

Introduction

*Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation.
Healing is an act of communion. — bell hooks*

Who is a mental health promoter? You are.

We all interact with people every day—in big and small ways—as friends, neighbors, workers, or volunteers. We listen, address shared problems, search for resources, and provide support. As we do this, we are already promoting community mental health.

We are often part of networks looking out for the community's safety, housing, food access, employment, interpersonal relationships, health care, and other aspects of health and well-being. This book was created to help strengthen community mental health through the work you are already doing.

If you are a social worker or peer counselor with training in handling individual mental health concerns, this book will encourage you to apply your experience to promote mental health at a community level.

If you are a community housing organizer, you have training or experience in dealing with a housing crisis, but maybe not so much with an emotional crisis. Without becoming a therapist, the ideas in this book can help prepare you for challenging emotional moments, equip you to get through them skillfully, and find ways to get support for yourself as you navigate stressful organizing work. Your efforts to improve your community also improve mental health through social change.

Recognizing and responding to emotional needs in a family, a group of friends, a neighborhood, or an organization is most often taken on by women. Women are asked to, expected to, and usually volunteer to step in and offer support. By encouraging and helping prepare everyone to respond to emotional needs and provide mental health support, we hope to lessen the emotional burden on women and improve their mental health too.



Mental health in our communities

Everything around us affects our mental health. Violence, discrimination, economic hardship, the climate crisis, widespread misinformation, and the feeling that things are getting worse instead of better—these affect what’s on our mind, how we feel, and our health. At the same time, our lives and mental health are affected in positive ways by the kindness and supportive interactions of those around us. Feeling connected, having people we can talk with, being part of a community—these make us feel better about ourselves and our communities.

During times of crisis, people often become more aware of their own and others’ mental health; for example, when people lose homes due to fires or floods, when a factory closing creates community unemployment, or when a school shooting creates fear among children and parents. This also happened during the COVID pandemic. People often respond to crisis by taking collective action to build up their communities—helping neighbors, creating mutual aid groups, and finding more ways to feel hope and purpose, and reduce isolation, anxiety, distress and loss.

Individual mental health

Everyone’s life is filled with ups and downs, moments of both happiness and sadness. When you can handle daily life and its challenges, care for yourself and others, maintain your relationships, have a sense of purpose and feel like you “belong,” your mental health is likely to be good. Mental health means feeling emotions but managing them, suffering from loss and disappointment but recovering, and adapting to changes.

When difficulties occur, they affect mental health by causing stronger than usual feelings of stress, worry, and sometimes even despair. That’s when each person draws on their personal strengths and resilience. But we don’t depend on ourselves alone: we also look to the ties of love and belonging we have built with family, friends, and supportive community.

Although every person responds to mental health stresses differently, and will find different paths through them and different kinds of support helpful, promoting community while promoting mental health benefits everyone.

It’s all connected: Individual/community, physical/mental

US society views both physical and mental health issues as individual problems with individual solutions. Yet a person’s physical and mental health respond to situations affecting groups and entire communities. While community organizing most often focuses on conditions determining physical health (like housing, food, safe streets, etc.), because physical and mental health are so interrelated, mental health improves at the same time. Likewise, a community mental health approach that targets social conditions will improve physical health.

ACTIVITY**Making connections between individual and community mental health**

This group discussion of a city bus accident helps identify the connections among physical and mental health, individual and community health, and health and social conditions. Looking at all sides of a situation helps illuminate why community mental health promotion includes actions to benefit everyone, from the most affected to those affected in less visible ways.

1. Describe the event and its immediate effects: After a bus accident in a busy urban area, a few passengers might have broken bones, while others have only scrapes. Probably many more will have bruises that won't be visible until the next day, and may also feel sore for a few days. Everyone involved was frightened and some suffered a serious emotional shock. Other people in cars, on bicycles, or on the sidewalk might be affected too.

2. Lead a discussion reflecting on questions such as:

Physical effects: What kinds of physical effects might passengers and others have from the crash? Which are visible and which are harder to see? How many people will get care for their injuries? How will it affect people's mental health to seek treatment for and possibly live with the long-term effects of their injuries?

