Issue 2.0

Learning Guide
Mental health wellbeing

Name:

Workplace:

26971 Describe factors that contribute to mental health wellbeing and mental health problems

Level 3  3 credits
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Introduction

This learning guide introduces you to mental health and the factors that contribute towards the mental health wellbeing and mental health problems of the people we support.

How to use your learning guide

This guide supports your learning and prepares you for the unit standard assessment. The activities and scenarios should be used as a general guide for learning.

This guide relates to the following unit standard:
• 26971 Describe factors that contribute to mental health wellbeing and mental health problems (level 3, credits 3).

This guide is yours to keep. Make it your own by writing notes that help you remember things, or where you need to find more information.

Follow the tips in the notes column.

You may use highlight pens to show important information and ideas, and think about how this information applies to your work.

You might find it helpful to talk to colleagues or your supervisor.

Finish this learning guide before you start on the assessment.

What you will learn

This topic will help you to understand:
• mental health wellbeing, particularly in the New Zealand context.
• the factors that contribute to mental health wellbeing.
What is mental health wellbeing?

To feel well in terms of mental health means different things to different people, and depends on their individual circumstances.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health wellbeing as:

“A state of well-being in which the individual realises 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.”

Julie Liebrich, New Zealand’s Mental Health Commissioner from 1996–2000 and a mental health service user herself, gives a personal definition, stating that:

“Mental health is like spirituality, an utterly subjective experience. For me, it means knowing who I am and accepting that. Mental health is the state of freedom which comes from accepting one’s self and taking responsibility for one’s actions. It is many other things as well of course: acceptance of others as they are, acceptance of life as it is, knowing when and how to change and when and how to let go.”

People have their own views of what mental health means to them as individuals. For example, people who have experience of mental health problems may describe mental health as living well in the presence or absence of these problems.

Different cultures can also have differing definitions of mental health. The use of culturally appropriate models is good practice, so it is important to understand the culture that people identify with, in order to relate to their own interpretation of wellness.
Māori models of wellbeing

There are several well-known Māori models of mental health wellbeing including Te Pae Mahutonga and Tu Wheke. Te Whare Tapa Whā is probably the best-known model of wellness for Māori.

The literal translation of ‘Te Whare Tapa Whā’ is ‘the four sides of the house’. The essence of the approach is that wellbeing sits within the four cornerstones of health, which are all interlocking and essential. If one wall falls, the house will fall.

The four cornerstones of health as illustrated above are described by Mason Durie (1994) as follows.

**Taha wairua – spiritual dimension**

‘Spiritual’ refers to the capacity for faith and a belief in the non-material world. Health is related to unseen and unspoken energies. The spiritual essence of people is their life force. It shapes them as individuals and as a community; and defines who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going.

**Taha hinengaro – mental dimension**

Mind and body are inseparable. ‘Mental’ refers to the capacity to communicate, think and feel. Thoughts, feelings and emotions are integral components of the body and soul. This dimension is about how Māori see themselves in the universe, their interaction with factors that are uniquely Māori, and the perception that others have of them.

**Taha tinana – physical dimension**

Good physical health is required for optimal development. People’s physical being supports their essence and shelters them from the external environment.

**Taha whānau – social/family dimension**

This dimension is about the capacity to belong, to care and to share as individuals who are part of wider social systems. Whānau (family) gives Māori the strength to be who they are, and provides a link to their
ancestors, their ties with the past, their present and their future. Understanding the importance of whānau and how whānau members can contribute to illness and assist in recovery is fundamental to understanding Māori health.

Pacific models of wellbeing: the Fonofale model

It is important to realise the range of cultures and lifestyles covered by the term ‘Pacific’, including diverse geographical locations, traditions and outlooks. The best-known over-arching Pacific model of wellness is the Fonofale, which is based on a Samoan fale (house), where the foundation or floor, four pou (posts) and roof all have symbolic meanings. These elements are presented in a circle, expressing the philosophy of holism and continuity.

