

Human-rights based approach to mental health



MENTAL
HEALTH
PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

This material is designed for anyone considering becoming a peer supporter. It serves as an educational resource to deepen your understanding of mental health and the values that underpin effective support.

Peer support is a powerful way to promote mental well-being through shared experiences, mutual understanding, and non-judgmental assistance. To provide meaningful help, however, it is essential to understand what mental health truly is—not just as a medical or clinical concept, but as a human experience shaped by various internal and external factors.

In this document, we explore different models of mental health, such as the biomedical and biopsychosocial approaches, while emphasizing the importance of recovery, personal agency, and the social and emotional aspects of well-being. You will also learn why a human rights-based approach is crucial—one that respects each individual's experiences, needs, and dignity.

This material should be used alongside other training and reflective practices to better support your journey as a peer supporter and to foster more inclusive, compassionate, and effective support networks.

The aim of this document is to provide a foundational understanding of the values essential for comprehending mental health, particularly for those involved in peer support. It offers insights into the importance of recognizing mental health as a multifaceted and evolving experience influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors. By embracing a human rights-based and recovery-oriented perspective, this document highlights why these values are critical for peer supporters—individuals who provide support based on shared experiences, empathy, and mutual respect. Understanding these values not only enhances the quality of peer support but also ensures it is rooted in compassion, dignity, and equality.

What is mental health?

How do you define mental health? Is it simply a state where you always feel good and happy? Or is it something more complex? It's natural for us to wish to avoid any feelings that cause discomfort. However, mental health isn't about constant happiness. Our mental state is continually changing. We are constantly affected by inner and outside triggers and events. Even minor health inconveniences such as cold or stressful situations at work can affect us.

It's essential to recognize that mental health is not merely the absence of mental illnesses. Instead, it encompasses a complex spectrum that varies from person to person. Some individuals may face more challenges and distress than others, which can lead to different social and clinical outcomes.

Good mental health, or well-being, is a mental state that allows us to work effectively, contribute to our communities, and tackle daily challenges.

When mental health is viewed solely in terms of the presence or absence of symptoms, this perspective is known as the biomedical model.

The biological approach to mental health suggests that mental health difficulties arise from specific abnormalities in the brain, such as chemical imbalances or the under- or over-activity of certain brain regions. This perspective emphasizes pharmacological treatments aimed at correcting these imbalances.

We can illustrate the biomedical model like this:

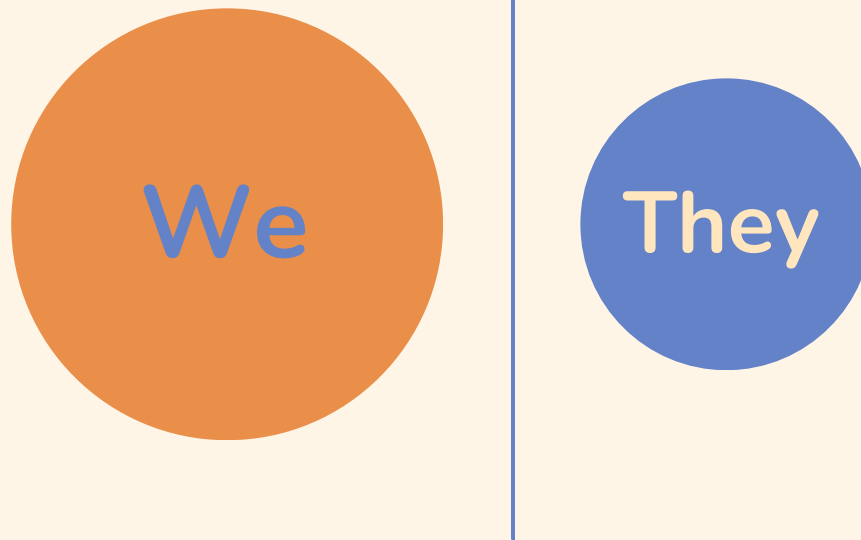
Biomedical model



Essentially, there is a structured process in which certain symptoms are linked to specific disorders, each with designated disease-specific medications intended to restore normal brain function and alleviate symptoms. Within this model, the idea of a cure is defined as the reduction or alleviation of symptoms.

