In what ways (activities, relationships, learning) are you focusing on activities that support your values? In what ways are you not? If necessary, readjust some priorities so that you can spend some time doing something or somethings that feels meaningful to you.

Strengthen your positivity: the human brain has an asymmetry in how we process negative and positive information. The brain's natural tendency is to pay attention to, learn from and use negative information more than positive. So always, but in especially difficult times we need to work on strengthening our ability to notice and experience positivity.

- What strategies do you have in place to notice the positive? What can you add?
 - Gratitude practices
 - Mindfulness
 - Savoring your good experiences: (chocolate, funny tik toks, a great conversation with a friend, a good grade...)
 - Start the day reminding yourself to find the hidden positives
 - Review the good parts of the day before sleep
 - Has your life become unbalanced? Can you find spaces to add some play (double bonus if it incorporates a friend)
 - Check out the [Happiness Journey information](#) on Cougar Connect for more ideas.

What about a mental health scrape?

Using the idea that we all know what to do when we fall down and skin our knees. What about when we have a mental health injury? (<https://www.guywinch.com/>) Rejection, loneliness, failure, loss, or guilt? We, collectively in psychology, but also all people know certain situations even in their smallest form can cause a papercut all the way to a gaping wound. What injuries should be treated by home care and which should be outsourced to the professional?

- **When considering your emotions have you noticed what situations cause and feelings affect you the most, cause you the most distress?**
- **When you are experience the feeling or the situation what do you think might help soothe your mind?** Here are two examples to give you an idea.
 - Rejection = pain (pain is often turned to anger, avoidance, or fear), what happens when you experience this type of emotional injury?

- Self-Criticism: Work to improve [negative, self talk](#).
- Lowered self-worth: Remind yourself of the parts of you that others and yourself finds valuable and desirable
- Loneliness: reach out to our safe, supportive others. Rejection makes you want to do this less, but we need to make efforts to overcome this and turn towards social networks for support and to refuel.
- Loneliness = pain (feelings of shame, self-blame, social anxiety, and perceive interactions with others as more negative)
 - Strengthen current relationships
 - Put yourself out there to find new relationships.
- Failure: Often leads to feeling trapped, helpless and unworthy.
 - Use failure as a lesson which mostly means what can we do better next time. There are two blog posts on OID's website about failure ([Lemonade section](#))
- **Apply in an upcoming situation.** Did it provide some relief, some help? If not, what other activity or method can you try next time?

Know when you need to get help & what help is available

- **If you are struggling, you are not alone.** At CofC, 33.4% of students reported their Mental Health as fair or poor (CofC Women's Research Team). Nationally, we know that around 28% of students experience anxiety and 22% depression nationwide (American Health Association 2019). COVID has probably affected these numbers, 1 in 5 students reported to Jed Campus that their mental health has significantly worsened.
- **What you are experiencing does not need to be a mental illness to utilize resources.** Emotional distress can be caused by circumstances and the tools that can be learned from mental health professionals are universal. They are not designed for only mental illness.
- **How do you know when to get help?** (special thanks to Jed Campus for this list)
 - If thoughts, feelings, or behaviors
 - Are too intense
 - Last too long
 - Don't get better or get worse
 - Get in the way of normal activities
 - Are associated with other problems
 - Become dangerous
 - If something just feels not right. You just know something is wrong.
- **How do you find help?**
 - Depending on how distressed you are feeling there are different resources that may benefit you.
 - Do you need a neutral, emotionally supportive person to talk with? Try reaching out to Students 4 Support for a zoom or to text. Both zoom and texting are initiated by texting "4support" to 839863. They are open Mon-Thurs from 12 to 9 pm.

- Do you want to build some skills? Try TAO (Therapy Assistance Online), the Counseling Center's new online program.
- Do you think that you would benefit from meeting with the same person to work together on goals to increase your skills, techniques, and strategies to reduce your distress and increase your emotional wellbeing? Try scheduling with one of our counselors at [The Counseling Center](#). Or if you prefer to meet with someone off campus then try using one of the therapist finding resources like [Psychology Today](#), [BEAM Collective](#), or [Latinx Therapy](#)
- Are you a danger to yourself or others? Contact 911 to ask for an emergency mental health assessment.