

# WHAT DOES MENTAL HEALTH MEAN TO ME?

By Christine Nightingale

To me, mental health means taking responsibility for dealing with life's issues as they come up (from basic courtesy to life-changing emergencies like Covid-19). Here are some compare and contrast scenarios from families I have had dealings with recently.

1. Two families having a second baby and their response to baby gifts. In each case, the families had a second baby boy. In each case, I sent them a large baby gift including a number of new baby clothes, a book and a stuffed animal. One mom e-mailed me effusive thanks, and a photo of mom with the two boys; from the other family, there was complete silence.

I think that appreciating the time and money someone invests in a gift necessitates a polite response; a person who does not show basic courtesy is not showing a grasp of the social contract all humans need to maintain. And they will be denying their children the rules of courtesy which smooth human interactions.

2. I have two siblings with dementia. Both live far away; one in a very good care home, one in his own home, with daily visits from his son next door. My sister is grumpy every week when I talk to her on the phone, never making any effort to engage in the many activities available to her, not appreciating the excellent meals she is provided, or making any attempt to engage in conversation. My brother is cheerful and happy on our weekly calls. Both are displaying the same personality traits they had all their lives; their forgetfulness and need of care have not changed their basic outlook on life. Strangely enough, I would say that my brother, although he has Alzheimer's, still shows good mental health.
3. My neighbours have very different approaches to Covid-19. One has become paranoid, with bright lights on all night and alarm systems evident.

The young children there swear loudly at their parents. But most of the neighbours are friendlier than usual; on my daily walks almost everyone smiles or says hello. With fewer social contacts available, many people are choosing to make the most of what there is.

(And yes, the people who wear masks and social distance are showing care and concern even for strangers.)

#### 4. Overcoming issues...and making choices.

One friend has overcome alcoholism. Many friends and family have moved on after divorce. One overcame horrific early childhood neglect to become a successful professional in a long-lasting marriage. Another friend's wife left him for another woman...yet the former partners remain on good terms, and the nanny who raised their children is now his partner.

Of course, adults who have overcome difficulties have much more to offer their children than those who made poor choices. We all have difficulties to overcome. During my decades as a teacher, I sometimes saw adults who took their problems out on their children. I also saw children who overcame tremendous emotional and physical handicaps. Very often it was not the presenting problem which was central to a child's life, but the way it was handled ...by adults, and by the child...as an obstacle... or a challenge to be overcome. To me it is clear that an adult who mistreats or neglects their own child has a serious mental health issue.

Also, if adults do not understand that a child has a health problem over which they have no control, the adult is at fault. Every year as a teacher I spotted at least one child who had an undiagnosed issue, from deafness to severe parental neglect or abuse.

I just finished an excellent novel, *Surfacing*, by Margaret Atwood. Spoiler alert...it is about the main character's descent into madness on a vacation trip to the remote island where she and her brother were raised in isolation from all other people, and her father disappeared. During that vacation the storyteller comes to understand that the people she most loved and trusted...her first husband, who

forced her to have an abortion, and her second husband, her current best friend and friend's husband...are cruel to each other and to her. The narrator cannot think of any way to survive but to miss the pickup boat and pull a Robinson Crusoe by hiding out on the remote island. (Well, even Robinson Crusoe in the eponymous book needed the company of his slave Friday to stay relatively sane on an island). The message of Atwood's book seems to be that nurturing human relationships, such as those between parent and child or marital partners or friends, are what keep us sane.

Of course, during Covid-19, the challenge is far greater for everyone, with social interactions greatly curtailed. Approximately a third of people have lost the social contact and financial security of their jobs. Many families are financially strapped. Women's shelters are receiving three times as many calls from abused women. Children have missed out on 6 months of normal routines and socialization at school, and parents worry about their children's health, while grandparents who do not live with family miss their regular hugs.

In short, all areas of the world are currently being impacted by not only existential concerns, but unprecedented mental health challenges.

In the face of these unprecedented challenges, the goal of everyone must be to use self-care for their mental health. For me, as a single adult living alone, that includes daily contact with friends and family (at least by phone), daily walks, and the company of my cats and backyard chickens. (Animal shelters and vets have reported a huge uptick in animal adoptions.)

Self-care is always an option. Reaching out to others is essential for the health of us all.