

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a large crowd of people, seen from behind, looking towards a bright sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the scene with a warm, golden light. The people in the crowd are mostly in silhouette, with some faces catching the light. The overall mood is one of a large gathering or event.

FORTE:

Swedish Research Council for
Health, Working Life and Welfare

STRATEGIC RESEARCH AGENDA

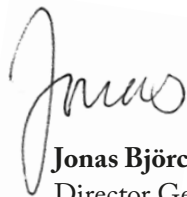
For the national research
programme on mental health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

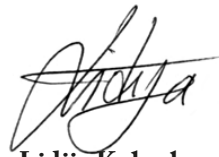
Preface

The national programme on mental health is a ten-year research programme conducted by Forte. The programme is part of the Swedish Government's initiative to promote mental well-being and prevent and treat mental ill-health through research and innovation.


The programme will be operated according to a strategic research agenda that outlines the programme's vision, goals, and strategies, as per the Government's instructions. The agenda also includes the prioritised research areas in which the programme will support research. This document is an executive summary of the programme's strategic research agenda.



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The complete strategic research agenda can be found in Swedish at www.forte.se



Why is a national research programme on mental health needed?

Mental ill-health represents considerable societal challenges that have significant impact on the lives of the population. It imposes a substantial burden on individuals, their families, society, health systems, and the economy. The work on promoting mental well-being as well as preventing and treating mental ill-health is conducted on different levels, in different arenas, and requires efforts from multiple actors in various sectors of society. These sectors include, among others, healthcare, social services, civil society, authorities, and research, but other actors are also involved, such as schools, workplaces, private individuals, and families. Mental health is a priority in public health policy in Sweden.

Research and evidence-based knowledge enhance society's capacity to promote mental well-being and prevent mental ill-health, thereby laying the foundation for a more equal and socially sustainable society in the future. Yet official reports indicate substantial gaps in knowledge concerning mental health, underscoring the necessity for research to improve the current state of understanding. For this reason, Forte was entrusted in the Government's 2020 research and innovation bill with the mandate to establish and conduct a ten-year national research programme on mental health. Forte is also responsible for two other national research programmes: on applied welfare research and on working life research.

What will the programme achieve?

The programme's vision

The national programme on mental health aims to promote mental well-being and prevent mental ill-health through research and evidence-based knowledge. It will thus contribute to the realisation of the vision for robust, equitable, and gender-neutral mental health across the population, while also working to mitigate avoidable health inequalities.

This vision aligns with the overarching public health policy objective accepted by the Parliament of Sweden, which aims to achieve a socially sustainable society. This presumes multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration between all national, regional, and municipal actors in Sweden.

Forte's overarching vision corresponds to that of the programme as the research funded by Forte today lays the scientific groundwork for a more equitable and socially sustainable society of tomorrow.

**THE
PROGRAMME'S
VISION**
A robust, equitable,
and gender-neutral
mental health across
the population

Desired development

The research programme aims to contribute to the development of society's efforts for mental health, and that contribution also becomes a part of achieving the overall vision. This, however, requires collaboration between a lot of actors.

The development required to achieve the vision has been summarised in the points below.

In this way, we can fulfill the vision:

• **Strengthened and more effective prevention**

In order for everyone to have the same possibilities for good and equal health, society needs to have strengthened and more effective prevention strategies to reduce the incidence of mental ill-health.

• **More effective and equal care and treatment**

Professional approach, care, and treatment should be provided on equal terms to everyone, regardless of gender, age, place of residence, functionality, education, social status, ethnic or religious affiliation, or sexual orientation. The interventions and methods employed to address mental ill-health should be based on scientific evidence and evaluated effects, ensuring that the treatment provided is indeed effective.

• **More integrated and coordinated care, support, and treatment**

All of the patient's care and treatment interventions must be cohesive and organised. Continuity, both for the patient and for employees, is key to this development.