Mental health effects: What are different ways passengers and others might react to the frightening experience of the crash? Will some try to avoid thinking about it? Will others talk through the frightening experience with friends or family? Will some have nightmares about traffic accidents? How many people will get mental health care to help them process this event?

What else might people experience? Will some refuse to take buses or bike in busy areas, and how will that affect their lives? Will people wonder if any changes will be made to prevent other accidents like this? And how will that affect the daily worries that people already manage?

ACTIVITY

Making connections between individual and community mental health *(continued)*

3. Ask the group to identify possible responses the transit company and local government might propose, and what responses the community would like to see:

Will the city transit company investigate the accident? Will they fire the driver who got into the accident? Will they improve driver training? Will the transit company better maintain the buses so they are safer to ride in? Will the local government make changes so the streets become less dangerous?

Will a community group engage in a transportation justice and accountability process? Will they look into whether: The oldest buses are used in poorer neighborhoods? If roads in poorer communities are less well-maintained? If there are fewer streetlights or traffic lights?

How would these actions—and the safer streets that could result—affect the physical and mental health of everyone in the community?



You can adapt this activity to discuss a different incident that happened (or could happen) in your community. Use similar questions that cover physical health, mental health, and economic and social conditions to explore how it would affect community mental health promotion.

How to use this book

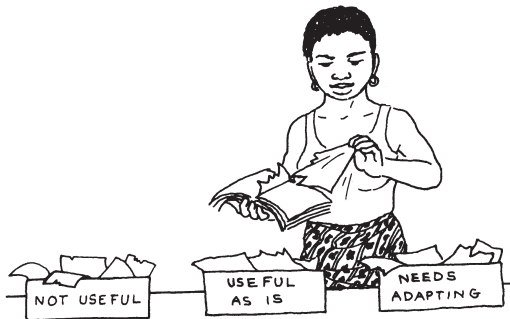
You can find many self-help resources and books directed at professionals. But this book focuses on how community building and community organizing efforts can contribute to mental health. We feature groups that have taken action based on their specific community, its needs and strengths. We greatly appreciate them and their work, and encourage you to learn more about them from their websites (see pages 155 to 158).

Mental health doesn't divide neatly into sections or chapters; the various issues are totally interrelated. This book includes cross-references to help you find material in different chapters, and includes an index for overarching topics like depression, children's mental health, and violence, that appear in more than one place.

Adapt this information for your community

This book includes discussions of what community-based organizations have done. It also gives practical examples of how individuals experience, get through, and support each other's mental health challenges. We hope you'll find both useful.

One of the prime lessons of community organizing is: Everything is connected. Sometimes as you draw out those interconnections, life can feel overwhelming. Supporting mental health need not feel overwhelming, and we hope this book helps individuals and organizations find and offer support in both small and big ways.



There is no one right way to address mental health and no one strategy that works for everyone. Take the ideas that look most useful and try them out, adapting them along the way to fit your community and situation.

When we share the successful experience of a community group, remember that one of the reasons for their success is that their work is rooted in a specific place, history, and people. Starting where you are and building on your community's strengths will provide you with a rich source of creative and achievable solutions.

We need your help—tell us how to improve this book!

Hesperian’s book creation process involves gathering feedback from those with experience—in this case, with community-based approaches to addressing mental health—as well as from anyone using this material in any way in their work. Your frank and constructive criticism and feedback will help make future editions better. Stories from your experiences will expand the variety of issues covered and the richness with which they are discussed. Contact us at MentalHealth@hesperian.org to tell us what you think.

A word on word choices

Hesperian Health Guides believes that language has the power to shape and change hearts and minds. We do our best to use inclusive language that recognizes the value and importance of every individual and community in the struggle to create a more just world. Language changes over time as we create that more inclusive society. Multiple words to describe a condition or group of people are often in use at the same time, and not everyone will choose the same one for themselves or recognize how language has changed at the same time. Understanding the effect of different words and how preferred terms evolve is especially important when describing communities who face persistent injustice. To honor and respect our organizational partners in this book, we have written about them and their work using the words they use on their websites and in their other materials. We hope the language choices found here reflect our common commitment to promoting community mental health.