But does it reflect the reality of mental health complexity?

What are the challenges of a biomedical model?



How do you feel when you look at this picture? How would you draw it differently?

The biomedical model is still relevant nowadays, but it causes quite a lot of misunderstandings related to our mental health.

First, it oversimplifies the complex nature of mental health by focusing primarily on biological factors. It often tends to ignore the impact of factors such as family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and cultural context on the development and maintenance of mental health conditions.

Trauma, discrimination, or adverse life events can significantly contribute to mental health challenges, and overlooking these critical contributors may hinder effective treatment and care.

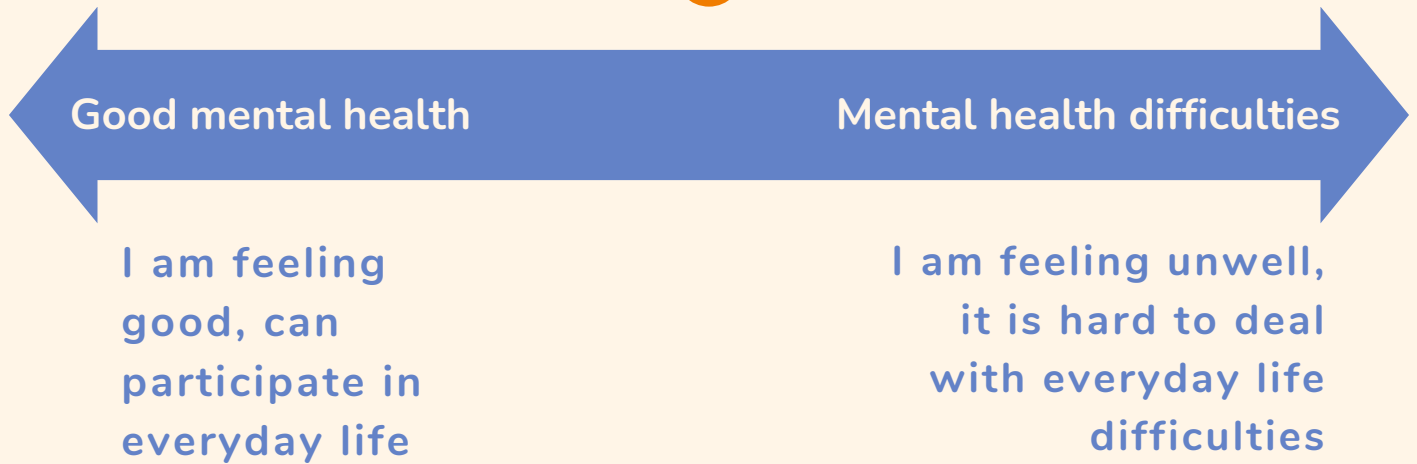
Also, the biomedical model of diagnosis often involves labeling individuals based on their symptoms, which can lead to oversimplification of diverse experiences and possible stigmatization. People who are diagnosed with a mental disorder may face social stigma, and the diagnostic labels may not fully capture the complexity of their unique experiences and circumstances.

How to better understand mental health?

We all have mental health, and it can be impacted by a variety of challenges such as loss, rejection, failure, work stress, poverty, physical health problems, violence, and experiences of discrimination. To maintain inner balance, it is essential to have access to resources like contact with other people, a supportive environment, the ability to recognize and express one's emotions and needs, healthy eating, and engaging in meaningful activities.

Our subjective well-being is constantly influenced by a variety of events, environments, and bodily sensations, leading to changes over time. Our well-being can fluctuate daily, monthly, and yearly. One can imagine that we are constantly moving on a scale.

At one end of the scale is good mental health, while at the other end are experiences of mental health difficulties. Everyone's mental health exists along this spectrum, regardless of whether they face mental health conditions, psychosocial disabilities, or other related experiences.



It is estimated that at least 1 in 4 people will experience what can be diagnosed as a mental health condition in their lifetime. However, between those who experience it and those who do not experience it, there is no fundamental difference.

