

# Mental Health or Mental Illness?

## Why clarity matters for better outcomes

**Mental health** refers to psychological and emotional wellbeing. It can vary from good to poor based on normal reactions to life events such as grief, stress, loneliness, and disappointment. In contrast, **mental illness, also referred to as mental disorders**, are medical conditions characterized by clinically significant disturbances in cognition, emotional regulation, or behaviour. Examples include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depressive disorder. These terms are not interchangeable. Mental health applies to everyone, while about 20% of Canadians experience a mental illness in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

**The Dual Continuum Model** provides a framework for understanding mental health and mental illness.<sup>2</sup> In this model, the opposite of good mental health is *not* mental illness. Instead, they exist as two distinct, yet related

spectrums. A person could have poor mental health without a diagnosable illness and not be doing well. Alternatively, someone may have a serious mental illness and good mental health and be doing very well.

Clarity is important for focused and effective care. Interventions to address mental health and mental illness can be very different, ranging from lifestyle changes to medication. Those experiencing distress and those with diagnosed illness can compete for finite resources. This can lead to longer wait times and gaps in support.<sup>3,4</sup> The Dual Continuum Model helps avoid treating situational distress as a mental illness, while ensuring professional care is available to those who need it most. By adopting this approach, decision makers can better allocate resources based on severity to promote wellbeing for all.<sup>a</sup>

### Corey Keyes' Dual Continuum Model



### Rising Demand and Unmet Needs in Canada



**26%** of Canadians reported having **poor or fair mental health** in 2021.<sup>3</sup>



**1.6x to 2x** higher prevalence of **depressive and anxiety disorders** in 2022 than in 2012.<sup>4</sup>



**No major increases** in **schizophrenia or bipolar disorder** over the past decade.<sup>4,5</sup>



**37%** of those with a mental illness reported **unmet care needs** in 2022.<sup>4</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Poor mental health ≠ mental illness. Avoid conflating distress with psychiatric illness.
- Appropriate resource allocation is needed to support those with mental illness.

**If you need help, contact 211. If you think you have a mental illness and require medical intervention, speak with your doctor. If this is an emergency, go to your closest emergency department.**

#### References:

1. <https://cmha.ca/brochure/fast-facts-about-mental-illness/>
2. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3090197>
3. <https://cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CMHA-State-of-Mental-Health-2024-report.pdf>
4. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00011-eng.htm>
5. Canadian Chronic Disease Surveillance System (CCDSS) — Canada.ca

<sup>a</sup> 211 Alberta: <https://ab.211.ca/>