

Episode 3 – Why is Mental Health a Public Health Issue?

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine, I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about mental health.

If we clicked on #selfcare on social media, we'd get over 50 million posts of smiling faces and captions like "show up for yourself" and "happiness starts with you."

Self care is often used as a stand-in for mental health, but it's really just one small piece of the puzzle. The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

So like health in general, good mental health is a lot more than not being sick. According to APHA, being mentally healthy means being able to cope with everyday stress, maintain meaningful relationships and work productively.

But we don't always feel mentally healthy. The American Psychological Association says that mental illness is a health condition that involves significant changes in our thinking or emotions that disrupt our everyday life.

There are degrees of mental illness, from temporary bouts of depression to lifelong conditions like bipolar disorder. But overall, mental illness affects nearly 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. in any given year — with depression and anxiety being two of the most common conditions.

Mental illness isn't just mental, though — it can impact our physical health too. Numerous studies have shown that depression increases the risk of developing heart disease, and that mental illness can lead to unhealthy behaviors like alcohol and substance misuse.

We call anything that negatively impacts mental health a stressor. Some stressors affect people on the individual level, like family life, money or conflicts at work or school. But other stressors affect entire communities, like poverty, neighborhood violence, or climate change. So that's another reason that #selfcare isn't telling us the whole story. Our mental health doesn't begin and end with ourselves.

Studying mental health and community-wide stressors provides public health experts with data to help people access the support they need — which is a really important ongoing issue.

A group called Mental Health America reported that 57% of adults with a mental illness didn't receive treatment in 2020 — that's over 20 million people.

And so far we think there are a few reasons why. According to numerous studies, the stigma around mental illness prevents some people from seeking help. To break that

stigma, researchers suggest normalizing taking care of our mental health to make people more comfortable with it over time.

Like making a mental health assessment a routine part of a doctor's visit, or offering mental and physical health services in the same facilities. That way, other people won't know if you're getting a physical or seeing a therapist.

Mental Health America also says 22% of adults with mental illness were untreated in 2020 because of limited insurance, a lack of psychiatrists and treatment options, or cost.

So a big public health goal is making treatment more accessible. Like with the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which expanded insurance coverage for mental health services and lowered the number of uninsured Americans.

Still, not all insurance plans cover mental health services. And Americans in rural areas or low-income households were less likely to report having access to care in 2018.

Another way we can improve care is by promoting diversity within the mental health care industry. Numerous studies have shown that people are more likely to continue mental health treatment and report improvements in their well-being if they can find health care providers with their same cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

But in 2015, 86% of psychologists in the U.S. workforce were white, only 5% were Black and half a percent were Indigenous Americans.

Mental health might seem like an individual struggle, but access to mental health services is affected by community-wide factors.

Addressing these issues will take public health agencies, policymakers, and communities all working together, and that's what makes mental health a public health issue.

Thanks for watching! This video is part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit [APHA.org](https://www.apha.org).

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