Chapter 2
Mental Health and Well–Being:
Societal Influences

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors provide a brief overview of the distinction between flourishing and non-flourishing mental health and well-being for people not diagnosed with a clinical mental disorder. While recognizing that genetics and personality impact the well-being of people, research supports the profound impact of societal constructs in American life. As part of a team of faculty who work with undergraduate students in Teacher Education, the authors feel this distinction is essential to understand as medical issues require diagnostics by people trained in that area. The book's focus is to examine what the college community can do to promote flourishing mental health in its social construction in classrooms, on campus and beyond. Dominant influences for non-flourishing mental health and well-being for college students rest in ideologies, happiness seeking and digitalization within American life, membership in groups that are underrepresented and well-intentioned but enabling parenting that ill prepares children for adult responses in life.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the authors provide a brief overview of the distinction between flourishing and non-flourishing mental health and well-being for people not diagnosed with a clinical mental disorder. While recognizing that genetics and personality impact the well-being of people, research supports the profound impact of societal constructs.

The chapter then focuses on the non-flourishing mental health of undergraduate students in college and the social constructs that have impacted the development of these anxieties. These include the influence of living in American society with its polarizing politics and obsession with the pursuit of happiness and media views of what this looks like, the influence of being a part of groups that are underrepresented in America, such as race and culture, religious beliefs, classism, sexual orientations, gender, and the influence of over-productive parenting and early educational experiences.

NON-FLOURISHING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

No one is raised in a vacuum and this is true of college students. Genetics and environment influence all, and people seeking higher education are no exception. While this life transition can trigger intense feelings of joy, it can also activate feelings of anxiety and depression. For purposes of this book we are not focusing on those with clinical mental illness but rather as Corie Keyes, full professor of Sociology at Emory University and UVM's Keynote for the 2nd Annual Conference "Mental Health Matters: Building a Resilient Campus" (Oct. 28, 2016), identifies those who are struggling emotionally, but who are not classified as mentally ill. He counters the often-held belief that if one does not carry a mental illness then one is mentally healthy, but this denies a category of people who are neither mentally ill nor mentally thriving or flourishing. According to Keyes, this middle category of "not flourishing" can include over 40% of the population.

This chapter will primarily focus on social constructs that can influence mental health and well-being: 1. membership in America's citizenry that promotes the "pursuit of happiness" and the often superficial representation on social media, along with America's current Nationalistic polarization, 2. membership in American's subcommunities that are underrepresented within the larger whole, and 3. membership in families and educational settings that may over-protect and over-control with good intentions, keeping young adults overly dependent on others and insecure in their own abilities and decision making skills. Later in the book there will be information regarding the role the campus community can play in easing some of these social constructs and in building a more supportive, proactive and safe collegiate society.

Using Keyes' Mental Health Continuum, John Fink (2014) identified and analyzed predictors from students about their college experiences that impacted their mental health favorably as college faculty and staff found entering freshmen to have "all-times highs of emotional disengagement" (Fink, 2011, p. 380). The World Health Organization published a report on Promoting Mental Health (2005) that shored the research that mental wellness is more a societal issue that is less about individual interventions and more about "social structures and processes" (p. 29). British author Ruth Whippman in her 2016 book, *America the Anxious: How our pursuit of happiness is creating a nation of nervous wrecks* analyzes America's obsession with happiness and the resulting failure of our intense multiple pursuits of it. She notes that the American Psychological Association (2012), forewarned that the US was on the precipice of "stress-induced public health crisis" (p. 10).

Many would say that it is the larger college community itself, beyond individuals, that creates the climate of stress. A recent study concludes its research with imagining a "different kind of academy, exploring the practices that produce it can be differently enacted…" (Peake, L., & Mullings, B., 2015, p.253). One of the hopes of Peake's and Mullings' study is to begin to create a space for mental wellness that de-stigmatizes people with mental and emotional stress so that care of self is more emphasized and that the corporate mindset of universities is minimized. (273). Whippman recognizes the impact that

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