It is just that for people experiencing mental health difficulties, social experiences, psychological traits, and biological factors, along with their interaction with the environment, may make it more difficult to maintain well-being. This can lead to periods of feeling unwell, struggling to concentrate, losing motivation, or behaving in ways that feel unfamiliar. It's important to remember that these difficult feelings can happen to everyone, even if only for a short time.

Why This Matters for Peer Supporters?

For peer supporters, understanding mental health as a shared, fluctuating human experience is essential. This perspective helps to break down harmful “us vs. them” thinking and replaces it with empathy, connection, and equality. It allows peer supporters to recognize that they, too, can be affected by life’s challenges, and that offering support does not require being “perfect” or “fully healed,” but rather being present, authentic, and compassionate.

By viewing mental health as a spectrum that everyone moves along, peer supporters can offer non-judgmental, inclusive support that honors each person’s unique journey. This approach fosters mutual understanding and encourages a supportive space where people feel safe to share openly. It also reinforces the idea that recovery is possible for everyone and that support is not about fixing someone but walking alongside them.

Most importantly, it empowers peer supporters to use their lived experience as a strength, while remaining mindful of their own well-being and boundaries in the process.

What is a biopsychosocial model?

Bio psycho social model

experiences/difficulties



help



recovery



The biopsychosocial approach, together with the mental health continuum, shifts the perspective from a division of "WE versus THEY" to a united "WE."

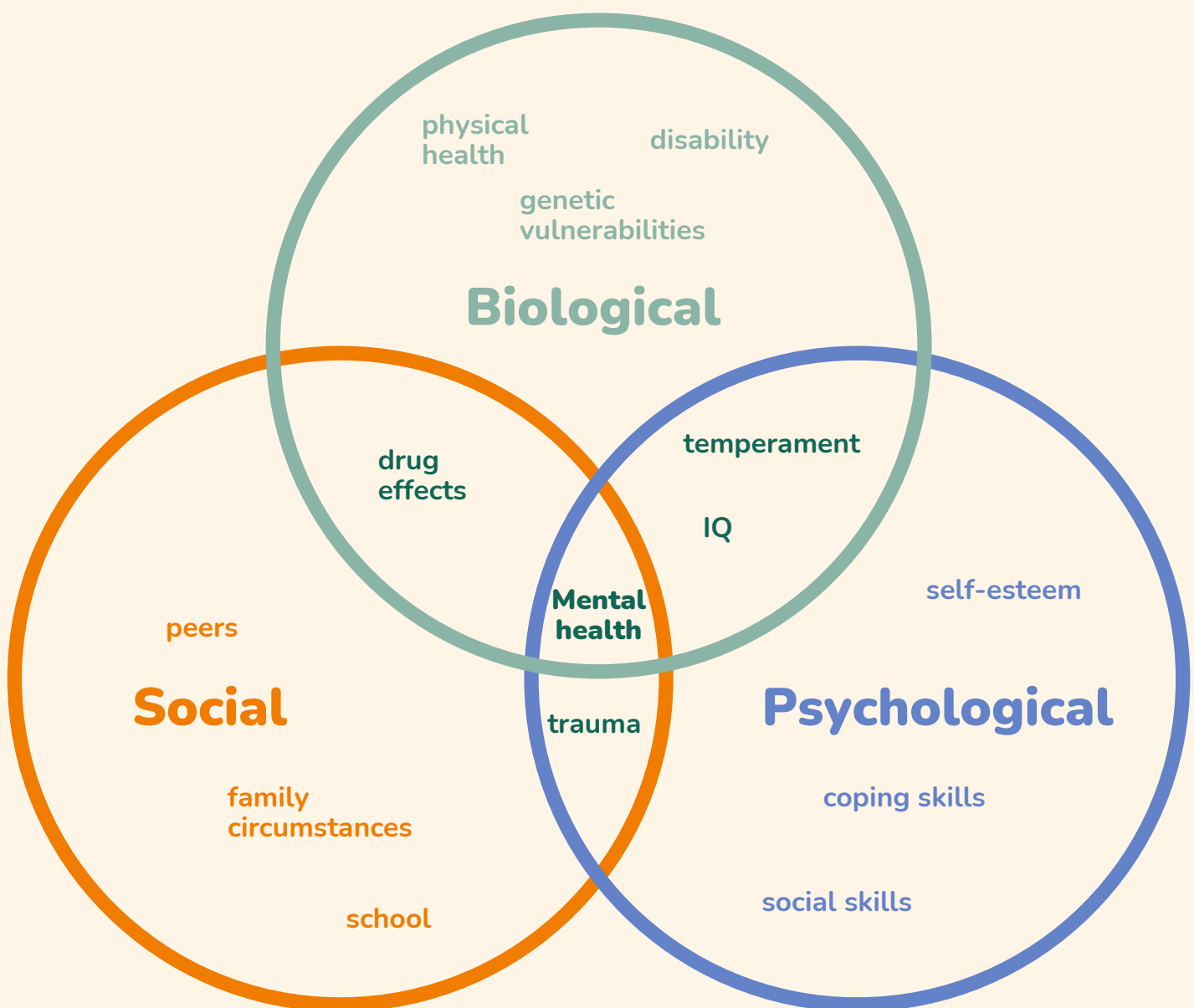
Unlike traditional biomedical model, the biopsychosocial approach recognizes the significance of a broader perspective in understanding human health, well-being, and illness within their full contexts.