• **More knowledge-based and effective policy**

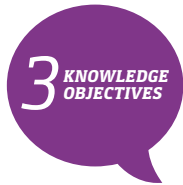
The results of the research funded by Forte should impact and contribute to addressing societal challenges and support evidence-based policy.

Knowledge objectives

To achieve the desired societal development, there is a need for enhanced knowledge and various types of interventions at different levels and in different arenas. This requires efforts from multiple stakeholders across various sectors of society.

Forte, alongside other research funders, plays an important role in the Swedish research funding system by initiating and supporting research of the highest scientific quality, as well as research that benefits policy and practice, and contributes to addressing societal challenges. Furthermore, Forte plays an important role in promoting the implementation of research results.

Forte has formulated three knowledge objectives that encompass pronounced research needs. These are:



1 *Improved understanding of how mental health and ill-health develop in various groups.*

2 *Enhanced knowledge of effective methods and interventions for mental ill-health.*

3 *Strengthened understanding of effective promotional and preventive interventions at various levels.*

Implementation goals

To achieve the knowledge objectives, Forte has identified three implementation goals. These are:

- ✓ **High-quality and relevant research is conducted**
The research initiated and funded by the programme should be of high scientific quality to ensure the reliability, relevance, and utility of its outcomes. To meet society's needs for knowledge, the research should be based on identified and prioritised knowledge gaps, thereby contributing to addressing societal challenges.
- ✓ **Research findings are effectively communicated to relevant stakeholders and target audiences**
The programme should contribute to ensuring that research and evidence-based knowledge reach relevant stakeholders and target audiences, enabling their practical utility.
- ✓ **The research field is developed and enhanced**
The programme is actively involved in national and global knowledge-building.

The programme's work is consistently linked to parliamentary objectives and strategies, such as the implementation of the UN's Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Swedish Public Health and Equality Policy Goals.

What is the strategy for accomplishing the work?

Strategies

To achieve the programme's vision and the established implementation and knowledge objectives, we will proceed in accordance with the following strategies:

- **Conduct calls for research funding within prioritised research areas**
In order for the research to benefit policy and practice and contribute to meeting societal challenges, the calls should have clear objectives and trajectories. The calls will be based on prioritised research areas as well as identified research needs and knowledge gaps. The types of grants and the conditions within the calls should be formulated to promote the programme's implementation objectives, with a specific emphasis on collaboration, utilisation, and interdisciplinary approaches.
- **Undertake activities that promote strategic collaboration among stakeholders**
The programme should stimulate dialogue, collaboration and an exchange of knowledge and experience between researchers and community actors. This can be achieved by joint calls with other stakeholders or through participation in networks with other national, regional, and local entities.
- **Organise activities to compile and disseminate research from the programme**
To contribute to the dissemination of evidence-based knowledge in society, the programme will actively and comprehensively engage in communication activities.
- **Undertake activities that promote international collaborations and exchanges**
The programme should actively engage in global knowledge-building through collaboration with international research programmes and European initiatives.
- **Initiate efforts to stimulate interdisciplinary research and innovation**
Many societal challenges are complex, and people's health, work, and welfare are intertwined and influenced by conditions in various societal sectors. The programme therefore promotes interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral, and multidisciplinary development of knowledge as well as client-oriented, practice-based research.
- **Continually follow up and assess the results of the research**
Within the programme, we will monitor the research we finance by, for example, visiting different educational institutions and organising networking events for researchers and other stakeholders.

Collaboration and utilisation of research

Collaboration and utilisation of research are pervasive factors throughout the programme – from vision, objectives, and strategies, to the day-to-day operations.

Forte has a specific mission to ensure that the research that the agency funds will be of use for policy and practice. Research utilisation can take place by research contributing to eliminating knowledge gaps that are an obstacle to societal development. Based on the state of knowledge, this might involve descriptive as well as hypothesis-driven, problem-solving, or evaluating research. Utilisation can also involve translating new knowledge into practice through new working methods or approaches, or it can have an impact in the form of political instruments or administration models.

