

PREVENTION UNITED

Joining forces to prevent mental health conditions

- ▶ Well-being is contagious too:
Inner strength and compassion during
and after COVID-19

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Overview of Webinar

- What is mental well-being and why is it important?
- What gets in the way of well-being?
- Identifying the foundational attitudes and skills for well-being - relationship to ourself, relationship to others
- Increasing well-being by cultivating these attitudes and skills
- Promoting and embedding mental well-being in our homes, schools, workplaces and wider society.

What is mental well-being?

- Being mentally well is more than the absence of symptoms
- It combines feeling good and functioning well, both personally and inter-personally
- It is not about feeling good all the time
- It is about doing well despite life's challenges
- It involves noticing and managing difficult thoughts and feelings, as well as noticing and savouring pleasant experiences.

Why is mental well-being important?

Research shows that people with higher levels of mental well-being:

- Live longer, healthier lives
- Are better learners, more creative and more productive
- Have better relationships with others
- Contribute more to the community

Student well-being

Murdoch Children's Research Institute
2018 Report

1200 students were assessed in years 3-5 on subjective well-being and learning outcomes

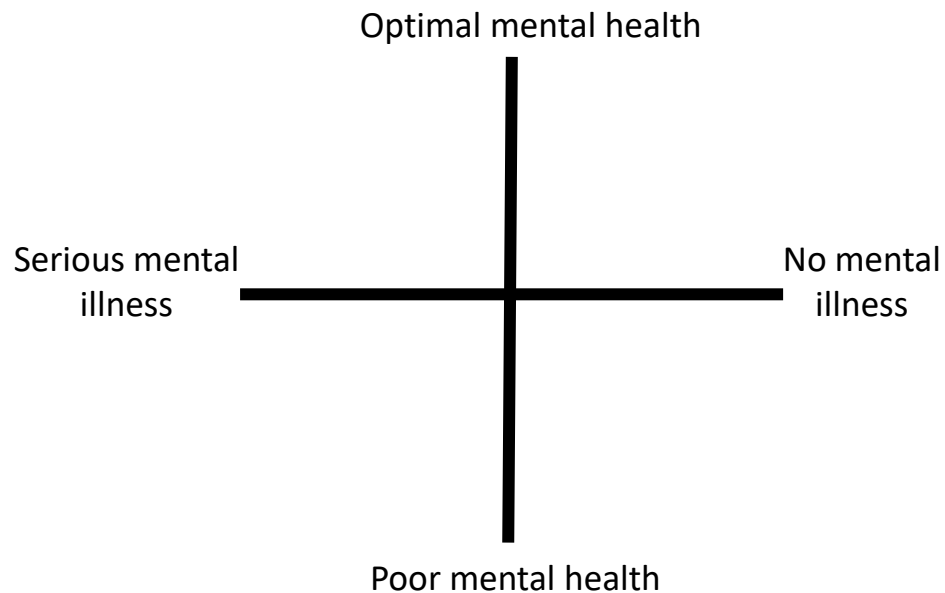
- 32% reported occasional or persistent low well-being
- Students with persistent low levels of well-being lost 8 months of numeracy, 2 months of reading ability, and were twice as likely to be disengaged from school by Year 7
- Even those with more transient poor well-being showed substantial losses in learning and engagement
- Findings were adjusted for socioeconomic factors, and independent of emotional and behavioural problems