Fonofale is a dynamic model, in that all elements have an interactive relationship.

The foundation or floor – family

The foundation of the house represents family, which underpins all Pacific Island cultures. ‘Family’ in this context can be nuclear, extended or constituted. It is bound by kinship, titles, marriage, partnership, covenant or agreement, and forms the fundamental basis of Pacific Island social organisation.
The roof – culture
The roof represents cultural values and beliefs which shelter the family for life.

The four pou
Between the roof and the foundation are the four pou (posts), connecting the family with their culture but also continually interacting with each other. These pou are:

- spiritual – the sense of wellbeing which stems from a belief system that includes Christianity or traditional spirituality relating to nature, spirits, language, beliefs, ancestors and history – or a combination of both.
- physical – biological or physical wellbeing. The relationship of the body – its anatomy and physiology – to physical or organic and inorganic substances such as food, water, air and medications can have either a positive or a negative impact on physical wellbeing.
- mental – the wellbeing or health of the mind, which involves thinking and emotions as well as the behaviour that people exhibit.
- other – the variables that can directly or indirectly affect health such as gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, age or socio-economic status.

The circle
The fonofale is expressed in a cocoon or circle which contains dimensions that directly or indirectly influence one another, namely:

- environment – this dimension addresses the relationships Pacific people have with their physical environment. This environment may be a rural or an urban setting.
- time – this dimension relates to the actual or specific time in history that impacts on Pacific people.
- context – this dimension relates to the where/how/what, and the meaning and importance of these factors for a particular person or people. Other contexts include country of residence, legal status, politics and socio-economic factors.
What are mental health problems?

People in general experience changes in their mental health state, influenced by a number of factors which could result from genetics, lifestyle or life events. Most people experience short to medium term depression and anxiety at some points in their lives.

Some people experience severe and longer term mental health problems that lead to a diagnosis of mental illness which require the involvement of specialist services and support.

Mental health problems can be defined as any psychological or behavioural signs or symptoms that are not a part of normal human development or culture, and which may suggest, or could lead to, a formal diagnosis of a recognised mental health disorder.

When people feel mentally well they are strengthened against stressful life events; but when they experience mental health problems, their vulnerability to stressful life events is strongly increased.
Factors that affect mental health

Certain factors play roles in people’s lives and can affect their mental health either for better or for worse. The role of culture and the environment, and factors including physical, psychological, spiritual, social and economic – together with experiences of trauma, can all contribute to people’s mental health wellbeing, as well as to mental health problems.

Because the same factors can contribute both to mental health wellbeing and to mental health problems, it is important to consider them when assessing people’s health status or supporting them to regain a sense of wellbeing.

Culture

People need a sense of belonging to feel good about themselves. This sense of belonging doesn’t necessarily have to come from family or friends, but can arise through support and interaction within cultural groups. Most people relate to a number of different cultures at the same time. It is important to remember that culture doesn’t only refer to a person’s ethnicity. Cultures reflect a wide range of groupings, including:

- nationality.
- language.
- age.
- disability.
- gender.
- sexual orientation.
- religious or spiritual beliefs.
- political beliefs.
- socio-economic status.
- occupation.
- organisational background.
- immigrant or refugee status.
- experience of the health system.

Positive potential

Being part of a cultural group with background, values, life experiences and ways of doing things in common provides people with positive ongoing contact and shared goals that help prevent them from feeling isolated or alienated. People can also participate in collective rituals such as, for example, a pōwhiri, church services, sports events, kava ceremonies, ANZAC Day, a gay pride march and Girl Guides jamborees.
Negative potential
When people are not connected to a culture, they may lose their identity and sense of belonging. Cultural breakdown or dislocation from a person’s culture can lead to a negative feeling of isolation and alienation. Not having people to relate to who have shared values and experiences may lead a person to feel that these values and experiences are no longer worthwhile.