By basing research on identified and prioritised knowledge gaps, it can contribute to addressing societal challenges and needs, thereby benefiting the population. Another way is for the calls to have utilisation and

collaboration as assessment criteria, but Forte can also encourage research results to be utilised through different forms of grants.

The programme will also aim to form a bridge between research, politics, and practice, which we achieve by communicating the results and insights from the research we fund, but also by stimulating dialogue, collaboration, and an exchange of knowledge and experience between researchers and other community actors.

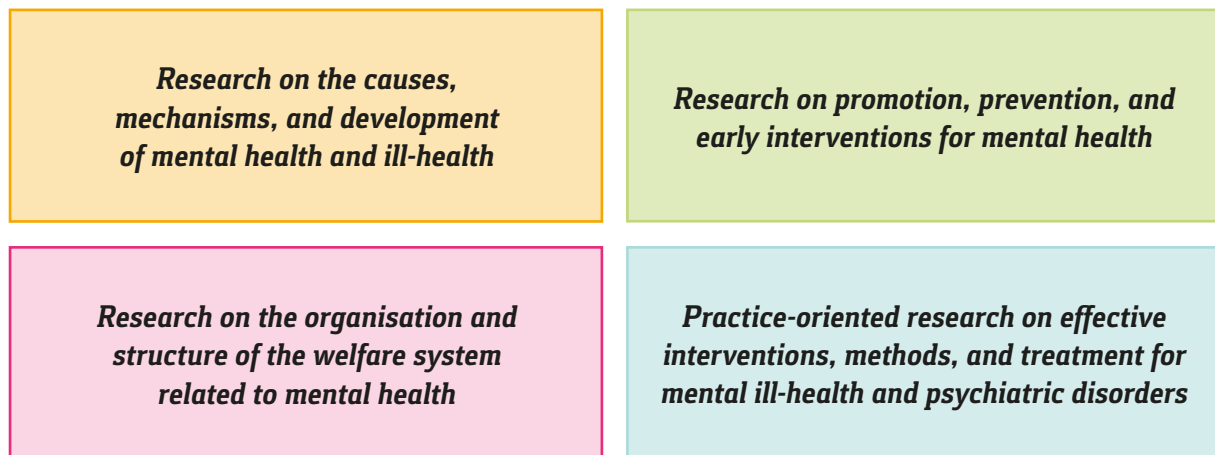
Through integrated and target group-oriented communication, the programme can contribute to ensuring that the research funded reaches pertinent stakeholders and key audiences. In this way, conditions are created for research and evidence-based knowledge to be put to practical use.

Collaboration
between
research and
society...

...is needed to bridge the gap between research, policy, and practice.

What are the programme's prioritised research areas?

The knowledge objectives are based on the programme's four prioritised research areas:



Research on the causes, mechanisms, and development of mental health and ill-health

This research area includes research on the causes, mechanisms, and development of mental health and ill-health in all age groups, but also among specific groups. Inequality in conditions and opportunities, as well as risk and protective factors related to mental health, are themes included in this area.

Among other things, this area includes research on:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concepts and measurement tools for mental well-being and mental ill-health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • holistic approach in relation to mental health and ill-health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • various population groups related to mental health and ill-health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the causes, mechanisms and development of mental health and ill-health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental health and ill-health within various minority groups, such as LGBTQI+ individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk factors and protective factors in mental health linked to specific areas such as work environment, digital media, outdoor environment, and urban environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • factors contributing to the decrease or increase in the prevalence of mental ill-health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the grey area between psychological problems and psychiatric disorders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health determinants of mental ill-health and suicide.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lifespan perspective and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health inequities among 	

Research on promotion, prevention, and early interventions for mental health

This research area involves research on promotion, prevention, and early interventions for mental health. The area spans a broader field encompassing various ages, groups, interventions, and issues, all sharing a common focus on promotion and prevention.

