

HEALTH AND MENTAL WELLNESS FOR JUDICIAL OFFICERS

A Paper Presented at the Annual Induction Course for Newly Appointed Judicial Officers of The Superior Courts of Record Organized at the National Judicial Institute, Abuja, Nigeria.

By

DR ADAORA KEAZOR
Head, Medical Services Department
Federal High Court,
Abuja.

May 2024

PREAMBLE

I thank God for the gift of life and the grace to be considered eligible to present this paper.

My appreciation goes to my lord, the Hon. Chief Justice of Nigeria, Hon. Justice Olukayode Ariwoola (GCON), and the administrator of the National Judicial Institute, my lord, Hon. Justice Salisu Garba Abdullahi, for having me here again. I do not take this honour lightly at all.

I appreciate the Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, my lord, Hon Justice J. T. Tsoho (OFR), and the Chief Registrar, Mr Sulaiman, Amida Hassan Esq, for allowing me to present this paper and for providing an enabling environment for me to work, flourish, and grow.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, wellness is the quality or state of good health, especially as an actively sought goal. Mental wellness is a positive state of mental health.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community.

It is "the emotional and spiritual resilience that allows us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment, and sadness. It is a positive sense of well-being and an underlying belief in our own and others' dignity and worth". MHFA, 2017

Mental health encompasses our emotional, psychological, and social well-being- how we think, feel, act, connect, and function.

Mental wellness is not just the absence of mental illness but the ability to cope in the presence and absence of challenges.

In view of the above definitions, mental wellness will be considered the same as mental health for this paper.

WHY IS MENTAL WELLNESS IMPORTANT?

1. Mental health is a critical consideration in the overall definition of health. Issues with mental health can affect one's general state of health.
2. Your mental health can affect your physical health and vice versa. Studies have shown that depression increases the risk of physical health challenges like headaches, fatigue, eating disorders, hypertension, diabetes, stroke, etc., while chronic illnesses can increase the risk of mental disorders.
3. Your mental health can affect your work, output, and productivity. As a judicial officer, your mind is arguably your most important asset. One's judgment can definitely be affected by one's state of mind. Your work can be called into question if there are pointers to any form of mental illness and instability. Some people may be so "down" that they do not want to carry out their tasks. They keep piling up, leading to more anxiety.
4. Your mental health can affect your relationships. For instance, if you are very cantankerous, people will not want to be around you.

FACTORS THAT CAN INFLUENCE YOUR MENTAL WELLNESS

Throughout our lives, multiple individual, social and structural determinants may combine to protect or undermine our mental health and shift our position on the mental health continuum. These could either be risks or protective factors. While the risks are detrimental, protective factors serve to develop and strengthen resilience.

Risk factors for mental illness are detrimental, and they include:

1. Adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, violence, harsh parenting, punishments, bullying
2. Medical conditions chronic conditions such as cancer, diabetes, hypertension, debilitating conditions, seizure disorders

3. Biological factors or chemical imbalances in the brain
4. Use of alcohol and drugs
5. If unfavourable, social, economic, geopolitical, and environmental circumstances, e.g., poverty, violence, inequality, toxic jobs, and bosses, etc.

Protective factors, however, serve to develop and strengthen resilience. They include:

1. Positive social interactions, e.g. a loving family, safe neighbourhoods, and community cohesion.
2. Quality education.
3. Decent work, amongst others

KEY POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND AT ALL TIMES

1. You are worthy, valuable, and the most important part of this equation. Without you, this conversation would not be possible.
2. You are not alone. The suits, shiny shoes, lovely make-up, and beautiful dresses do an excellent job of masking a lot. You might not have the details, but you are not alone.
3. There is nothing new under the sun.
4. You are NOT your past experiences. You do not have to be weighed down by them, and you do not have to continue the cycle of hurt and pain. It can end with you.

DO I NEED TO IMPROVE MY MENTAL WELLNESS?