Over the years many ethnic groups had to move from their place of belonging for various reasons including war, trauma and colonisation, or to seek financial benefits. These moves often involve leaving behind family, social identity, support groups and the group’s whole cultural context. They can also create misunderstandings between generations of a family. Such a background often leaves people more vulnerable to mental health problems when difficulties arise.

Social
Relationships take many forms, for example, intimate relationships, friendships, family/whānau, extended family, iwi or ancestral relationships. More casual social relationships also play an important role as part of a regular routine, for example, chatting briefly with a local shop-owner.

Positive potential
Being part of a community and its social structure enhances people’s sense of belonging. Social relationships protect against isolation and increase a person’s sense of being valued. People feel more ‘human’ when they can return a favour to someone who has ‘been there’ for them at a difficult time.

Having strong safe relationships with people who support others through good times and bad can help a person to be more resilient through times of change, or when difficulties arise.

Negative potential
For people with experience of mental illness, socialisation is often damaged or threatened by other people’s fear and lack of understanding. People may avoid someone living with a mental illness because they feel they can’t handle the ways in which that person has behaved, or might behave. This fear and prejudice can lead to isolation and alienation from social groups and networks that people with mental illness have commonly relied on. Discrimination can remove social supports at the very time when they are most needed.
Write

Name two cultural groups or other social groups that you are currently part of and which support your sense of belonging and wellness.

1

2

How do you feel supported by these groups?

What are two cultural groups or other social groups that you have been separated from or are no longer part of?

1

2

Did this change make you feel vulnerable, and if so, in what way?
Physical

The close relationship between good physical health and good mental health has long been recognised and is reflected in the Te Whare Tapa Whā and Fonofale models of health. Around the 17th Century, however, western cultures separated the mind and the body, giving medical science the freedom to explore the physical body, and leaving the mind as the church’s domain. Conversely, in the 20th and 21st centuries the concepts of ‘alternative therapies’ and ‘mind-body medicine’ have become accepted, in which behavioural and lifestyle interventions can be as important as traditional medical interventions.

Positive potential

The three key factors essential to general physical health are nutrition, exercise and sleep. These factors support people’s mental health wellbeing by helping to keep their moods stable, energy levels up and cognitive functioning working. These topics are covered in more depth in the section ‘Lifestyle choices that promote wellbeing’.

Negative potential

Maintaining good physical health is often more difficult for people with other chronic disorders such as ongoing mental conditions. Research in 2001 found that 45% of the population with a mental health disorder also have a physical illness; and that their death rates from the physical illness are proportionately higher than those of people with that illness who do not have a mental health disorder.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Death Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart Disease</td>
<td>2.2 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer (all sites)</td>
<td>1.5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenza (Flu)</td>
<td>5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>3 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory illness</td>
<td>2.8 - 4 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45% of the service user population have a concurrent physical illness

This difference in these rates is because people who are experiencing mental illness are often less motivated to care for their physical health. They may also be discriminated against in primary care and consequently have access to fewer treatment options. This finding is backed up by the research that has been undertaken in the area.
Psychological

Psychological wellbeing is a key factor in mental health wellbeing. Psychological wellbeing refers not only to the absence of mental illness, but also to people feeling good about themselves and about who they are.

Positive potential

People who are psychologically resilient tend to have:

- self-confidence.
- a sense of contentment.
- a sense of meaning and purpose in their relationships, work and leisure.
- the ability to deal with stress and bounce back from adversity.
- the flexibility to learn new things and adapt to change.
- the ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships.
- the ability and opportunities to laugh and have fun.

These attributes help to build resilience and form protective guards around people’s mental wellbeing during times of stress. They are greatly supported by people receiving sufficient nutrition, exercise and sleep. (These points are covered later in this learning guide in the section ‘Lifestyle choices that promote wellbeing’.)

Negative potential

People who are not psychologically resilient tend to have:

- a negative outlook which leads to low self-regard.
- a lack of sense of safety in the world.
- a diminished sense of belonging.
- lowered self-confidence.
How do changes in your physical health affect how you feel mentally?

