

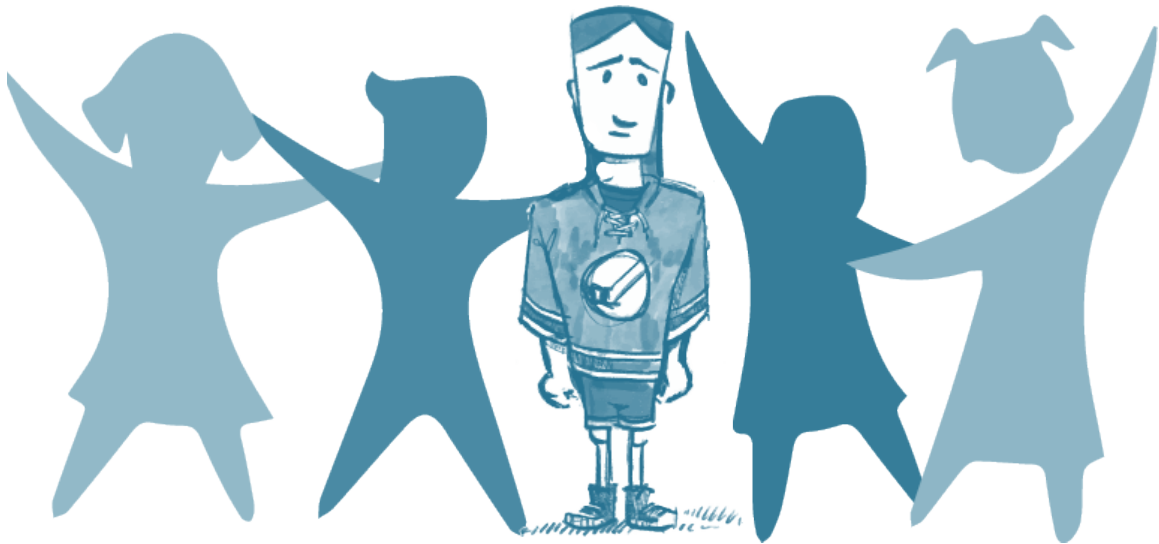
## Module 1:

# Understanding Mental Health

- Everyone has mental health
- Mental health has a wide range of states, including no distress, mental distress (aka stress), mental health problems and mental disorders
- Mental health is more than a positive mood (good mental health isn't just feeling happy)
- It is important to use appropriate words to describe our emotions, to regulate and cope



# Understanding Mental Health



**M**ental health is part of our overall health and includes health aspects related to our thinking / cognition, emotions and behaviours. There are two widely accepted definitions of mental health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, 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.” The Surgeon General of the USA provides this definition of mental health: “Mental health is a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people and the ability to change and cope with adversity.” The Surgeon General’s definition underlines the importance of developing competencies to meet life’s challenges while the WHO’s definition focuses more on the state of wellbeing.