Student well-being across the middle years matters for learning and engagement

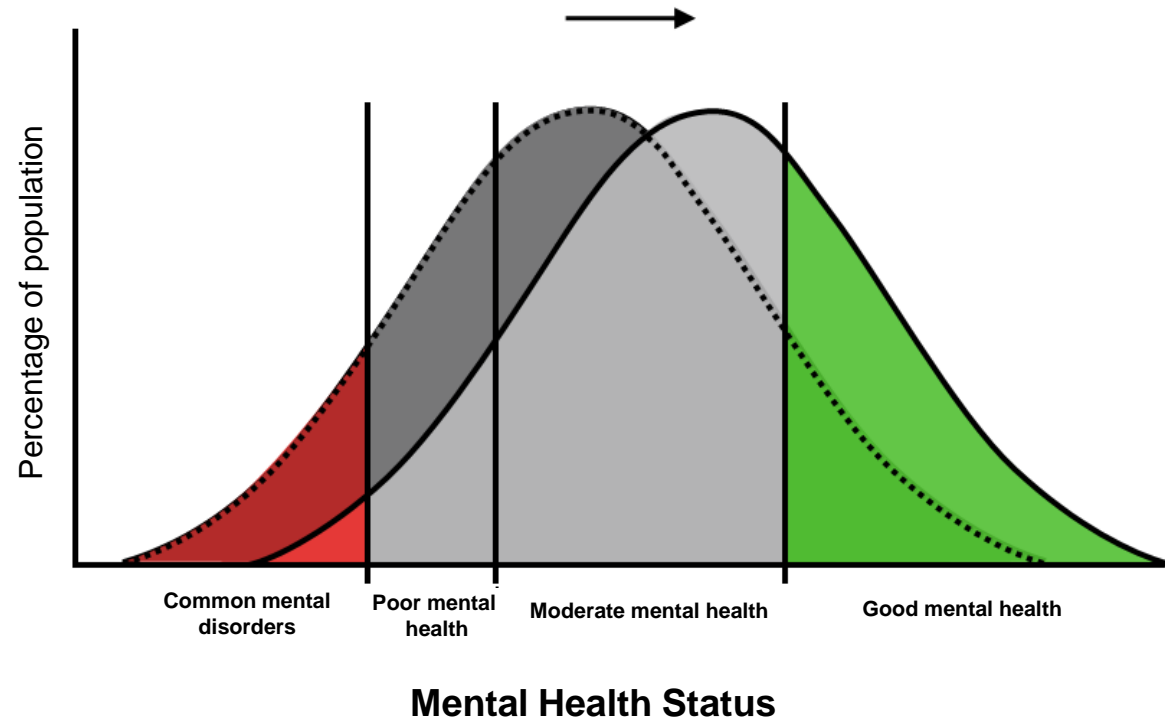
Emotions and actions can be contagious

- Negative emotions like stress, fear and anger are highly contagious.
- **Positive emotions are contagious too.** A large study of managers used a confederate to set the emotional tone in meetings. Positive emotions had a ripple effect, increasing positivity and improving cooperation, decreasing conflict, and increasing perceived task performance - *Barsade, Administrative Science Quarterly, 2002*
- **Acts of kindness are also contagious.** Employees in a large corporation were randomly assigned to give or receive kindness, or neither (control group), over a 4 week period. Both givers and receivers showed short and long-term well-being benefits and receivers 'paid kindness forward', showing almost three times as many helpful behaviours as controls. — *Chancellor et al., Emotion, 2018*

Relationship between mental ill-health and mental well-being



Adapted from Keyes, Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 2002.



The left-hand bell curve represents the population distribution of any common mental disorder. The right-hand bell curve shows that a very small shift towards better health, by improving population risk and protective factors, can greatly reduce the percentage with a common disorder and increase the percentage with very good health.

Based on Huppert, Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being, 2009

What does good mental health look like?

Good mental health ('flourishing') has been defined as the positive end of the mental health spectrum, the opposite of the symptoms of the common mental disorders (depression and anxiety) - Huppert & So, Social Indicators Research, 2013

- **Positive emotions:** experiencing happiness, joy, interest, contentment, love
- **Positive relationships:** having people you care for, and who care for you
- **Engagement:** taking an interest in most activities, being actively involved
- **Meaning:** the sense that what you do is valuable and worthwhile
- **Competence:** feeling you are a capable person, having a sense of accomplishment
- **Emotional stability:** feeling calm and able to manage emotions
- **Resilience:** being able to manage the stresses of daily life
- **Optimism:** having a positive attitude about the future; feeling hopeful.
- **Self-esteem:** feeling positive about yourself
- **Vitality:** feeling mentally energised

What gets in the way of mental well-being?

- Adversity - in childhood, health, social conditions
- Negativity bias – focusing on what's wrong rather than what's right
- The belief that if we feel sad, fearful or lonely there is something wrong with us
- Self-criticism, judging ourselves harshly
- Social media pressure suggesting we are not enough
- Reactivity, difficulty in self-regulation

Unemployment and well-being

- Unemployment has a major effect on well-being. Negative impacts can be long-lasting, and go beyond the effects of income loss.
- Australia has almost 1 million out of work due to COVID-19, and a very slow recovery is forecast. This could have a major, and lasting effect on the well-being of unemployed people and their families.
- However, research shows that in the context of widespread unemployment, the negative impact is reduced - Brand, Annual Review of Sociology, 2015

Growing demand for mental well-being resources

Use of mental health and well-being resources has increased , particularly in recent months

- 40% increase in the use of Beyond Blue services
- 25% increase in calls to Lifeline
- Downloads of the Headspace app have doubled

Quality of Resources

- Some offer structured, progressive training programs
 - Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
 - Monash University - Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance
- Some offer a smorgasbord of practices
 - Insight Timer – thousands of meditation practices
 - My Digital Health – wide variety of self-help programs
 - Be You –210 programs for schools and early learning centres
- Most are ‘evidence-based,’ but few have been evaluated.

Developing inner strengths

Cultivating the attitudes and behaviours that foster well-being:

- **Relationship to oneself** – awareness, self-reflection, emotion regulation, kindness, resilience, growth mindset, feeling gratitude
- **Relationship to others** – paying attention ('really listening'), acts of kindness, compassion, generosity, expressing gratitude.

