



Mental health promotion competencies in the health sector – what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are needed in mental health promotion actions

MAIN FINDINGS

- Altogether 16 main competencies and 56 subcompetencies for mental health promotion were identified
- Knowledge of positive mental health and collaboration skills come up strongly in the competencies
- Client-oriented operating culture and the empowerment of individuals and communities are also highlighted as important competency areas
- The competency areas can be used in municipal wellbeing and health promotion activities, mental health promotion and development of preventive services in future welfare areas and health and social services centres, organisations and educational institutions providing mental health promotion training

Mental health is an integral part of health and the promotion of health and wellbeing. Good mental health is more than the absence of mental illness. It is an important resource for the individual and for society, which increases both the quality of life and well-being of the individual and the community and the productivity of society. Mental health is built and develops in interaction with our everyday environment – functional and working everyday environments thus promote mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing enables the enjoyment of life, supports daily living, and helps to cope with adversity.

Mental health promotion aims to support good mental health by strengthening psychological wellbeing, resources, competencies, and resilience, and by creating living conditions and environments that support mental wellbeing. Mental health promotion can also have a preventive effect on mental health problems and disorders by increasing the good mental health of the individual and the community.

There is a need to develop mental health promotion and its competencies. The importance of mental health promotion competencies is emphasised in the social welfare and health care reform, with which the responsibility for activities that promote wellbeing and health lies with both municipalities and welfare areas. This shared responsibility requires a new kind of expertise to implement effective mental health promotion practices.

The aim of this study was to identify what mental health promotion competencies are needed in health sector practice. The research is based on the views of experts in the field of mental health promotion as well as experts by experience.

Mental health promotion competencies in the health sector

As a result of the study, 16 main competencies for mental health promotion were identified (Figure 1) and 56 subcompetencies. Areas of competency are divided into theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and attitudes and values. Each competency describes one dimension of competency in mental health promotion. The results highlight the diversity of expertise needed for mental health promotion. Knowledge of positive mental health and collaboration skills come up strongly as the required competency. According to the results, client-oriented operating culture and the empowerment of individuals and communities are particularly emphasised in the competency areas.

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How the research was conducted:

The results reported in this publication are based on a dissertation research (Tamminen 2021), which was carried out in stages during 2013–2021.

The views of professionals working in the field of mental health promotion on competencies related to mental health promotion were investigated through focus groups (2 groups, 6+7 participants, spring 2014, autumn 2015) and a survey of open questions (20 participants, December 2015–January 2016).

Based on the focus group interviews and the survey, a Delphi survey was created and conducted in the spring of 2017. The Delphi panel was attended by 32 mental health professionals. The Delphi study identified by building consensus competency areas in mental health promotion.

Finally, the experts by experience evaluated the resulting competency areas in a focus group interview with 10 experts by experience.