Among other things, this area includes research on:

- promotional, preventative, and early interventions for people of all ages and groups
- methods to promote and improve mental well-being
- families as protective and risk factors, and various forms of parenting support programmes
- suicide prevention
- interventions for stress-related mental ill-health and exhaustion disorder, as well as effective methods to support individuals during the sick-leave process
- long-term effects of workplace interventions linked to mental ill-health and suicide
- family support
- studies assessing the impact of early interventions on mental health.

Research on the organisation and structure of the welfare system related to mental health

This research area includes research related to specific contexts within the welfare sector, such as schools, student health services, the chain of care, and child and adolescent psychiatry, as well as appropriate competence supply within the mental care services. The common denominator is issues related to organisation and structure within the welfare sector and their effects on mental health.

Among other things, this area includes research on:

- impact studies of interventions designed to prevent mental ill-health among children and adolescents in schools
- promotional and preventive interventions aimed at improving mental well-being within various contexts, such as the work environment in schools, social services, and the health-care sector
- conditions for appropriate competence supply within the mental health care services
- the chain of care and its organisation, for example stepped care and first-line collaboration with specialist care
- individual-focused interventions, for example in primary care, social services, or company healthcare
- the organisation and conditions in child and adolescent psychiatry
- the organisation and conditions in student health services.

Practice-oriented research on effective interventions, methods, and treatment for mental ill-health and psychiatric disorders

This research area includes practice-based research on effective interventions, methods, and treatments for mental ill-health.

Among other things, this area includes research on:

- effective interventions, development of methods and treatment of mental ill-health
- effective treatment methods for stress-related mental ill-health
- coordinated interventions for people with severe psychiatric problems, for example in cases of co-morbidity in substance abuse and psychiatric disorders
- implementing evidence-based methods in practical settings
- review of quality and methods used in digital healthcare
- excess mortality in individuals with psychiatric disorders.

How have the research areas been selected?

In its research bill (2020/21:60), the Government designates a number of research areas that the programme should include. To broaden the picture of the existing knowledge gaps and research needs within this area, and to further highlight what the programme should focus on, Forte has used different methods to gather information.

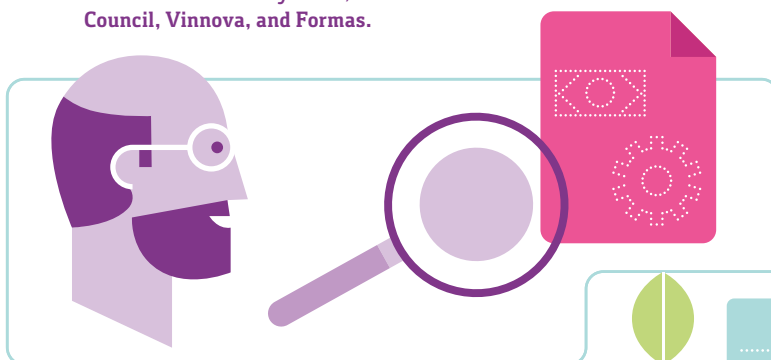
Hearings with relevant stakeholders

Forte invited civil society organisations, national agencies, various occupations within the healthcare sector, and the research community to hearings. In total, 146 people participated.



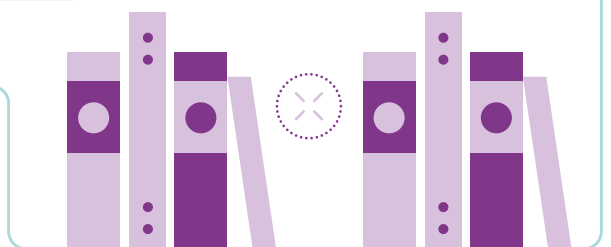
Research projects 2010-2020

Forte conducted a comprehensive review of research projects in the field spanning the years from 2010 to 2020, which were funded by Forte, the Swedish Research Council, Vinnova, and Formas.