Are there any physical techniques that you use when you need to feel better mentally?

Are there any psychological techniques that you use when you need to feel better mentally?
Economic

People need to have an adequate income to provide the base essentials of life without getting into debt or other stressful situations. The best economic situation for people to be in is when their income is steady enough to allow for treats from time to time or to share their benefits with others. Having sufficient money gives people a sense of present and future security. Also, level of income can affect people’s self-perception for better or for worse because it is a major source of social status.

Positive potential

When people can make and stick to decisions about spending, saving, tax matters, borrowing, insurance and investments, they are exercising sound financial management. People in this situation gain a sense of confidence and security that they are controlling and shaping their own lives.

Negative potential

Times of financial difficulty are often cited as one of the most stressful situations in people’s lives. For some people financial difficulty can be remedied easily or reasonably quickly, while for others ongoing debt and poor financial management can lead to years, and sometimes to generations of poverty.

Poverty affects many of the other factors which also support mental health wellbeing, such as physical health, ability to join groups or being able to live in a healthy environment.

Spiritual

Many people have a spiritual influence in their life, whether it is a religious belief or a belief in a higher power, life force, fate or the universe. Others may hold atheist or agnostic points of view – that there is no god, or proof of the existence of any god.

The form that people’s belief systems take can be an important factor in maintaining a sense of self during difficult times.

Positive potential

People with a belief system can gain a sense of contentment, knowledge and confidence of their place in the universe, and a deep understanding and acceptance of whatever life throws at them.

For some people, the experience of mental illness causes them to seek out a spiritual support system or to question previously held beliefs.
For this reason, it is not uncommon for people experiencing mental distress to seek the support of priests and elders, or marae-based tohunga. For Māori, the experience of mental illness may draw them back to their whānau and marae to the wisdom of their kaumātua and kuia, to interpret their illness in terms of their spiritual beliefs.

**Negative potential**

When people are experiencing a mental health problem, they may also feel unable to connect with their usual spiritual or religious beliefs. This loss of confidence can intensify their overall despair and confusion – they might feel deserted and alone in the universe.

Some spiritual or religious beliefs and practices, however, can be harmful for the people following them, and may lead to delusional or irrational behaviour that affects their health and wellbeing and even their lives.
Think about your own approach to spirituality, using the questions below. Tick ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’, but be aware that there are no right or wrong answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have a spiritual belief that is important to my daily wellbeing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t see spiritual beliefs as important to my own wellbeing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a strong spiritual belief that would support me if I turned to it during a difficult time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe that spiritual beliefs are needed to get well.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would seek spiritual support if I became unwell.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would support another person to seek spiritual support.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use this space to write any other thoughts that you might have on this topic.
Environment

The environment that people live in has a far greater impact on their mental health than they might realise. Environment can refer to any location from immediate housing to other areas that are frequently regularly, for example, community centres, workplaces, the surrounding area and location, or country. It can also refer to the physical attributes of these locations and to other attributes that are part of the experience of being there.

Positive potential

Some examples of how environments can affect people positively include:

- having a home of their own choosing that is safe, comfortable and warm, and which adds to their health, safety and sense of self-worth.
- being surrounded by opportunities for relaxation and recreation. For example, having easy access to parks and nature reserves gives people the opportunity to feel that they can escape from the world, get exercise, share social contact with others or allow children to play safely.
- having a workplace that is clean and safe, where people’s work and opinions are sought and valued, and where the environment is free from harassment and bullying.
- living in a country where environmental principles are prioritised and maintained can support people’s positive beliefs and commitment to where they live.

Negative potential

People living in a difficult environment can be more at risk of developing mental health problems. For example:

- living in homes that are overcrowded, unsafe or have poor heating can lead to despondency and a lack of motivation to do better.
- people in poor, unsupported suburbs or communities are more likely to have social problems such as gang membership, bullying, and high unemployment and crime rates.