This approach examines the complex interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors to better understand health, illness, and the delivery of healthcare.

Furthermore, the biopsychosocial model underscores that mental health results from a combination of various factors rather than being

exclusively determined by a single one. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, and social elements, and stresses that a comprehensive assessment of mental health must consider all aspects of a person's life.

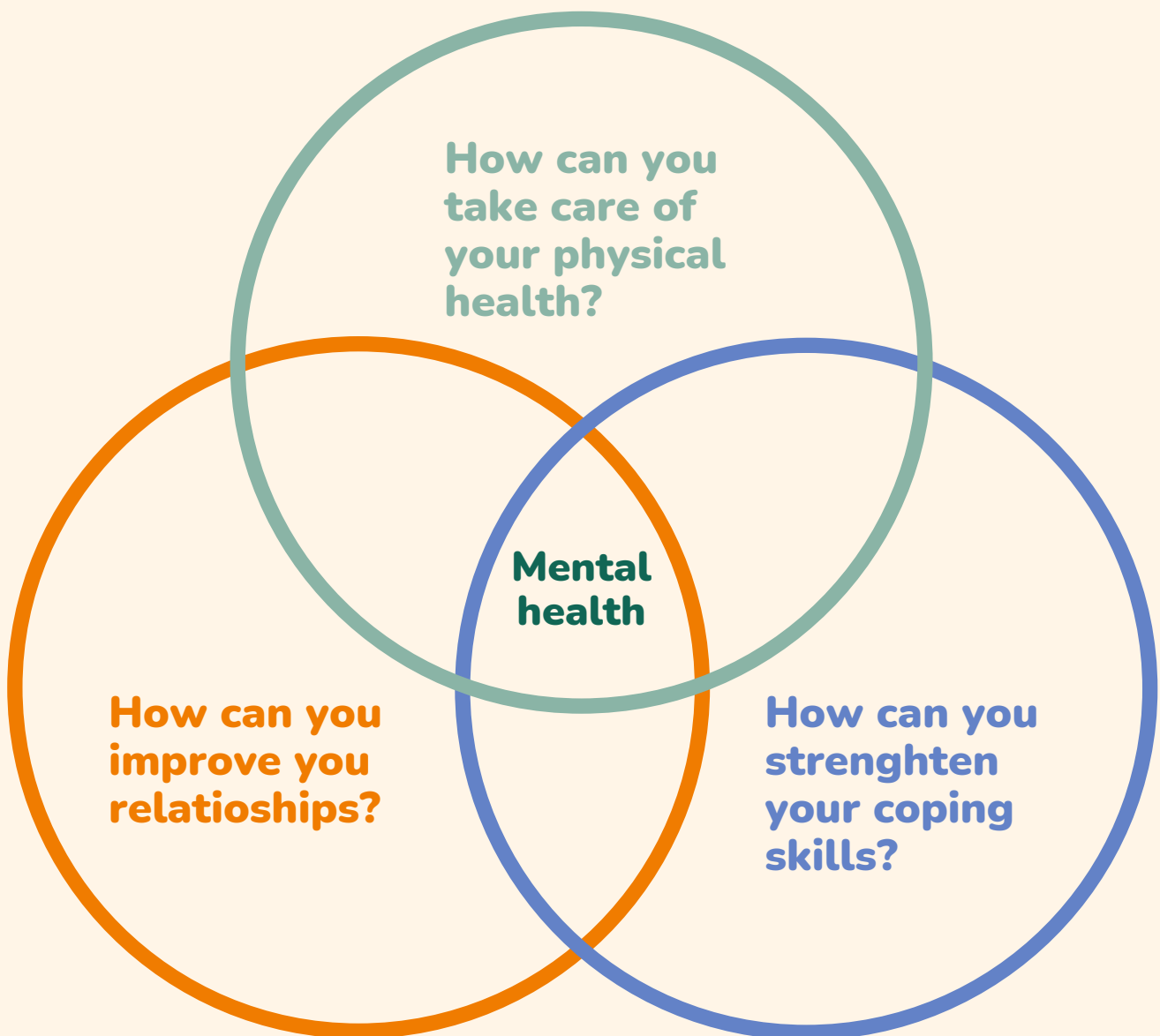
Bio psycho social model



Taking care of yourself

Understanding the biopsychosocial model can be a valuable tool in identifying resources to promote your mental health.

If you were to create a diagram of this model, you could include bubbles that list various ways to take care of yourself.



These models suggest a shift in our approach to mental health issues and how we provide support. They view mental health as a constantly changing state influenced by various factors, advocating for a movement away from seeking diagnoses and towards discussing normal human experiences. Each person is the best expert on their own experiences, rather than relying solely on specialists for diagnoses. Providing help should be based on equality and the understanding that roles can often switch; even those who are currently offering support can experience mental health challenges themselves. This shared humanity is a natural part of life.

The overall goal is recovery. A journey to recovery begins with a person asking themselves: What does it mean to me to live a fulfilling life? What does good mental health look like for me?

Recovery is about finding ways of dealing with these issues and leading a good life; one that is defined by the person themselves, with or without what professional cal symptpoms.

