



*Improving the Health of Canadians:
Exploring Positive Mental Health*

Summary Report



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Increasingly, mental health is moving to the forefront of discussions and action on overall health and well-being. However, much of this work has not focused on supporting the development of positive mental health. Instead, it has had a primary focus on mental illness, specifically service-, access- and stigma-related issues. Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness.¹ It is a component of overall health² and is shaped by individual, physical environment, social, cultural and socio-economic characteristics.³ Fostering the development of positive mental health by supporting individual resilience, creating supportive environments⁴ and addressing the influence of the broader determinants of mental health⁵ are key components of promoting mental health.

To help inform planning decisions to promote positive mental health, *Improving the Health of Canadians: Exploring Positive Mental Health* brings together available information and data analyses that look at one way of defining positive mental health; current measures of positive mental health; its role in health; what factors are associated with high levels of positive mental health; and what strategies are, or may be, effective at promoting mental health at a population level. This is the final report in a series of three reports on mental health being produced by CPHI.ⁱ We invite you to refer to the underlying research, analyses and references at www.cihi.ca/cphi.

i. The first and second reports in the series, *Mental Health and Homelessness* and *Mental Health, Delinquency and Criminal Activity*, were released in August 2007 and April 2008, respectively.

Exploring Positive Mental Health

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) defines mental health as “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.”^{ii,6} The report uses this definition as a guiding framework to look at one way of operationalizing the term “positive mental health.”

To date, the term “positive mental health” has been used in many different ways. Numerous, sometimes overlapping, terms are used to reflect the same concepts, thereby contributing to a lack of definitional clarity. Despite this variation, research indicates that factors related to our genetics⁷ and personality,^{8,9} life circumstances,^{10,11} family and social environments^{12,13} and behaviours¹⁴ all play roles in our ability to enjoy life. However, positive mental health is not simply the presence of life enjoyment. It involves many aspects that are just as integral to our positive mental health, including the way we deal with life’s challenges;¹⁵ the ways we experience and use our emotions to function and interact with others;¹⁶ the connectedness, meaning, purpose, values and beliefs by which we live;^{17,18} the connections we have within our social and physical environments;¹⁹ and our sense of equity and respect for people’s differences.²⁰ These aspects, in isolation and in combination, are dimensions of positive mental health and are related to various health-related outcomes.

Measuring Positive Mental Health and Its Role in Health

A range of positive mental health measures is used internationally and in Canada. In Canada, mental health and well-being are currently assessed using measures of self-rated health and self-rated mental health as part of a framework of overall health indicators.²¹ The report suggests that other, or additional, measures may be more effective at reflecting positive mental health.

Information presented in the report illustrates that there are numerous multi-directional links between positive mental health, mental illness, physical illness and positive physical health.²² Consistent with this, new CPHI analyses of data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) cycle on mental health and well-being (Cycle 1.2, 2002), show that people reporting higher levels of positive mental health are less likely to report adverse health outcomes (such as mental illness) and more likely to report positive health outcomes (such as excellent self-rated physical health) than are people who report low and moderate levels of positive mental health (see Table 1).

Analyses also explore the characteristics of people reporting high levels of positive mental health. Results highlight differences in rates of high positive mental health across different social and demographic characteristics.

- ii. As noted in the article, “Mental Health Promotion: People, Power and Passion,” published in the September 1998 issue of *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion* (Authors: N. Joubert and J. Raeburn), this definition arose from a 1996 international workshop held by the Centre for Health Promotion, University of Toronto, and the Mental Health Promotion Unit, Health Canada.

- **Geographic Location:** Rates of reporting high positive mental health vary by province and across census metropolitan areas. High life enjoyment, emotional well-being and social connectedness are significantly higher in Newfoundland and Labrador than in most provinces and in Canada overall.
- **Age and Sex:** Analyses show an increase in four of the five positive mental health outcomes among respondents 15 to 69 years of age and fluctuations thereafter. High emotional well-being and coping ability are more common among males, while high social connectedness and spiritual values are more common among females.
- **Income and Education:** Neither factor was consistently linked with high positive mental health. For example, groups with some postsecondary education or higher are more likely to have high coping ability but less likely to report high life enjoyment, as well as emotional well-being, spiritual values and social connectedness than people with lower education.
- **Race or Culture:** No one group has the highest rates of positive mental health for all five measures.
- **Available Support and Community Belonging:** Having emotional support almost always available and having high levels of community belonging are associated with high positive mental health across all five dimensions.

Table 1
Percentage Self-Reporting Mental Illness and Excellent Self-Rated Physical Health by Level of Positive Mental Health, Population 15 Years and Over, 2002

Positive Mental Health Characteristics	Percentage Reporting Mental Illness	Percentage Reporting Excellent Self-Rated Physical Health
Life Enjoyment		
High	7%*	26%*
Moderate	12%*	18%*
Low	28%*	10%*
Emotional Well-Being		
High	6%*	28%*
Moderate	10%*	19%*
Low	28%*	10%*
Coping Ability		
High	9%*	31%*
Moderate	15%*	15%*
Low	36%*	8%*
Spiritual Values		
High	14% ^{††}	18%
Moderate	16%	17%
Low	17%	18%
Social Connectedness		
High	11%*	21%*
Moderate	16%*	16%*
Low	29%*	11%*

Notes

* Pairwise comparisons significantly different at $p < 0.05$.

†† Significantly different than moderate and low levels at $p < 0.05$.

Source

CPIH analyses of Canadian Community Health Survey (Cycle 1.2, 2002), Statistics Canada.

Promoting Positive Mental Health

The report also looks at strategies and opportunities to promote positive mental health among the population. A scan of the emerging evidence in this field indicates that:

- Many mental health programs tend to have a symptom management, illness treatment or preventative focus rather than a primary focus on promoting positive mental health;
- Some programs and initiatives are incorporating a positive mental health focus or approach into their programming;
- Programs and interventions are being offered or implemented at the grassroots level but in many cases, evaluations are not available;
- Some programs and interventions target specific subgroups, but they do not necessarily look at the causes behind gradients or inequities or the interaction of various determinants of health; and
- Population-based policies and interventions are scarce.

Mental health promotion is about fostering the development of positive mental health by supporting individual resilience, creating supportive environments⁴ and addressing the influence of the broader determinants of mental health.⁵

Strategies that focus on mental health promotion apply to all people and communities—including at-risk individuals or groups and people living with a mental illness.⁴ As such, mental health promotion strategies and activities can be grouped into three broad levels of analyses:

- Societal,
- Community and
- Individual.²³

Specific goals of mental health promotion include enhancing protective factors that help individuals, families and communities deal with events and increasing conditions, such as social cohesion, that reduce risk factors for diminished mental health among individuals, families and communities.²⁴ Inequities associated with gender, poverty, disability, race or ethnicity, unemployment and geographic location can themselves influence mental health.²⁴ As it applies to all groups of people, the promotion of positive mental health is an essential contributor to population health. It can also increase the effectiveness of prevention and treatment activities. Information presented in the report shows that everyone, within and outside of the health sector, can play a role in promoting positive mental health.

About CPHI

The Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI), a part of the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), was created in 1999. CPHI's mission is twofold:

- To foster a better understanding of factors that affect the health of individuals and communities; and
- To contribute to the development of policies that reduce inequities and improve the health of and well-being of Canadians.

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