It is possible that a difficult environment can have a stimulatory effect, even motivating people to change the situation or get out of it altogether. However this is not the usual response, and there is more likely to be a negative impact that can continue through several generations.
Experiences of trauma

People experiencing mental illness are highly likely to have experienced a traumatic event as well. Trauma can occur at any age, and its impact can be felt at any time. Examples of trauma commonly seen in mental health and addiction services include:

- childhood neglect or abuse.
- sexual or physical assault.
- incarceration.
- bullying.
- major loss of a loved one or property.
- major accident or incident, for example car crash, house fire.
- living through acts of nature, for example, earthquakes, tsunami.
- fleeing from war zones.

A severe earthquake may have a traumatic effect on some people and lead to a mental illness.

These experiences and the trauma they cause may occur once or continually. Traumatic events may happen directly to the people concerned or be witnessed by them.
Positive potential

The trauma itself is never positive. Eventually however, and with the right support for the particular trauma as well as for other mental health problems, some people find resilience and ways of coping both with the past and with future difficult times.

Negative potential

The experience of trauma often overwhelms people’s ability to cope and leaves them feeling betrayed, disillusioned and shattered. People may re-experience traumatic events through flashbacks or nightmares, and/or they may suppress these events through numbing or dissociation. These symptoms often lead to poor coping responses, such as substance use and abuse, emotional outbursts and social isolation. Different types of trauma can also lead to specific reactions. For example:

- survivors of abuse may feel a sense of personal worthlessness.
- people who experienced the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes may no longer enter multi-storey buildings or crowded environments.

Trauma can continue to impact on people long after the event has occurred. For some people, a large amount of energy may go into behaviour that attempts to avoid re-traumatisation, including leaving a relationship, home or even a country.
Lifestyle choices that promote wellbeing

Because so many factors can affect people’s mental wellbeing, the lifestyle choices that people make are very important.

There are some lifestyle choices that all people can make to support their mental health wellbeing or support their journey away from mental health problems. Many of these choices are about the patterns that they build up around the daily details of how they live their lives. Habits might initially seem hard to change and the benefits hard to imagine, but once change is achieved the benefits are usually overwhelmingly positive across all areas of a person’s life.

Recreational activities

Choosing to follow a natural interest is a positive and enjoyable way for people to keep themselves motivated about their lives and how they spend their time. It also provides variety within and distraction from other pressing matters of life.

Recreational activities encourage people to relax and use their minds in different ways. If the activity chosen is a group one, the benefits described earlier in this learning guide under cultural and social factors will also be felt.
Levels of physical activity

The role of exercise in maintaining mental health is well documented. Exercise can be as simple as walking regularly (to the work, to the shops, around the park), cycling, swimming or gardening. To maintain optimal mental health, it is important to get at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise (exercises that make people puff) at least three times weekly.

Exercise should form a part of the routine of people who experience mental illness. The impact of mild to moderate depression and anxiety can be offset through exercise, and it is not uncommon for people to receive a prescription for exercise during these times. Some primary care organisations are able to offer reduced gym memberships as part of their overall health plan for people experiencing mental illness.

A lack of regular exercise can contribute to weight gain, worsening physical health conditions and leading to poor self-esteem. For some people who take particular anti-psychotics, weight gain is a serious side effect and has led to an increase in diabetes within this population.

Sleep

To maintain optimal wellbeing, most people need seven to nine hours of sleep per night. During sleep the body regenerates and reaches the levels of relaxation required to fuel the body for the next day. Stress and mental illness can impact negatively on sleep, which in turn reduces the ability of the body and mind to deal with further stressors. Some people with particular mental illnesses, for example, mania may feel that they don’t need sleep. This increases their vulnerability to more debilitating symptoms and to poor judgement. Some disorders such as postnatal depression are commonly believed to be partly caused by sleep deprivation.
Some people need to work at getting themselves into a good sleep pattern. Some tools that are known to work include:

- getting 30 minutes of exercise during the day.
- reducing caffeine intake during the evening (or during the day if a person’s intake is particularly high).
- taking a warm bath before bed.
- reading a book/magazine in the evening rather than watching television which can be over-stimulating.