Unlike the biomedical model, there is no magical pill that will enable recovery from the experiences associated with mental health conditions. Recovery is a deeply personal process that encourages individuals to reconnect with their lives and find ways to live with their conditions. It is fundamentally about relationships — relationships with yourself, your diagnosis, and the people around you.

Recovery is a strength-based approach that encourages individuals to shift their focus from the problems they are facing to the personal strengths they can utilize to aid in their recovery.

Everyone is capable of recovery, no matter how tough or impossible it may seem.

To wrap up

- **Human Rights and Mental Health.** A human rights-based approach to mental health emphasizes the importance of understanding each individual's unique experiences and needs. This perspective focuses on recognizing personal circumstances and finding ways to address them. Instead of simply aiming for the absence of symptoms, this approach prioritizes the individual's journey toward recovery. A human rights-based approach recognizes that everyone has the right to well-being, as well as good quality and accessible service to promote that.
- **Mental Health as a Spectrum.** Mental health is not just the absence of illness but a dynamic state influenced by various biological, psychological, and social factors. Everyone moves on a spectrum, regardless of whether they experience mental health conditions or not.
- **The Biopsychosocial Approach.** A more inclusive framework considers biological, psychological, and social influences on mental health. It emphasizes holistic recovery by integrating community support, self-care strategies, and access to social resources.
- **Recovery.** Mental health recovery is a personal and social process rather than just symptom management. Recovery includes building resilience, fostering supportive relationships, and enabling individuals to participate fully in society.