

# What is mental health?

May 19 2023, by Laurel Kelly

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May is Mental Health Awareness Month, which makes this a good time to learn about mental health and mental illness.

Mental health is the overall wellness of how you think, regulate your feelings and behave. Cultural norms and [social expectations](#) play a role

in defining [mental health](#). There is no standard measure across cultures to determine whether a behavior is normal or when it becomes disruptive. What might be normal in one society may be a cause for concern in another.

Mental illness refers to a wide range of mental health conditions—disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Examples of [mental illness](#) include depression, [anxiety disorders](#), schizophrenia, eating disorders and addictive behaviors.

Many people have [mental health concerns](#) from time to time. But a mental health concern becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function. Mental illness can begin at any age, from childhood through later adult years, but most cases begin earlier in life. About 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. has a mental illness in any given year.

Access to [mental health care](#) is an important part of overall health care services. It's also important to understand the roles of different types of mental health care professionals to find the one that fits your needs. The best choice for your care will depend on your concern or condition; whether you need medications, counseling or both; and your [health insurance coverage](#). Finding the right match is crucial to establishing a good relationship and getting the most out of your treatment.

Treatment depends on the type of mental illness and its severity. In many cases, a combination of treatments works best. If you have a mild mental illness with well-controlled symptoms, treatment from your primary health care clinician may be sufficient. However, often a team approach is appropriate to make sure all your psychiatric, medical and social needs are met.

Unfortunately, negative attitudes and beliefs toward people who have a

mental health condition are common. Others' judgments almost always stem from a lack of understanding rather than information based on facts. Learn more about the stigma of mental illness and what you can do to cope.

If you or someone you know are experiencing a [mental health crisis](#), get help right away by taking one of these actions:

- Call your mental health specialist.
- Call a crisis hotline number. In the U.S., call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline 24/7. Or use Lifeline Chat. Services are free and confidential. U.S. veterans or service members who are in crisis can call 988 and press "1" for the Veterans Crisis Line, text 838255 or chat online. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the U.S. also has a Spanish-language phone line at 888-628-9454.
- Call 911 or your local emergency number.
- Seek help from your health care professional.
- Reach out to a close friend or loved one.
- Contact a minister, spiritual leader or someone else in your faith community.

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Citation: What is mental health? (2023, May 19) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-mental-health.html>

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