For other people, short-term use of sleeping tablets, as prescribed by a clinician, can offset symptoms of sleep deprivation and reduce the likelihood of an episode of illness occurring.

**Dietary management**

Eating a balanced, regular diet helps people to keep their bodies in good physical condition, which in turn supports their mental health wellbeing by helping to keep their moods stable, energy levels up and cognitive functioning working.

It is helpful if people are able to:

- eat from the five food groups each day.
- drink up to eight glasses of water each day.
- limit junk food or food which is not healthy.

Achieving a balanced diet when people are mentally unwell is difficult. People often feel less motivated to cook balanced meals. And if employment and income are issues, people may not be able to afford good quality food.

People taking medication can experience conditions that increase their poor diet and negatively impact on their mental health, causing a downwards spiral to poor physical health. These conditions can include:

- carbohydrate craving, where people have a strong urge to load up on carbohydrates, leading to an increase in the amount of junk food eaten.
- increased thirst and dry mouth. Often people experience a seemingly unquenchable thirst, which can lead them to drinking more soft drinks or sugar laden drinks. Again, this behaviour will not fix the problem, and will only lead to poor physical health.
Alcohol and other drugs

It is often important for people to reduce their intake of, or avoid entirely, substances such as alcohol and other drugs. The growing use and overuse of both legal and illegal substances across New Zealand is well documented. Use of alcohol and drugs can move quickly from appropriate (for example, casual, minor and/or social) use, to overuse and dependence, especially when the person is struggling with mental health problems.

The co-morbidity (dual existence) of mental health problems and alcohol or drug addiction is recognised as a costly and difficult issue across New Zealand. People with mental health problems may view substances as a way to dull the pain or escape the reality of their existence.

People overuse substances for many reasons, but the impact is far-reaching. Once people become dependent on substances, the intervention of professional drug and alcohol services is often required. Substance use tends to impact across all areas of a person’s life, affecting relationships, employment, financial status, physical health, and vulnerability to mental health problems.

Overuse of recreational drugs and alcohol can reduce wellbeing in several ways. Apart from physical health changes, anti-social behaviour resulting from overuse coupled with the symptoms of mental illness, can leave people vulnerable to social isolation and alienation from their community.

Career and employment opportunities

Working can be beneficial for people, aside from the matter of financial reward. People feel more positive mentally when they are engaged in a wider purpose and can see how their efforts contribute towards certain achievements.

People feel positive and in control of their lives if they are able to make their own decisions about what their employment is, and how, when and where they work. Choosing an employment path or a career change can be highly motivating. While not everyone feels able to make these choices, there are steps that can be taken to improve people’s opportunities, for example:

- taking up career guidance information and services that are available online or through local or national agencies.
- writing a CV and keeping it up to date.
- practising being interviewed.
- doing a night school course or other training.
- volunteering for voluntary work to see if this is where they would like to work.
Lifestyle choices which did not support a person’s mental health wellbeing

From your personal experience think about two occasions when lifestyle choices were made which did not support a person’s mental health wellbeing. These choices might have been your own or those of another person you were observing.

Occasion 1
What was the lifestyle choice?

How did the choice have negative consequences for the person’s mental health wellbeing?

Occasion 2
What was the lifestyle choice?

How did the choice have negative consequences for the person’s mental health wellbeing?
Lifestyle choices which support a person’s mental health wellbeing

From your personal experience think about two times when lifestyle choices were made which supported a person’s mental health wellbeing. These choices might have been your own or those of another person you were observing.

Occasion 1
What was the lifestyle choice?

How did the choice have positive consequences for the person’s mental health wellbeing?

Occasion 2
What was the lifestyle choice?

How did the choice have positive consequences for the person’s mental health wellbeing?