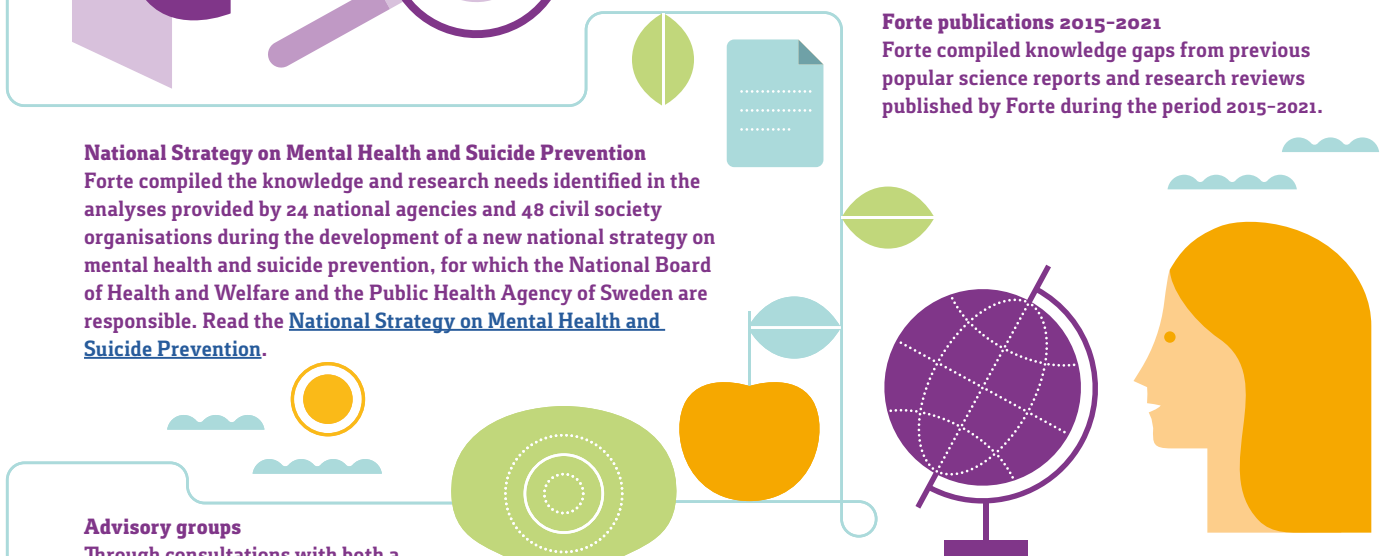
Open consultation on Forte's website

Forte made a web questionnaire accessible to the public, which received responses from 99 individuals.



National Strategy on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

Forte compiled the knowledge and research needs identified in the analyses provided by 24 national agencies and 48 civil society organisations during the development of a new national strategy on mental health and suicide prevention, for which the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency of Sweden are responsible. Read the [National Strategy on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention](#).



Forte publications 2015-2021

Forte compiled knowledge gaps from previous popular science reports and research reviews published by Forte during the period 2015-2021.

Advisory groups

Through consultations with both a reference group and a programme committee, the accumulated knowledge has been applied to identify the prioritised research areas.



