

Flourishing, Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing: How can they be increased?

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

How New Zealanders view mental health

For many people the term *mental health* means only something to do with a mental illness, or having a mental health problem. It's as if mental health is something to be avoided, or at least not valued.

Mental health also has a positive side to it however, closely aligned to concepts such as wellbeing, happiness, flourishing and positive psychology. Positive mental health is a state that can increase general health and wellbeing, and resilience.

Many people work out informally for themselves what is good for their own positive mental health and wellbeing. However research suggests that positive mental health, or wellbeing, is too important to be left to personal choice or chance alone.

Over the coming years New Zealanders' individual and collective mental health is likely to be under increasing pressure from growing uncertainty, the pace of technological change, financial uncertainty, information overload, complexity in life, consumerism and global events affecting us but beyond our control.

To best respond to the effects of these huge changes and the impacts on our lives there are many opportunities to understand and cultivate the quality of our own mental health and promote it positively through behavioural and institutional change.

Objective indicators of economic and social conditions have been steadily improving in New Zealand and in most other countries over the last few decades. However parallel to these general improvements: depression and anxiety have also been increasing. The World Health Organisation (WHO) now expects depression to be the second leading cause of disability by 2020. Why is this?

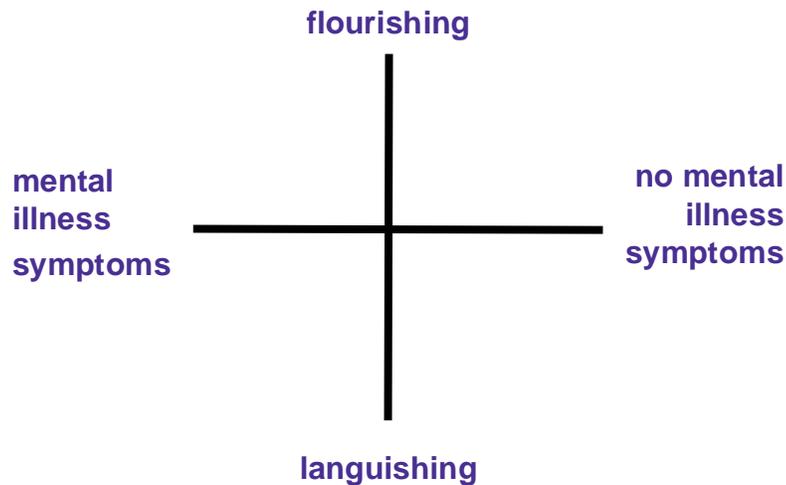
There is no apparent biological causal factor as to why there is such an increase in depression and anxiety, which leads to at least two other possible explanations which are not mutually exclusive. For instance, it could be that we are being adversely affected psychologically by certain aspects of the modern world, fear, stress, breakdown of traditional families. Alternatively it could be that we are diagnosing what used to be thought of as life problems more as illnesses these days (Horowitz, 2010). It is also possible that a combination of both is occurring. In any case, the level of perceived or actual mental illness in our communities is at proportions we could have never foreseen.

Until recently most of the mainstream discussion on the increasing prevalence of mental health problems such as depression has taken place without questioning *why* it is increasing and without reference to the positive side to mental health. There is also little serious consideration of how mental health can be seen as an overall positive state that needs to be understood managed and nurtured in its entirety as an art and a science of living. The prevailing negative view of mental health persists despite the WHO definition of mental health as:

“...a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”
(WHO, 2010).

The currently applied understanding of mental health as a continuum spanning from; severe symptoms at one end, to no symptoms at the other, does not allow a significant place for the development of positive states referred to in the WHO definition. Recent analysis on the concept of “flourishing” in people and communities has however explored positive states of experience and functioning and their personal and social benefits as part of a full spectrum approach to mental health. For example Keyes (2007) has integrated the continuum of symptoms through to no symptoms, with a second complementary continuum of flourishing to languishing (As shown in Figure 1). This provides a richer conceptual understanding of our psychological make up and our potentials.

Fig 1 A Model of Total Mental Health



Adapted from Keyes 2007

What is flourishing?

Flourishing is useful descriptor of positive mental health that allows for broad experience and meaning, but is also relatively definable. Flourishing as defined in international literature is a state where people experience positive emotions, positive psychological functioning and positive social functioning, most of the time. In more philosophical terms this means access to the *pleasant* life, the *engaged or good* life and the *meaningful* life. Flourishing is not just a simple measure of happiness or life satisfaction or positive thinking. It requires the development of attributes and social and personal levels that exhibit character strengths and virtues that are commonly agreed across different cultures (Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson, 2005). On the other hand languishing includes states of experience where people describe their lives as “hollow” or “empty” (Fredrickson & Lahoda, 2005).

What the two continua approach to mental health also allows us to understand is that people can and do languish even without a mental disorder. Also the associated evidence shows that people diagnosed with significant mental health symptoms can still flourish, which aligns with New Zealand’s anti stigma campaigns that tell us not to generalize about people’s experience of mental illness as always negative or debilitating.

Using epidemiological data from the United States, and robust definitions of mental health and flourishing Keyes (2007) found that less than 20% of the US population is experiencing optimal mental health i.e. flourishing, and without a diagnosed mental illness. In the European context, using data from the European Union Survey, the Wellbeing Institute at Cambridge University, England, has been able to establish indications of the level of flourishing in the European Union. The highest measured national level of flourishing was in Denmark at around 33%. The UK (like the United States) was at just under 20% (Huppert and So, 2009).

