

A proposed new definition of mental health

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Summary

The authors propose a new approach to the definition of mental health, different than the definition proposed by the World Health Organization, which is established around issues of person's well-being and productivity. It is supposed to reflect the complexity of human life experience.

Key words: mental health, definition

Introduction

The definition of mental health proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO) [1]¹ is organized around a hedonic and eudaimonic perspective, in which a key role is assigned to person's well-being and productivity. While regarding well-being as a desirable goal for many people, its inclusion in the definition of mental health raises concerns. According to Keyes [2], well-being includes emotional, psychological and social well-being, and involves positive feelings (e.g., happiness, satisfaction), positive attitudes towards own responsibilities and towards others, and positive functioning (e.g., social integration, actualization and coherence).

¹ Mental Health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes 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 [1].

However, people in good mental health experience a wide range of emotions, such as sadness, anger or unhappiness; most adolescents are often unsatisfied, unhappy about present social organization and may lack social coherence. Does this mean that they are not in good mental health? A person responsible for her/his family might feel desperate after being fired from his/her job, especially in a situation characterized by scarce occupational opportunities; should we question her/his mental health? Actually, raising the bar of mental health may create unrealistic expectations, encourage people to mask most of their emotions while pretending constant happiness, and even favor their isolation when they feel sad, angry or worried.

Also the concept of positive functioning (“can work productively and fruitfully”), in line with the eudaimonic tradition [3], raises concerns, as it implies that a person at an age or in a physical or even political condition preventing her/him from working productively is not by definition in good mental health.

The definition of mental health is clearly influenced by the culture that defines it. However, as also advocated by Vaillant [4], an effort can be made to identify elements that have a universal importance for mental health, as for example, vitamins and the four basic food groups are universally given a key role in eating habits, in spite of cultural differences.

A new definition of mental health

In the light of the above considerations we proposed the following definition:

Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one’s own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium [5].

In the definition, the internal equilibrium is regarded as a “dynamic state” mainly to reflect the fact that different life epochs (adolescence, becoming a parent, retirement) challenge the achieved equilibrium and may require changes.

Mental health components

The elements of the definition cited above are regarded as important but not mandatory resources. They may contribute to a varying degree to mental health, so that fully developed resources may offset an impairment in another component. A very empathetic person, for instance, may compensate for a moderate degree of cognitive impairment, develop a very good social network, a satisfactory equilibrium and pursue her/his life goals. Basic cognitive and social skills are regarded as an important component of mental health in the light of their impact on all aspects of everyday life

[6]. They include the ability to pay attention, remember and organize information, solve problems, make decisions, and use one's own repertoire of verbal/non-verbal abilities to communicate and interact with others. The term "basic" is meant to clarify that mild degrees of impairment are compatible with mental health, while moderate to severe degrees of impairment, especially if not balanced by other aspects, may require social support and incentives, such as facilitated job opportunities, financial benefits or ad hoc training programs.

The ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions is also regarded as an important component of mental health [7]; it represents a mediator of stress adjustment [8–10] and its impairment is a risk factor for mental and physical disorders [11]. Empathy, i.e., the ability to experience and understand what others feel, is important in communicating and interacting in effective ways and to predict actions, intentions, and feelings of others [12]. Poor empathy is a risk factor for violence, a feature of antisocial personality disorder, and may impair social interactions at all levels. Flexibility refers to the ability to modify one's own behavior or ideas in the light of unpredicted events or new evidence. Poor flexibility may result in great distress for a person undergoing sudden and/or important life changes, and is an important aspect of several psychiatric disorders, such as obsessive personality or delusional disorder [13]. The basic ability to function in social roles and to participate in meaningful social interactions is reported in the definition and deemed an important aspect of mental health, as it contributes to resilience against distress; however, a careful analysis of factors impairing social participation and favoring social exclusion is always needed to avoid confusing the results of stigmatization, discrimination and scarce opportunities with individual's poor ability to participate in the life of the community [14–16].

The mind is embodied, and heavily interconnected with the brain, organism and environment. [17]. Disturbances of these interactions may result in psychotic experiences, eating disorders, self-harm, body dysmorphic disorder or poor physical health.

Conclusions

The proposed definition aims to overcome perspectives based on ideal norms or hedonic and eudaimonic theoretical traditions, in favor of an inclusive approach, reflecting as much as possible the complexity of human life experience, which is sometimes joyful, and at other times sad or disgusting or frightening, sometimes satisfactory, and at other times challenging or unsatisfactory. The definition contains reference to universal values of human society. While this aspect remains controversial due to the difficulty of conceiving a definition free of culture-bound statements, all efforts were made to minimize this aspect and provide examples of largely shared values, such as respect and care for oneself and other living beings; recognition of connectedness between people; respect for the environment; respect for one's own and others' freedom. The reference to values is deemed important, given the importance of values

in building individual's identity, but the possibility of improving this aspect of the definition deserves attention.

Our definition is also in line with the current perspective of recovery after an illness, regarded as a process through which the person may attain a fulfilled and valued life by building on the functions spared by the illness [18].

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