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What is 'good mental health'?

We all want to feel well, both mentally and physically. But what feeling well means, especially in terms of mental health, varies for each of us. We all need different things to feel our best.

When you break a limb, it's often fairly clear from an [X-ray](#) or doing an examination how bad the break is. But when you're feeling low, [anxious](#) or experiencing a flare-up of your mental health condition, it's harder to express or measure how bad it is. We all have different perceptions of our well-being and ability to cope, as well as various definitions of what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' mental health.

Defining good mental health

However, in many ways mental health and physical health are very similar. "Everybody has it, it can fluctuate from good to poor, and we need to take care of it," explains Stephen Buckley, Head of Information at [Mind](#).

"Good mental health might have a different meaning to each of us, but it's generally understood to mean being able to think, feel and react in the ways that you need and want to live your life as fully and independently as possible."

Good mental health doesn't mean that you always feel happy or that you never have bad moods or bad days. But if anxiety, [low mood](#) or other symptoms of your mental health condition are overwhelming or difficult to cope with, it's likely that you don't currently have good mental health.

"Mental health affects how we think, feel and act," says Deirdre Kehoe, Director of Training and Services at [YoungMinds](#). "Having good mental health is about feeling positive about ourselves and others, being able to form good relationships, and having the resilience to overcome challenges."

Someone who has good mental health will likely be able to:

- Feel, express and manage a range of positive and negative emotions.
- Carry out everyday tasks and look after themselves. This might include [diet](#), [exercise](#), [sleep](#), cleaning, work, learning and social activities.
- Take part in activities they enjoy.
- Build and manage healthy relationships with others.

Not everyone with good mental health will be able to do all of these things, and the ability to do them doesn't mean that you aren't experiencing a mental health problem. It's all about what's normal for you.

"Some people never experience poor mental health, some go through a phase of their lives where they struggle with their mental health, while others have longer-term conditions," says Kehoe. "Some common mental health problems are things like depression, anxiety, [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#), [eating disorders](#) or [psychosis](#), and dealing with these can be really tough."

Am I mentally healthy?

"Poor mental health affects us all in different ways, but if you're experiencing something like depression or anxiety, you might notice changes to your feelings, thoughts and behaviour," says Buckley.

These changes might become disruptive to everyday life and make it difficult to carry out basic tasks. Signs of poor mental health might include:

- Feeling low, numb, irritable, tearful or worthless.
- Changes to your sleeping pattern including sleeping more or less than is normal for you.
- Eating more or less than you usually do.
- Withdrawing from or wanting to withdraw from friends or family.
- Thoughts about [self-harm](#) or [suicide](#). You should seek support as soon as possible if you are experiencing these thoughts.

"Feeling down from time to time is a normal part of daily life. But if the feelings last for two weeks or more, or keep returning, it could be a sign you're experiencing a mental health problem," says Buckley.

Doctors routinely use a tool called the [PHQ9](#) to get an indication of whether someone is depressed and how severely. It doesn't cover all the subtle nuances, but it's a good starting point and can be used to measure improvements over time.

In young people, it can sometimes be hard for parents to tell what's normal teenage moodiness and what's a mental health problem. However, [half of all](#) mental health problems are established by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24, so it's crucial to intervene early if you suspect a mental health issue.

"Young people are adapting to lots of changes as they grow up, so it's normal for them to express raw emotions and change moods quickly," explains Kehoe. "But if they consistently struggle - if there are changes to their sleeping or eating patterns, or if they constantly seem upset - it's important to take it seriously."

As well as seeking support from a GP, school or mental health professional, parents can call the YoungMinds [parents helpline](#) if they are concerned about their child's mental health and need advice.

Working towards good mental health

If you feel that you don't have good mental health, it's a good idea to look at your life and take note of the things that make you feel better or worse so you can make changes to improve your well-being. And if you already have good mental health, it's important to work on maintaining it; good mental health isn't necessarily permanent, and it can fluctuate if we don't stay on top of it.

Healthy lifestyle

"It can be easier said than done, but all the things we do to improve our physical health also benefit our well-being," says Buckley. "Eating healthily, sleeping well and making time for exercise are all important, as well as keeping an eye on how much [alcohol](#), [sugar](#) and [caffeine](#) you're consuming." If you have a mental health condition which requires therapy or medication, it's key to be consistent and follow your treatment plan.

Support network

Finding a support network which can help you stay on top of taking care of yourself may help you stay motivated. This might include friends, family, colleagues, teachers, therapists or other people in your community. There are also mental health groups online, such as on the [Patient community forums](#).

Talk to your support network about how you've been feeling and see if they can offer you any solutions, such as social activities, emotional support or keeping an eye on any changes to your behaviour or well-being.

Professional support

"If you notice changes to your feelings, thoughts and behaviour that last for more than two weeks, keep coming back or interfere with your day-to-day life, speak with your GP, who can talk through different treatment options available if needed," continues Buckley. "Most people find that they are able to manage their mental health problems well with the right combination of treatments. This might include self-care techniques, medication and talking therapies."

You can also [self-refer for talking therapies](#) on the NHS or book private sessions through [Patient Access](#).

If you need urgent support, you can contact the Samaritans on 116 123. Young people under 25 can also contact the YoungMinds [Crisis Messenger](#) service by texting YM to 85258.

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