



Mental health and mental illness: a one-page primer for architects and urban planners

What is mental health?

Just as physical health is not simply the absence of physical illness, mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness. Good mental health involves our basic cognitive and social skills, our ability to empathise, to recognise, express and modulate our emotions, to cope with challenges and to enjoy life.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as: “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” This definition is relevant for urban designers because it also reflects key components of a thriving, resilient urban population.

What is mental illness?

Mental illness refers to a wide range of health conditions that cause changes in our thinking, emotions, and/or behaviour. These problems become mental disorders when the changes are associated with distress and/or problems in our ability to function in relationships, social, school and work settings. Examples of mental illnesses include depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia, and dementia, and include developmental disorders (such as autism or ADHD) and substance use disorders (such as alcohol or drug addiction). Causes of mental disorders are complex and include genetics, psychosocial factors, and more.

How big an issue is mental illness?

Everybody experiences mental health problems at some point, from exam stress to bereavement. And 1 in 4 people will have a diagnosable mental illness in their lifetime. Together, mental disorders cause one third of global disability, and the direct and indirect costs of mental health problems amount to over 4% of GDP.

What is the opportunity for architects and planners in mental health?

Most efforts to improve mental health are still targeted at treating people who already have mental health problems. By designing protective factors such as nature access, physical activity, social interaction, sleep and safety into the city, urban design innovation can add value by helping strengthen the population’s mental health resilience for good mental health and mental illness prevention and recovery.