Mindful awareness

A way of paying attention to what is going on right now in the mind, the body, and the world around us, with gentle curiosity.

Practising mindfulness can create a peaceful space in busy or stressed lives.

- Allows us to pause and notice our experience rather than reacting in a habitual manner that may be unhelpful.
- Enables us to make wiser choices about how to respond.

Mindfulness practice trains the mind just as exercise trains the body.

Benefits of mindfulness training

Review of high quality research – Creswell, Annual Reviews of Psychology, 2017

Mental and physical health

- depression, anxiety
- substance abuse
- chronic pain
- stress response

Cognitive and affective processes

- sustained attention, working memory
- problem solving
- positive mood
- emotion regulation

Interpersonal outcomes

- relationship quality
- perspective taking
- pro-social behaviour

Does personal mindfulness benefit others?

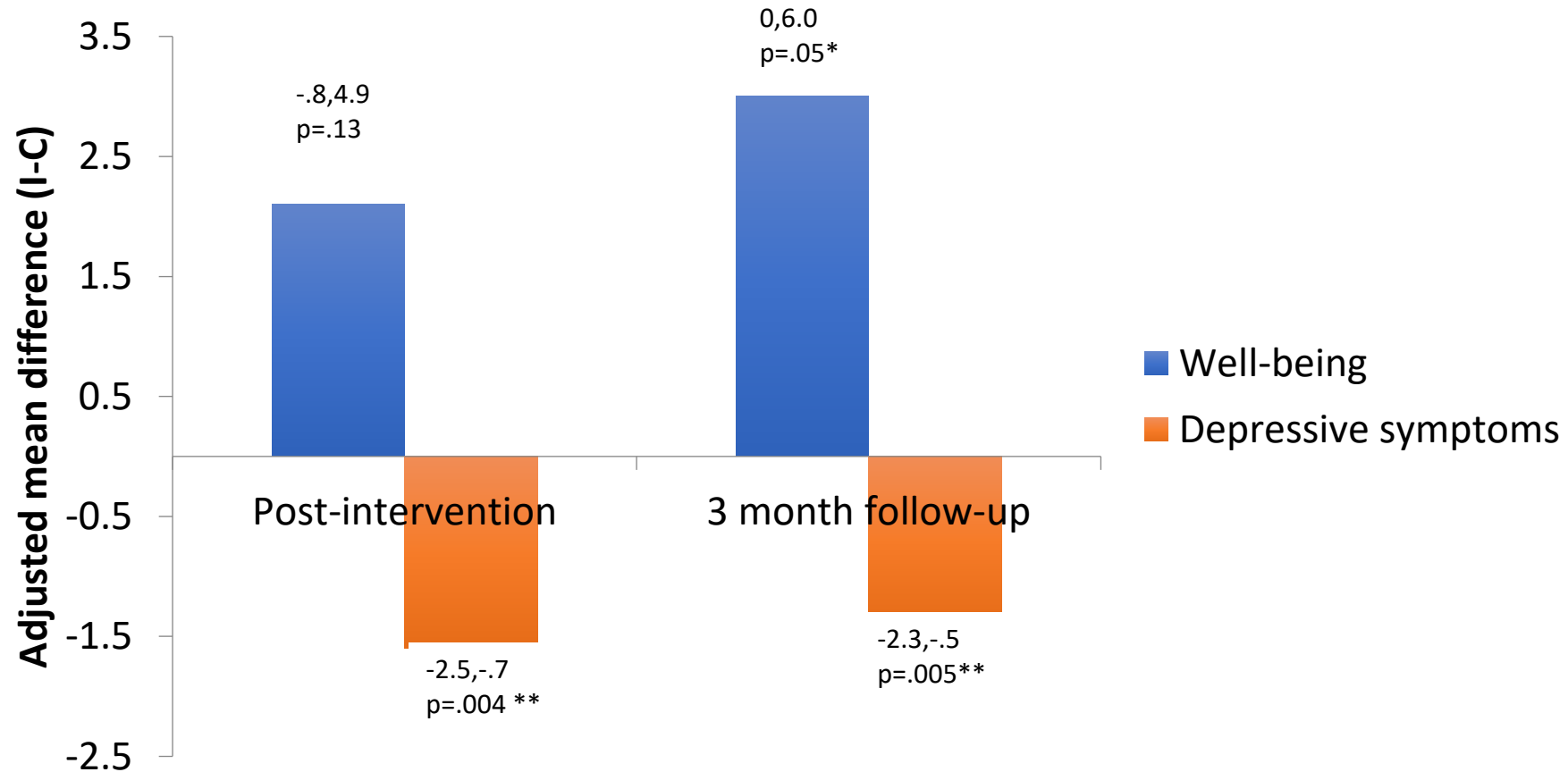
Systematic review and meta-analysis, Donald et al., British Journal of Psychology, 2019

- 31 studies included - 21 were interventions, 19 of them RCTs.
- Mindfulness increases the incidence of pro-social acts toward others.
- Moderate effect sizes were found whether or not meditation included a pro-social component.

