

Activity 1 - Defining Wellbeing and Mental Health

Write your own definitions of mental health and wellbeing on a notecard (5 minutes).



Definitions of mental health and wellbeing

The World Health Organization defines mental health as *“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.”*

The Centers for Disease Control says *“There is no consensus around a single definition of well-being, but there is general agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning. In simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good.”*



Case Study: I Don't Know If I Can Go Any Further

Scenario 1

Ana, a doctoral student, has recently done poorly in two classes and is on academic probation due to a low GPA. Upon learning that her fellowships are about to be taken away due to these circumstances, she begins to question her belonging and decides to approach each of her co-mentors regarding the matter. Read the interaction Ana had with her first mentor below:

Ana: "Listen, I don't know if I'm capable of going any further...I think I'm going to be kicked out. I mean, I've read the handbook. The coordinator has talked to me about this...[laughs] You guys finally found out how dumb I am."

Mentor #1: "Look, I know this is hard to hear, but it sounds like you just need to schedule your time a little better and work a bit harder. Maybe you can study more or find a tutor? Graduate school is meant to be hard, and all of this is part of the learning process. I'll be honest with you, not everyone is meant to make it, you know? There are appropriate careers out there for everyone, many of which don't require a PhD."

1. How do you, as the reader, feel right now? Write down some of the emotions and/or physical responses you are feeling.
2. What are the assumptions that you find yourself making about the mentor providing Ana with feedback?

Scenario 2

Now read the response from her second mentor:

Mentor #2: "It sounds like things are really difficult for you right now, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to get kicked out. I'm going to try my best as your mentor to prevent that from happening. We all go through our rough patches. Just because you have been struggling with your courses and tests doesn't mean you don't belong here, or that you're not smart. Your intellectual contributions in lab meetings are valuable and appreciated by the entire team, and you have a good working model for your thesis work. I'd love to support you through this. How about we shift to thinking about strategies to help with your coursework? What are some resources in the lab and in the department that we can tap into to help you succeed?"

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think these two different forms of feedback influence Ana's views about her ability to succeed in the program or about her belonging at the institution? Is one form of feedback more "realistic"?
2. How do you think these different forms of feedback influence Ana's overall wellbeing?
3. What is your role as a mentor in providing this kind of support for your mentee? How does this align (or not) with your goals as a mentor?
4. What are some other ways you might respond to Ana?