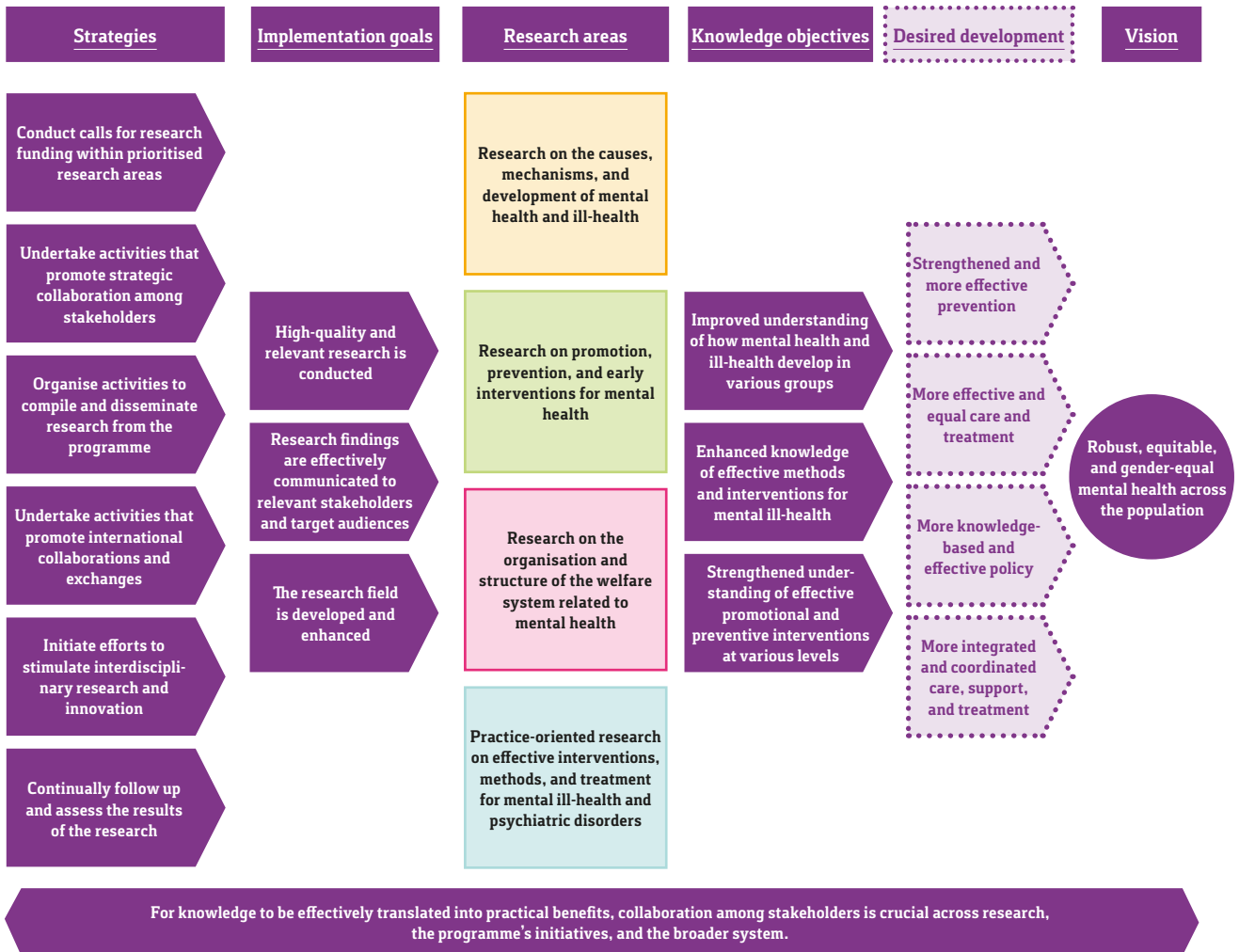
Report with an international outlook

Forte has gained insights from the outcomes of a report commissioned by Vinnova, which provides an international perspective on mapping the research field. Read the report: [Mapping Mental Health & Well-being: An investigation of the landscape of mental health research](#)

Programme model

The programme’s vision, objectives, and implementation strategies are illustrated in the flowchart below (see Figure 1). The model should not be regarded as a complete explanation of how research can contribute to a desirable societal development, but rather as an illustration of how Forte has interpreted its assignment and converted it into objectives on different levels with strategies for the implementation. As we learn more, the model may need to be revised.

Figure 1. Programme model for the national programme on mental health.



What is mental health?

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community.

In 2020, a dual-continuum model illustrating the interrelations of terms and concepts within the mental health domain was introduced by the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Public Health Agency of Sweden, the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services, and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The purpose of the model is to promote a standardised usage of terms and key concepts within the field of mental health in Sweden (see Figure 2).

The model highlights the breadth of the area and encompasses several guiding principles on the appropriate utilisation of the concepts. These principles are likely to evolve and become more refined over time (National Board of Health and Welfare et al., 2020).