Although we don't have data on flourishing in New Zealand the European and United States experience would suggest that around 80% of New Zealand's population may be experiencing sub optimal mental health. Such a low level of flourishing is a major social policy issue and not restricted to mental health alone. As Keyes notes:

".....individuals free of a 12 month mental disorder and flourishing – reported fewest missed days of work...healthiest psychosocial functioning...lowest risk of cardiovascular disease...lowest number of chronic physical diseases with age....fewest health limitations of activities of daily living, and lower health care utilization". (2007: 95)

Margaret Barry a leading Irish academic in mental health promotion says

"Positive mental health is a key asset and resource for population well-being and the long-term social and economic prosperity of society". (Barry, 2009 pg 12)

Positive mental health, as defined by concepts such as flourishing is extremely important because it:

- increases psychological and emotional resilience
- increases sustainable happiness and wellbeing
- improves social relations, increases openness and inclusiveness
- improves physical health
- enhances creativity for solutions to solve increasingly difficult problems
- promotes a search for human strengths
- makes mental health everybody' experience – and is therefore likely to reduce stigma and marginalization of mental health as a public issue
- is a key resource for recovery following diagnoses with a mental illness
- may counteract mainstream media negativity bias

Māori and flourishing

In the New Zealand context the Māori aspirational aim of Whānau Ora could be seen as relevant to flourishing. It could also perhaps be a more useful, or complimentary measure of psychological and social wellbeing for Māori, with its greater focus on collective outcomes. The goals of Whānau Ora are met when whānau are:

- Self-managing
- Living healthy lifestyles
- Participating fully in society
- Confidently participating in te ao Māori
- Economically secure and successfully involved in wealth creation
- Cohesive, resilient and nurturing

Whanau Ora Taskforce 2010:7

What could we do to increase flourishing and positive mental health?

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand firmly believes that positive mental health can be increased in the population by integrating social change with personal change. Improvements in the social determinants of mental health are not enough in themselves to increase positive mental health; and, nor is simply applying strategies for better experiencing the world at an individual level. Because of the inherent traits in flourishing and positive mental health, people who experience these states of being are more likely feel positively about themselves and others and experience genuine concern for those around them. This is likely to predispose them to appreciate civil strengths, be less tolerant of injustice and promote fair and equitable institutions. On the other hand it is more difficult for people to flourish and have positive mental health if they are subject to oppressive institutions, discrimination and societal inequalities. It is therefore a 'chicken *and* egg' approach with the potential to establish a reinforcing cycle of positive mental health and positive institutions.

The Mental Health Foundation proposes the following range of potential activities as examples that, in addition to existing mental health promotion measures, could contribute to an increase of flourishing and positive mental health in the wider population:

- Complete an annual national survey with a sufficient sample to determine a baseline measure for prevalence flourishing in New Zealand (and compare with international work where possible).

- Promote simple accessible messages about what people can do to increase their positive mental health and wellbeing. *The Winning Ways to Wellbeing*, the New Zealand theme for mental health awareness week (MHAW) in 2009¹ made up of the following five actions: give, be active, take notice, keep learning and connect.
- Promote mindfulness based techniques in Primary Health Organisations and other health services based on the increasing evidence of the effectiveness of these approaches (as is being trialed nationally in the UK).
- Increase teaching of evidence based positive mental health techniques in schools. Carry out research in pilot sites to test the effectiveness of such approaches.
- Recognise the intuitive and/or incidental application of positive mental health approaches in community development initiatives and community projects around New Zealand. Name these as good mental health promotion in practice and celebrate their effectiveness with awards.
- Promote national debate on '*how we want to be – with ourselves and others*' as a way of introducing thinking about possibilities for the future.
- The development of a mental health impact assessment tool (incorporating positive and negative affects) for proposed public policy changes and public developments.

The Mental Health Foundation will continue to seek to provide leadership in this area by influencing government policy where possible, for example through submissions, (particularly to critique income inequalities and social policies which have a significant effect on the social conditions that support flourishing). It also proposes that a range of low cost, high impact and creative positive mental health promotion strategies could be put in place to increase flourishing, thereby increasing our overall physical, mental, economic and social wellbeing.

References

Aked J, Marks N, Cordon C &, Thompson S (2008) Five Ways to Well-being: The Evidence Centre for Well-being, The New Economics Foundation
<http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being>

Barry M (2009), Addressing the Determinants of Positive Mental Health: Concepts, Evidence and Practice, *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, Vol. 11, 3, 4-17.

Fredrickson B L & Losada M F (2005) Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing, *American Psychologist* October, Vol. 60, No 7, 678-686

Horowitz AV (2010) How an Age of Anxiety Became an Age of Depression. *The Milbank Quarterly* Vol. 88, No. 1, p. 112-138.

Huppert FA & So T (2009 23-24 July), What percentage of people in Europe are flourishing and what characterises them? The Well-being Institute University of Cambridge *Measuring subjective well-being: an opportunity for NSO's*, Florence, (Briefing Document for ECD/SQOLS meeting)

Keyes C L M (2007 February – March) Promoting and Protecting Mental Health as Flourishing, *American Psychologist* p. 95-98.

Lepper J & McAndrew S (2008) Developments in the economics of well-being *Treasury Economic Working Paper No.4*
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/workingpaper4_031108.pdf

Seligman M E, Steen T A., Park N & Peterson C (2005 July - August) Positive Psychology Progress – empirical validations of interventions *American Psychologist*

Whānau Ora Taskforce (2010) Report of the Taskforce on Whānau-Centred Initiatives

World Health Organisation website – definition of mental health Online Q&A
3 September 2007 <http://www.who.int/features/qa/62/en/index.html>