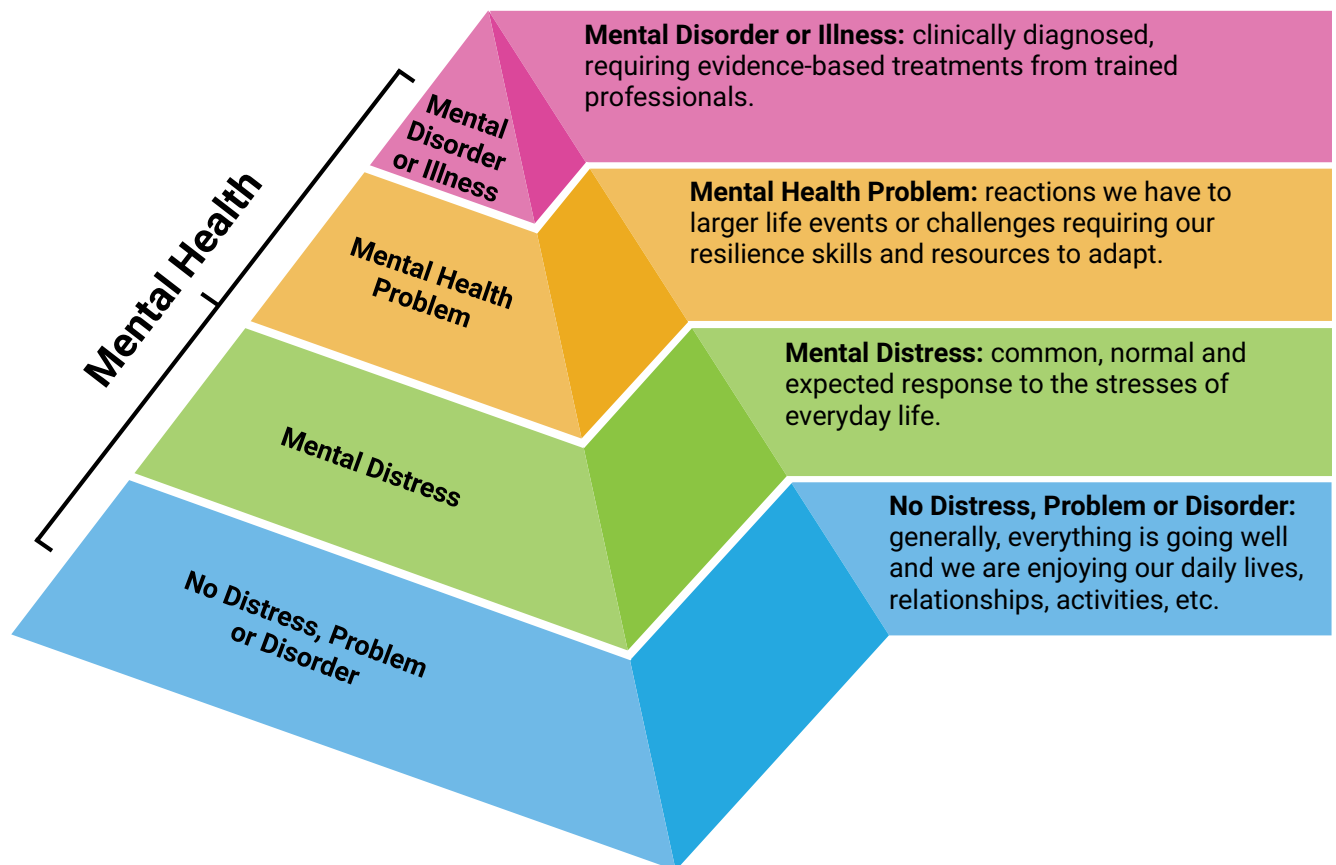


**It is essential to help students understand that everyone has mental health which involves a number of states**

Mental Health is...

- “ A state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community.  
- World Health Organization
- “ A state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people and the ability to change and cope with adversity.  
- Surgeon General of the USA

To deliver this module, it is essential to help students understand that everyone has mental health which involves a number of states, including: no distress, mental distress, mental health problems, and for some, mental disorders.



You can download a printable PDF on the pyramid of mental health states from:

<https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/product/using-the-right-words/>

**Mental distress / stress is the common, expected, and normal response to the stresses of everyday life.**

This may include starting at a new school, writing a test, presenting in front of a class, or making new friends. Dealing with mental distress doesn't require professional interventions. We are usually able to adapt and respond to mental distress naturally by ourselves along with support from our family and community. For example, a student may feel distressed for not making a sports team and this may be alleviated by encouraging more practice for the next opportunity or choosing another sport or activity. Learning new skills from managing stressful life events will help us deal with similar life events in the future with more competence, thereby building our resiliency. A parallel to this is that of the body's immune system. Every day our bodies are invaded by a multitude of germs (bacteria and viruses) but most of the time our bodies shrug them off. We may feel a little unwell at times, and may cough or sneeze or have a mild headache or stomach ache, but these are merely indicators that our bodies are doing exactly what they have evolved to do. We don't need to go see a healthcare provider for help. We can help ourselves by actions such as good hand hygiene, but note that our body handles all these stressors on its own, naturally. Once our bodies have encountered a germ, they're more prepared to cope with it in the future.

We can expect to experience mental distress almost daily. Examples of words used to describe mental distress may include: agitated, nervous, stressed, worried, unhappy, disappointed, disgruntled, uneasy, and fretful, etc.



Watch *Mental Health Literacy Pyramid Explained*:  
<https://youtu.be/VgYmlsYmUIU>



**Mental health states are not a continuum and people DO NOT necessarily progress from mental distress to developing a mental disorder**

**Mental health problems indicate that our adaptation to the environment is being significantly challenged.**

They are characterised by negative emotions, thinking / cognition, and behaviours that can be severe at times and of either short or long durations. Examples of events leading to a mental health problem could include the death of a loved one, a divorce, loss of a friendship or career, or moving to a new country with insufficient support. To manage mental health problems, we may benefit from professional help such as counselling in addition to family and community support. Returning to the metaphor of a powerful new germ attacking our immune system, our health may be temporarily compromised and we would experience some significant and substantial symptoms (e.g. fever, sore throat, fatigue, muscle aches and pains, etc.). However, most of the time with the proper interventions (such as rest, fluids and over-the-counter medications) our health is restored and we return to our usual self within a few days to a week. Medical treatment is not usually necessary unless complications such as pneumonia develop. Similarly, almost everyone will experience mental health problems at various times throughout their life. These experiences are described with language appropriate to the situation, such as: grief, demoralisation, devastation, etc.

“ Sometimes a person may be in multiple states at the same time.



## Mental Disorders

The current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-5-TR) defines mental disorders as dysregulation of mood, thought and / or behaviours. Mental disorders are diagnosed according to internationally agreed upon criteria such as the DSM-5-TR or the International Classification of Diseases 11, and require best available evidence-based treatments / interventions from properly trained healthcare providers. These treatments are provided in addition to the support often given to people who experience mental distress or a mental health problem. The parallel is that of a disease such as HIV / AIDS or Tuberculosis, where the invading organism overwhelms the body's defences. In these cases, we may experience many of the same kinds of symptoms that characterise a bad cold or the flu. However, unlike a cold, without the proper medical interventions (rapid access to evidence-based treatment), the outcomes are poor. In this case, professional help is both needed and necessary. Clinical terms such as Major Depressive Disorder, Generalised Anxiety Disorder, and Schizophrenia are used to connote specific disorders.

In summary, every person will experience three mental health states (no mental distress, problem; mental distress; mental health problems) throughout their lives. These three states are all part of usual life. Added to this, about 20% of people worldwide will experience a mental disorder. Therefore, a good many of us will experience a mental disorder as one component of our overall mental health. Taken together, these states constitute our mental health. Please note: Mental health states are not a continuum and people DO NOT necessarily progress from mental distress to developing a mental disorder.

Any person can experience some or all of these mental health states within a short period of time (such as an hour), or over a longer period of time (weeks, months or even years). Sometimes a person may be in multiple states at the same time.



Download a PDF handout on the pyramid of various mental health states from:  
<https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/product/using-the-right-words/>