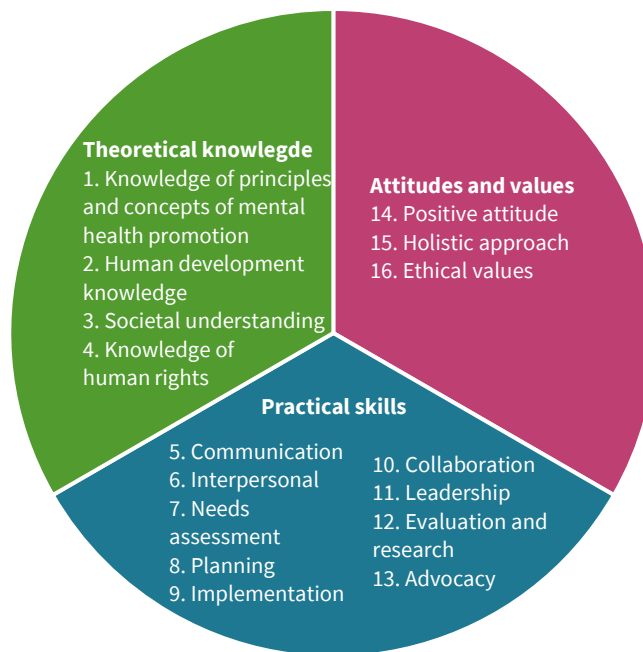


Figure 1. Mental health promotion competency areas

Theoretical knowledge

In order to implement mental health promotion activities, it is necessary to know the principles and concepts of mental health promotion, including good practices and tools and effective methods. Knowledge and understanding of positive mental health and the salutogenic, that is, health and resource-oriented approach in mental health promotion is essential in all mental health promotion activities. There is also a need for a broad understanding of the importance of different sectors of society for the mental health of the individual and the community throughout the life course, as well as an understanding of the factors that support and challenge mental health in society. The four competencies of theoretical knowledge for mental health promotion and their different subcompetencies are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical knowledge and its subcompetencies

Main competencies	Subcompetencies
1. Knowledge of principles and concepts of mental health promotion (MHP)	1.1 Knowledge of the concept of positive mental health, resilience, and the importance of strengths, resources, and protective factors 1.2 Knowledge of supportive living conditions and environments 1.3 Knowledge of the concept of mental health 1.4 Knowledge of the risk factors of mental health 1.5 Knowledge of effective methods, practices and tools for MHP
2. Human development knowledge	2.1 Knowledge of MHP aims and activities according to the life course approach 2.2 Knowledge of the psychological and physiological human development
3. Societal understanding	3.1 Understanding how society works and how to influence on it 3.2 Understanding the factors that support and challenge mental health in society 3.3 Understanding the significance of different sectors and their role in MHP 3.4 Understanding the influence of political decisions on wellbeing and on MHP
4. Knowledge of human rights	4.1 Knowledge of equality, justice and appreciation and respect for others 4.2 Knowledge of cultural differences and similarities and their significance to MHP work

Practical skills

A wide range of practical skills demonstrates the diversity of skills needed for mental health promotion. Among the most important practical skills are collaboration skills that are needed both in mental health promotion activities between different sectors of society and in the mental health promotion of individuals and communities. Planning, implementing, and evaluating mental health promotion practices and measures according to needs are also necessary skills for the actions to be effective and successful. In addition, advocacy for mental health promotion is seen as an important competency. The nine competencies of practical skills for mental health promotion and their different subcompetencies are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Practical skills and their subcompetencies

Main competencies	Subcompetencies
5. Communication skills	5.1 Mastering different communication methods, including verbal and written communication, as well as technological communication methods 5.2 Providing information on factors and activities related to MHP 5.3 Influencing positive and supportive attitude towards mental health, and reducing stigmas
6. Interpersonal skills	6.1 Mastering interaction skills when working with various stakeholders 6.2 Considering others with appreciation, respect and empathy taking into account the views and values of others and using them as a starting point for working 6.3 Mastering group and bilateral work as well as different guidance methods
7. Needs assessment skills	7.1 Assessing client/stakeholder needs while utilising different methods, tools and indicators 7.2 Engaging clients/stakeholder groups with needs assessment as well as setting and monitoring objectives and actions 7.3 Monitoring mental health with different indicators and indicating the effectiveness of MHP 7.4 Recognising and supporting components of positive mental health and client's/stakeholder group's strengths and resources and supporting those 7.5 Recognising risk factors of mental health
8. Planning skills	8.1 Planning objective-oriented MHP actions and interventions 8.2 Utilising available resources with planning 8.3 Engaging clients/stakeholder groups and other players when planning and developing activities 8.4 Developing new innovations, methods and tools
9. Implementation skills	9.1 Implementing effective MHP methods and interventions 9.2 Providing objective-oriented and targeted MHP actions to and with clients/stakeholder groups as well as part of wider MHP 9.3 Monitoring systematically the planned actions
10. Collaboration skills	10.1 Working in partnership with others beyond organisations, sectors and disciplines while planning and developing MHP actions 10.2 Networking and creating partnerships and utilising different networks 10.3 Working in partnership with clients/stakeholder groups 10.4 Enabling and utilising peer support (experts by experience) in MHP activities
11. Leadership skills	11.1 Leading and supporting MHP actions in practice and in different levels from client work to population level actions 11.2 Guiding systematically objective-oriented and knowledge-based MHP and its actions 11.3 Utilising scientific knowledge in decision-making, in both the health sector and other sectors

