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
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