

The Mental Wealth Approach

Forward: This document does not attempt to be prescriptive, or to offer practical information, but only to capture the spirit of the beliefs and values that Mental Wealth UK was founded on, and the approach that has been taken since.

Mental Wealth UK is based on a broad and holistic view of mental health & wellbeing.

Mahatma Gandhi said that wellbeing is “when what you think, what you say, and what you do, are in harmony”. By this, he doesn’t just mean being honest, but the ability for a person to live in a way that accords with the things they most value. A more scientific definition of wellbeing comes from psychologists Ryff and Keyes, who said that wellbeing is an active state consisting of six dimensions: autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff and Keyes, 1995).

Both definitions can be expressed by Professor Brian Thorne’s simile:

“Just as a tulip instinctively moves towards becoming as complete and perfect a tulip as possible, so the human being moves towards growth and fulfilment and the accomplishment of the highest level of human being-ness. The only constraints placed upon the actualising tendency arise from the environment in which the person finds himself or herself. Just as the tulip is unlikely to flourish in poor soil and without proper care and watering, so too the growth of the human being will be stunted if the conditions of the encouragement of the actualising tendency are unfavourable.”

These definitions of wellbeing lead to the following premise: *we each have the capacity to promote the conditions for our own wellbeing, and the wellbeing of others.*

Since launching The Mind Matters Society at the University of Leeds in 2008, discussions have been held with mental health and wellbeing staff and student advocates from 80+ universities. Meetings during a February 2010 tour of the UK focussed on the following questions: ‘What are the problems facing campuses?’ and ‘How can we overcome these?’. Dialogues repeatedly pointed to the same underlying issues, and the 18 months since then have only reinforced this. The process for addressing these has been captured as follows: *opening minds, creating understanding, connecting with the resources to thrive.*

To understand we must be receptive. When we are closed-minded about a thing, we are uninterested and unwilling to give it our attention. Many people are closed-minded about mental health. Discussion and observation points to this being a key problem on university campuses. The use of language, the awareness of resources, and the quality of communication channels, have also been regularly identified as problems.

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."

In practice, mental health is typically interpreted as being synonymous with illness, or at best, the absence of illness. This causes misunderstanding. It leads to the incorrect view that mental health is just about pathology, and a binary thing; that either you're healthy or you're not.

We want to move away from repressive, black-and-white thinking, towards a more dynamic and inclusive model of the mind and its potential. This is why we often talk about 'mental wealth'. Meaning, a person's psychological resources; their capacity for wellbeing, for flourishing, for thriving as a person.

The task is to find ways of engaging with the condition of the mind that avoids wrong associations, that challenges prejudices, that engages everyone, and that emphasises that we are all in the same boat in having the desire and the ability to promote the wellbeing of ourselves and others. This means making people think, shifting perspectives, and changing attitudes.

To change attitudes is to loosen attachments to narrow ways of viewing things. When we are open-minded, we are in a position to learn and understand more about ourselves, our environments, and the relationships between the two. We can then make better decisions about resources and support. Discussion and observation points to language being something that often creates obstacles on campuses.

Information is only as useful as its context. To be effective, it must be communicated in a way that is accessible and relevant to the recipient. This means good design, and a thoughtful approach to language. Good communication can mean the difference between us relating with a concept, or feeling alienated from it.

Often there are good resources and support available. It is awareness of the resources that is lacking. If we are open-minded, and have understanding, we

still need to discover what is out there. Everyone can contribute to bringing resources to the attention of those that need them; and to helping people access the resources they are looking for.

To do this is to build better communication channels. Not only to increase awareness, but to avoid inefficiencies that creates wastage and prevent people from accessing what they need. By collaborating we can find ways to share skills, share strategies, and share resources. Central to this is communicating better.

A set of values that support this on a personal level are as follows:

1. Empathy: encouraging a spirit of unity, and recognising that all are worthy of respect.
2. Respect for individuals: recognising that we are all unique with our own way of viewing things and our own path to wellbeing.
3. Leadership: recognising that we are each influential over our environment, and must show commitment to our own values, and take responsibility for our thoughts, words, and deeds.
4. Open-mindedness: encouraging a flexible view of things, receptive to others' perspectives on the basis that there is no one way of seeing things.
5. Awareness: to be observant, mindful and attentive; appreciative of what is, and aware that we each have the conditions we need for flourishing.
6. Enterprise: a desire to make things better. Recognising that we each have the capacity to break down barriers and build connections, to show enterprise and cultivate an environment conducive to flourishing.
7. Trust: the optimism and flexibility to be resilient and to find the best in situations.

Edward Pinkney, September 2011