

Beyond the Brain: Understanding Mental Health

When we think about mental health, many of us think about what's happening in our brains.

And while biology and genetics have a part to play in our mental health, our wellbeing is also influenced by social factors, including our environment, community, culture, and the specific circumstances of our lives. These factors are called the social determinants of mental health and they help us understand why people experience mental distress and how we can address these issues as a community. For example, there are many social stigmas that can influence our mental health, including stigma towards race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, abilities, and more. Addressing these stigmas can have a positive impact on everyone's wellbeing.

But what does this look like?

For example, one student may have a genetic vulnerability to depression that might be triggered by a difficult family situation like the loss of a loved one. Growing up in poverty without healthy food to eat or access to stable housing and the same opportunities as their peers can make people more vulnerable to life's stressors. Dealing with bullying and being stigmatized or discriminated against can also make a person more likely to experience depression. Even things like how we use social media or whether we have access to green space can impact our mental health.

How our culture views things like success and wellbeing and what our upbringing is like can impact our self-esteem, values, belief systems, and therefore our wellbeing. For example, our culture tends to put a lot of emphasis on academic and financial success. If we don't succeed in these traditional ways, we might feel badly about ourselves, which can impact our wellbeing.



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Examples of social factors that can impact our mental health:

- Family dynamics and family conflict, poverty, poor nutrition, housing insecurity, social media, school, peer pressure, bullying, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, religion, traumatic events, loss, access to green spaces, social isolation, access to therapy and medical care, and global events such as the pandemic. All these factors are interconnected and can also be impacted by societal stigma.

Understanding that mental health issues are not just individual problems but involve other aspects of our lives and our culture can be helpful for many reasons:

1. Building Empathy: When we know that mental health issues are impacted by societal things like stigma, poverty, social exclusion, inequalities, and bullying, we can be more compassionate towards people who might be struggling with their mental health. We can start to see how our actions and how we treat others might impact the wellbeing of those around us. Understanding the different social factors that impact mental health can also help us develop more compassion for ourselves when we're struggling.

2. Creating Social Change: Noticing how different inequalities impact people's mental health can inspire us to work towards social change and a fairer and more just world for all. For example, raising awareness about discrimination or stigma in your school, volunteering for a homeless shelter or other initiative that addresses societal issues, and finding ways to create a more inclusive environment within your social network can make a big difference to the wellbeing of those around you.

3. Improving Hope: There are things in our social environment that we can work to change and improve, and with this comes the knowledge that our mental health can also be improved. While there are aspects of mental health that we don't have control over, there are plenty of things we can do to support our wellbeing and the wellbeing of



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those around us. Our lifestyle and our choices impact our overall physical and mental health and with this knowledge comes the power to make changes that support our wellbeing.

Thinking about mental health in a holistic way can help us take better care of our wellbeing and support the people in our community by building empathy and working towards social change. While mental health might seem like an individual problem with only individual solutions, our wellbeing is also impacted by many societal issues. By addressing bullying and stigmas and building up the self-esteem and sense of belonging in those around us, we can help improve the wellbeing of the whole community.

