

Definitions of health

What is health?

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion states:

Health is created and lived by people within the settings of their everyday life: where they learn, work, play and love. Health is created by caring for oneself and others, by being able to take decisions and have control over one's life circumstances, and by ensuring that the society one lives in creates conditions that allow the attainment of health by all its members.

Quoted in Davy, J., Parker, R. & Patterson, J. 1994, *Health Moves 2: Senior Personal Development, Health and Physical Education*, Heinemann, Port Melbourne, Vic., p. 445.

This definition reflects a very broad view of health. In contrast, many generations of Australians have grown up with the narrow view that health is simply the absence of disease. The definition above suggests that health consists of many dimensions, including the personal physical dimension that most people associate with the term 'health'.

Different writers/researchers in the field of health describe the dimensions of health in different ways. Some refer only to individual or personal health, while others also include environmental and/or community dimensions. The dimensions of personal health include: the physical, emotional, intellectual/mental, social and spiritual.

Environmental health

Environmental health refers to the state of the natural systems of our planet and to the physical environments that people construct around them. Of fundamental importance to living things, including people, are the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we depend on to grow so much of our food. Keeping the air, the water and the soil as healthy and unpolluted as possible is vital for environmental health. The preservation of biodiversity, the conservation of natural places and the creation of buildings and spaces where people can live and work comfortably are also important dimensions/elements of environmental health.

Community health

The health of a community can be measured by its physical health and by the nature of its social systems, particularly the interrelationships between community members.

Some important dimensions/elements of community health are:

- inclusive social structures (structures meeting the needs of all community members);
- cohesion created by valuing diversity and encouraging participation and cooperation;
- the provision of accessible community services;
- the opportunity for community members to earn a living;
- the opportunity for community members to enjoy leisure time.

While healthy communities are not free of conflict, opportunities are created for the productive and peaceful resolution of conflict.

Personal health: physical

Physical health is about being fit, having enough energy for both your daily work and your leisure activities, and not being sick. It means that your body systems are working well, including your immune system which works to resist infections. Physical health involves getting adequate rest and sleep and having a balanced nutritional intake. Physical activity is an important part of maintaining personal physical health.

Personal health: emotional

Emotional health involves liking yourself and accepting others. It means understanding your own emotions, and having the ability to listen to others and empathise with their emotions. Importantly, it also means being able to express emotions productively. It includes controlling your own behaviour, and being able to deal with success, failure and challenge.

Emotional health means moving from emotional dependence to interdependence as we grow up. Emotional interdependence includes the ability to provide emotional support for others.

Being emotionally mature enables a person to have considerable control over their quality of life. Emotional maturity also encourages cooperation and productive relationships between people.

Personal health: intellectual/mental

Intellectual or mental health involves a person's ability to think clearly and logically and to make decisions – that is, it involves the way in which our minds operate. It includes being able to



reason and question, to challenge ideas and plan actions. The ability to organise, process and evaluate information is an essential part of intellectual health. Also important are: the ability to see things from a number of perspectives, a willingness to consider new ideas and the ability to assess risk, creativity, curiosity and intuition.

Personal health: social

Social health involves the ability to interact positively with friends, family and other members of the community. Relationships that are built on social needs, such as a sense of belonging, acceptance and being cared for, as well as caring for others, contribute to social health. Another aspect of social health is the ability to use diverse social skills in a variety of contexts.

Personal health: spiritual

Spiritual health involves working out what you believe in, having a purpose in life and being in touch with your inner self. It includes making meaning for yourself by exploring ethical and philosophical questions. For some people, spiritual health may include the adoption of religious beliefs. Such beliefs can take many forms, including a profound connection to a particular place or to elements of the natural world.

Spiritual health may include: caring for your soul; respecting life; searching for wisdom; listening to your inner voice; searching for universal truths or individual truths.

Maintaining spiritual health is often seen as a journey in which the directions you take, and your motivation for taking these particular directions, are important.

Interrelationships between the dimensions of health

Just as important as the distinct dimensions of health is the web of complex interrelationships between the dimensions. One attempt to explain these interrelationships is provided below.

The health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and the Earth have many interrelated dimensions. Personal and community health have physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Planetary health and wellbeing depend upon the state of the Earth's physical and biological systems. Political and economic systems can also affect the wellbeing of our planet and its people.

We know about the need for balanced eating habits; good nutrition is one of the things that keeps us healthy. We are also usually aware of what causes us stress, and we know there is a limit to the degree of stress we can tolerate. Knowing our limitations helps us recognise the warning signals of personal stress.

It is not only individuals who experience stress when things are out of balance; groups or communities also undergo stress. For example, the growing numbers of homeless youth could be a sign of an unhealthy community that is subject to such stresses as high levels of unemployment and family breakdown. When individuals or communities are under stress, warning signs indicate that limits are being pushed.

Similarly, there are warning signs that tell us when the Earth is under stress. For example, soil degradation is a sign that practices such as over-grazing, over-cropping, excessive deforestation and unwise use of ground water are resulting in an unhealthy planet is compromised by unwise farming, forestry and development practices – practices that reflect the values of individuals and communities.

In turn, the health of individuals and communities is affected by the health of the planet. Degraded soil (for example) leads to poorer crops and pastures, higher production costs, shortage of food, rising prices and hardship, at least for some. If our choices are founded on the understanding that natural and social systems and individuals all have limits to their ability to tolerate stress, those choices are likely to have healthier, more sustainable results now and in the future.

Source of quoted material: Department of Education, Queensland 1993, P-12 *Environmental Education Curriculum Guide*, Brisbane, p. 1