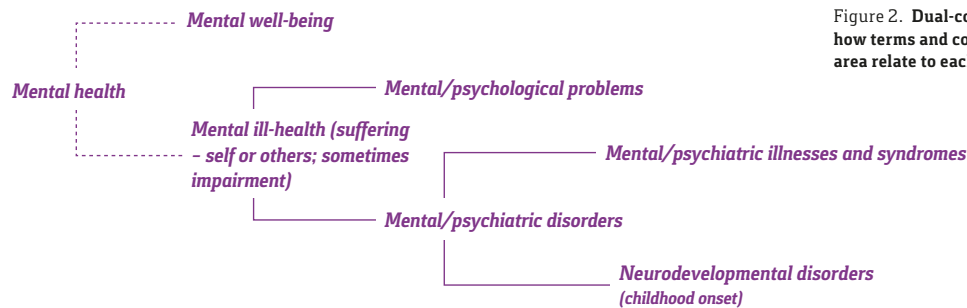


Figure 2. Dual-continuum model describing how terms and concepts in the mental health area relate to each other.

Mental health
 Mental health is a collective term that encompasses all aspects of mental well-being and mental ill-health. These are not opposites of each other but can coexist within the same individual.

Mental ill-health
 Mental ill-health is a collective term for conditions of varying severity and duration. It includes both mental/psychological problems and mental/psychiatric disorders. What these have in common is that they both cause suffering, either for the individuals themselves or for the people around them.
 Mental ill-health is often associated with difficulties in functioning in everyday life, such as in relation to other people or in working or studying. These difficulties can vary greatly depending on individual characteristics, the social context, and the type of mental ill-health involved. Psychological problems usually have less impact on our functioning in comparison with psychiatric disorders.

Mental well-being
 Mental well-being refers to the positive dimension of mental health and is characterised by the ability to balance positive and negative emotions, to feel satisfaction with life, to find meaning in life, to have strong social relationships, to engage in one's community, and to develop and achieve one's potential. It also about being able to feel pleasure, desire, and joy. Mental well-being is not the same as the absence of mental ill-health.

Mental/psychiatric disorders
 Mental/psychiatric disorders are more serious forms of mental ill-health that meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis, regardless of whether the diagnosis has been established and registered by the healthcare system or not. For a diagnosis to be made, several different symptoms must be present, and the symptoms should have existed for a prolonged continuous period. The ability to function must also be impaired. Psychiatric disorders are divided into mental/psychiatric illnesses and syndromes as well as neurodevelopmental disorders.

Mental/psychological problems
 Psychological problems can be expressed as, for instance, disheartenment, anxiety, or sleep problems. Physical problems can also occur, such as headaches, stomach pain or dizziness. Psychological problems are common and are often nothing more than normal reactions to life's challenges, something everyone experiences from time to time. Often, it concerns normal reactions to life's stresses. Psychological problems arising from common stresses are often transient and ease when the situation changes or when we ourselves have adapted. In some cases, psychological problems can lead to individuals developing psychiatric disorders.

Neurodevelopmental disorders (childhood onset)
 Neurodevelopmental disorders typically begin childhood and often persist into adulthood. Examples of neurodevelopmental disorders are attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorders. Individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders are at a higher risk than others of also developing psychiatric illnesses and syndromes, experiencing persistent and severe psychological problems, or having reduced mental well-being. At the same time, individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, just like individuals with other psychiatric disorders, can also feel a general sense of well-being and can cope with day-to-day activities.

Mental/psychiatric illnesses and syndromes
 Mental/psychiatric illnesses and syndromes are health issues that can emerge at any point in life. These can include depression, generalised anxiety disorder, exhaustion disorder, and harmful use and addiction to alcohol or drugs. Other examples include bipolar disorder and psychotic disorders.

Self-harm, attempted suicide, and suicide

Mental ill-health is a risk factor for self-harm, suicide attempts, and, ultimately, suicide itself. The context behind the occurrence of suicide is intricate, often stemming from a complex interplay of elements. It is often described that suicide is a consequence of unbearable suffering, which can, in turn, be triggered by factors such as psychiatric disorders, physical illness, or significant life events.



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