Mindfulness in Schools

Outcome comparisons of .b program in adolescents post-intervention and 3-month follow-up (N=522)

Kuyken et al., Brit. J. Psychiatry, 2013



Amount of home practiced correlated with better well-being at 3-month follow-up.

Benefits of mindfulness training in young people

Weare & Huppert, Oxford Bibliography on Mindfulness and Education, 2019

- Attention control, executive function
- Learning and academic performance
- Self-regulation and resilience
- Well-being, cheerfulness, optimism
- Stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders
- Problem behaviour
- Empathy, compassion
- Physical health, sleep quality.

MYRIAD: Mindfulness and Resilience in Adolescence

Led by Oxford Mindfulness Centre, funded by the Wellcome Trust, UK

Awarded £6.4m over seven years

Randomised controlled trials of:

- teacher training
- student training

Long-term follow up and cost effectiveness

8,000 students aged 12-16, 550 staff in 84 schools across the UK

Physiological benefits of mindfulness

- Improved immune function
- Decreased inflammation
- Reduced stress hormones
- Stimulation of parasympathetic nervous system which promotes calming
- Increased telomerase activity, an indicator of healthy cell ageing

Structural brain changes after mindfulness training

A standard 8 week MBSR course lead to increased grey matter density in brain regions associated with:

- **attention, learning and memory**
- **emotion regulation**
- **self-awareness**
- **bodily awareness**
- **compassion**

Effects of self-compassion interventions

- A meta-analysis of RCT's of self-compassion interventions in clinical and non-clinical samples showed large or moderate effects on improvements in stress, anxiety, depression, self-criticism, rumination, and eating behaviours.

Ferrari, Mindfulness, 2019

- A one week, online self-compassion program increased happiness in a general population sample for up to six months, and reduced depressive symptoms for up to 3 months compared to an active control group.

Shapira & Mongrain, Journal of Positive Psychology, 2010

- Participants in a self-compassion condition, compared to an active control group (self-esteem condition) had an increased self-improvement mindset, increased motivation to change for the better, and spent more time studying for a difficult test following an initial failure.

Breines & Chen, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 2012

Benefits of compassion towards others

Shonin et al., Mindfulness, 2015

Systematic review and meta-analysis of compassion interventions found significant improvements across 5 domains:

- improved positive and negative mood
- reduced psychological distress
- Increases in positive thinking
- better interpersonal relationships
- improved empathic accuracy

Effects of being compassionate to others

Improvements in the following behavioural responses:

- Positive feelings e.g. caring, love
- Approach, helping behaviour
- Physiological benefits - immune response, telomere length

Brain activation in regions associated with:

- Affiliation
- Positive mood
- Reward processing

How we relate to others

Gratitude

- A meta-analysis of 38 gratitude studies concluded that gratitude interventions have positive benefits for well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and positive mood, and can decrease depressive symptoms.– *Dickens, Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 2017*
- Well-being benefits result from both feeling gratitude and expressing gratitude
- *The Science of Gratitude, Greater Good Science Centre, 2018*

Generosity

- In a classic study, students were given a small sum of money and randomly assigned to spend it on themselves or someone else. Spending on someone else produced a greater boost in happiness than spending on oneself - *Dunn et al., Science, 2008*
- The warm glow of giving appears to be universal. Adults around the world and even young children experience emotional benefits from using their resources to help or share with others. — *Dunn et al., Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2014*

Effect of a kindness curriculum in young children

RCT with 68 pre-school children

12 week mindfulness-based pro-social skills training vs waitlist control

Benefits of kindness curriculum:

- Increased social competence
- Improved cognitive flexibility
- Delayed gratification

How can we increase mental well-being?

- Spreading knowledge of what works to enhance well-being and what gets in the way
- Supporting mental skills training, particularly in the early years
- Endorsing programs that are evidence-based and have been scientifically evaluated
- Measuring what matters in population surveys.

Conclusions

- Developing inner strength and cultivating compassion for oneself and others are key public mental health strategies.
- They allow us to flourish, and prepare us for future challenges and opportunities.
- Promoting and embedding mental well-being in our homes, schools, workplaces and wider society should be a policy priority.
- Self-help strategies that have evidence for effectiveness are highly acceptable to the public, inexpensive and may avert the development of mental ill-health.
- The resources are already available. Let's promote their widespread use now.