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Flourishing

Would you be satisfied defining a good parent as one who doesn't abuse her/his children? If a book has no grammatical flaws or spelling errors, is it necessarily a fine book? Does the absence of conflict in a group of employees automatically mean that it is an effective and productive team? These examples illustrate how what we consider being good, fine, effective, or productive usually involves more than the simple absence of something negative.

This standard typically hasn't been applied in the realm of health. Health care in the United States has historically been focused on treating disease, with the implication that health is the absence of disease. Indeed there is increasing attention on health promotion and fitness, but most people would still say that they are “healthy” if they aren't “sick.”

What constitutes mental health? The implicit answer to this question has been the absence of mental illness, although nearly all of us would probably maintain that there is much more to mental health. The World Health Organization's 2004 definition of mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

Emory University sociologist Corey Keyes argues that mental illness and mental health are separate (but related) processes, and uses the term “flourishing” to describe mental health. While his description of the “symptoms” of flourishing

is too extensive to include here, in brief it includes positive emotions (e.g., being regularly cheerful and mostly satisfied with life), positive psychological functioning (e.g., self-acceptance, sense of direction and meaning), and positive social functioning (e.g., belief in potential of others, sense of belonging to a community). Keyes uses the term “languishing” to describe people who have low levels of these dimensions of positive functioning. Persons who are between languishing and flourishing are described as being “moderately mentally healthy.” According to Keyes, only about 17% of US adults are flourishing. About 50% are moderately mentally healthy.

It is not surprising that mental disorders (illnesses) are most prevalent among persons who are languishing, and least common in those who are flourishing. Importantly, there is a parallel pattern for chronic physical conditions, such as cardiovascular disease and gastrointestinal problems. Flourishing adults are mentally and physically healthier. Needless to say, having more people flourishing can bring many social and economic benefits to a society.

There are many skills that can contribute to the development or maintenance of flourishing. One example is savoring. The next time something good happens to you --- something desirable, pleasurable, or satisfying --- savor the experience. One can savor by spending some additional moments enjoying or reflecting upon the experience, sharing the experience with others, or focusing on what one wants to remember about the experience. We frequently hear or say, “Have a good day!” Savoring is one of the ways to accomplish this and serves as a building block in flourishing.

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