Everyone is a work in progress. Situations and circumstances change, and we must constantly re-evaluate and find ways to cope, noting that we may or may not always be successful. However, experiencing one or more of the following symptoms on an ongoing basis may be an early warning sign of a more significant problem:

- a. Inability to perform daily tasks.
- b. Eating or sleeping too much or too little.
- c. Lack of interest and pulling away from people and usual activities.
- d. Having low or no energy.
- e. Feeling numb or like nothing matters.
- f. Having unexplained aches and pains.
- g. Feeling helpless or hopeless.
- h. Smoking, drinking, or using drugs more than usual.
- i. Feeling unusually on edge, angry, upset, worried, or scared.
- j. Yelling or fighting with family and friends.
- k. Experiencing severe mood swings.
- l. Thinking of harming yourself or others.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE OUR MENTAL HEALTH

1. **Healthy Diet:** The foods we eat affect our mental health, and our mental health status can affect what and how well we eat. Eat a healthy diet comprising all food

classes (carbohydrates, protein, fats and oil, vitamins, minerals, and water) that are adequate for your medical state.

- Eat regularly. Your brain needs glucose to function.
- Including fruits, green leafy vegetables, nuts, whole grains and protein in your diet provides vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants that nourish the brain and protect it from oxidative stress, which can damage cells.
- Reduce consumption of processed (canned or packaged) foods.

Multiple studies have found a correlation between a diet high in refined sugars and impaired brain function — and even a worsening of symptoms of mood disorders, such as depression.

- Hydration: Drink water. Mild dehydration can cause headaches and affect your mood and concentration. Include more whole grains, fruits and vegetables in your diet. They contain the vitamins and minerals your brain and body need to stay well.

2. Exercise causes the release of certain chemicals like serotonin, and this reduces anxiety and depression. Exercise improves your mood, self-esteem (the six-pack and trim look), and cognitive function. It also boosts your physical strength. One hundred fifty (150) minutes of moderate aerobic exercise per week is recommended. Examples include walking, jogging, dancing etc.
3. Sleep: We all feel better after "a good night's sleep" and are more grumpy, irritable, confused, or foggy if sleep-deprived. Good sleep helps to maintain focus, attention, learning and memory. Poor or insufficient sleep has been found to increase negative emotional responses to stressors and decrease positive emotions. Inadequate sleep can also contribute to the onset and worsening of different mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. It is recommended that adults get 7-9 hours of sleep per day. Please note that mental health issues can lead to poor sleep.
4. Relationships: Cultivate and nurture relationships that serve your purpose. No man is an island. Good relationships are essential for your mental well-being. They can help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth, give you an opportunity to

share experiences, provide emotional support and allow you to support others. Cut off relationships that consistently bring you down and make you feel less every time. Don't forget to connect with people: Relax. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. It also makes Jill a dull girl.

5. Be kind: Kindness works in at least two directions. It impacts the giver and the receiver. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to others; do unto others as you would have them do to you.
6. Goals: Set SMART goals and work towards them. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-limited)
7. No! Learn to say no to your time, resources, and work. Do not put unnecessary pressure on yourself. You cannot solve everybody's problems. There is only one Almighty, and it's not you. You are not God.
8. Speak up: A Nigerian proverb goes: "All lizards lie flat on their stomach, so it is difficult to know which one has a stomachache." Our smiles, clean-cut attires, and beautiful make-up may hide many things and make people think you are doing okay. Only you know where those Louis Vuitton shoes are pinching. Speak to someone you trust: a problem shared gives relief and is at least half solved.
9. Professional help: Please seek professional assistance if you have to. It does not mean you are weak or, in our local parlance, "mad". On the contrary, it shows you are strong enough to recognise that you need help.

CONCLUSION

Mental wellness is crucial to your personal and professional lives as judicial officers.

Mental wellness is not just the absence of mental illness but the ability to cope in the presence and absence of challenges.

It is influenced by many factors, past and present, internal, and external. A better understanding of these can help us cope better.

Several activities can help boost mental wellness. Activities like those mentioned above will do us a world of good by ensuring we are in a good place regarding our mental health.

If we assimilate all we have learned today, we will go a long way toward achieving improved mental wellness, and by extension, good health.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Strengthening Mental Health Promotion. Fact sheet no. 220. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.
2. Chronic Illness & Mental Health. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health. 2015.
3. <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/what-is-wellness/mental-wellness/>
4. What is Mental Wellness & How to Improve It
<https://www.voasw.org/blog/what-is-mental-wellness-how-to-improve-it/>
5. How Sleep Deprivation Affects Your Mental Health.
<https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/news/how-sleep-deprivation-affects-your-mental-health>
6. What Is Mental Health and How to Improve It. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/>