12. Evaluation and research skills	12.1 Seeking scientific knowledge to support MHP work and utilising research-based effective interventions 12.2 Mastering different evaluation and research methods and indicators 12.3 Studying and evaluating MHP planning, implementation and impact
13. Advocacy skills	13.1 Influencing by networking and working with different sectors 13.2 Marketing MHP and MHP actions to other stakeholders and players 13.3 Influencing decision makers, decision-making and policies at different levels 13.4 Lobbying for resources needed for MHP actions

Attitudes and values

Attitudes and values emphasise the holistic and positive approach of a mental health professional. At the heart are client orientation and the empowerment of individuals and communities. Ethical values such as equality and respect for human rights are at the centre of mental health promotion practice and an integral part of mental health promotion competencies. The three competencies of attitudes and values for mental health promotion and their different subcompetencies are described in Table 3.

Table 3. Attitudes and values and their subcompetencies

Main competencies	Subcompetencies
14. Positive attitude	14.1 Working with an open-minded attitude in MHP actions with different people, population groups and cultures 14.2 Inspiring, encouraging and motivating people 14.3 Recognising and utilising possibilities and resources and strengths 14.4 Renewing and improving ways of working with courage in order to promote and support mental health
15. Holistic approach	15.1 Seeing the client/stakeholder group holistically with strengths and limitations, supporting their own expertise and agency 15.2 Working in a multisectoral and multidisciplinary manner in MHP activities 15.3 Taking into account the biological, psychological, social, spiritual and societal factors that affect mental health 15.4 Promoting client-oriented operating culture
16. Ethical values	16.1 Respecting human rights and strengthening equality 16.2 Acting in an equal manner and respecting differences 16.3 Making human rights visible and realised in MHP actions

Conclusions and recommendations

The importance of good mental health for the individual, the community and society has been widely recognised. We need skilled professionals to plan and implement decisions, actions and research that strengthen and support mental health. This study provides new and necessary information on the required competencies. The identified competencies, from theoretical knowledge and practical skills to attitudes and values, describe the diversity of competencies in mental health promotion.

The identified competency areas can be used in municipal wellbeing and health promotion activities, mental health promotion and development of preventive services in future welfare areas and health and social services centres, organisations and educational institutions providing mental health promotion training. The competencies can be utilised in the development and assessment of mental health promotion skills for both those already in the profession and those studying the field.

The mental health promotion competencies provide a tool for strengthening mental health promotion education and training and assist in the design of curriculum and degree content related to mental health promotion. They can be used to assess competency and its development, both in education and training and in the profession. In addition, they can be used to identify the training needs of professionals and to be used as a self-assessment in mapping competency and professional development needs. The competencies can also be utilised in the planning of work tasks and job roles related to mental health promotion.

The identified competencies describe extensive and multidisciplinary expertise in mental health promotion. It should be noted that the level of competency required may depend on the role of the professional in the health sector; working in a leadership or development role may require a different level of expertise than working in a more client-oriented role. The skills needs of professionals in different jobs may vary, making it necessary to place more emphasis on certain competency areas. However, all identified competencies are necessary for the implementation of effective mental health promotion activities and the strengthening of the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.

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Suggested citation:

Tamminen N, Solin P, Kannas L, Kettunen T (2022) Mental health promotion competencies in the health sector – what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are needed in mental health promotion actions. Data brief 19/2022. Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, Helsinki



Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

ISBN 978-952-343-844-6 (online publication)

ISSN 2323-5179 (online publication)

<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-343-844-6>