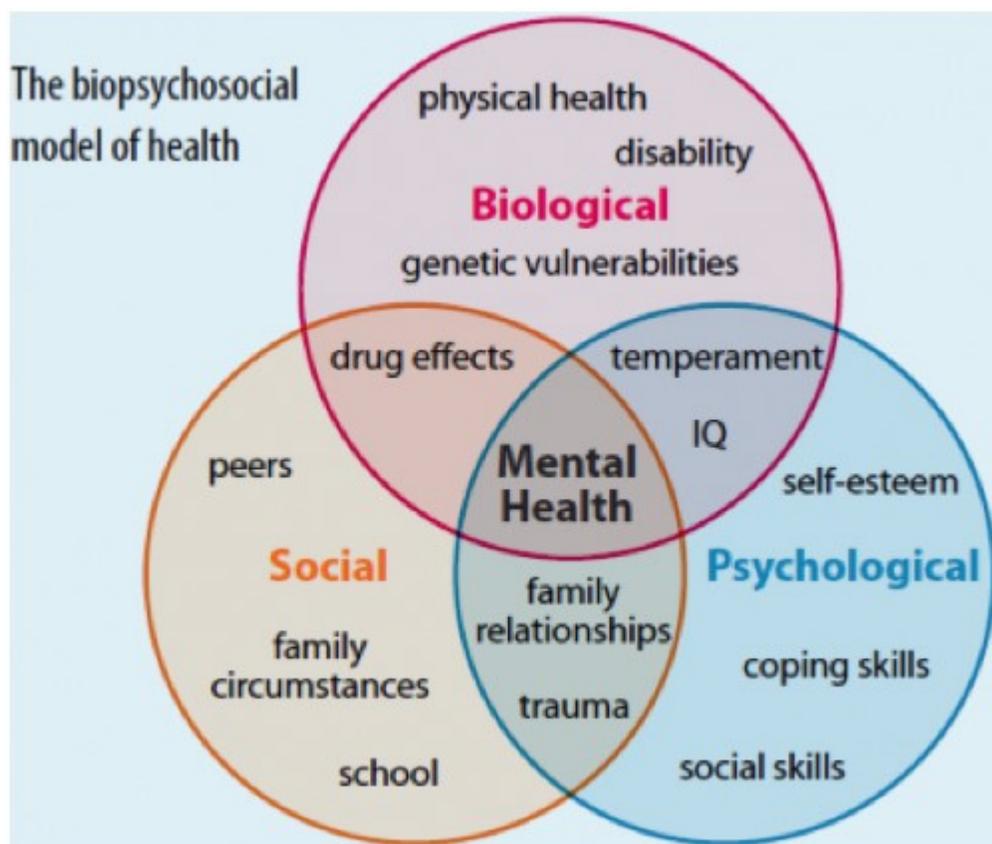


7 days of Psychology

Health Psychology

The late George Engel (1913-1999) thought that to understand and respond adequately to a person's suffering, clinicians must attend simultaneously to the biological, psychological and social aspects of illness. This idea provided a holistic alternative to the prevailing biomedical model that had dominated industrialised nations for much of the 20th century. This new model became known as the 'biopsychosocial model.'



This holistic framework is one of the key defining features of the field of

health psychology. To a health psychologist, health is viewed as a product of biological, social, psychological, cultural and environmental processes. Health psychologists apply this knowledge at both the individual level (clinical health psychology), and at the group, organisational, community and policy level (health promotion psychology).

Where will I find a health psychologist?

Health psychologists may work in primary and tertiary health settings, research institutes, health promotion agencies or government bodies. It is common to find them working with multi-disciplinary teams of other health professionals, as the management of chronic illness (e.g. diabetes) often involves multiple health professionals.

The field of health psychology is generally divided into two streams: **health promotion psychology** and **clinical health psychology**.

Clinical health psychology

As we increasingly understand and find evidence for the interactivity between psychological and physiological processes, health psychologists are more commonly seen as integral members of treatment teams for a range of acute and chronic health issues in hospitals and community health settings.

In these settings, psychologists assisting clients to manage their psychological health (reduce stress and anxiety, manage depression, cope with adjustment to illness) can improve physical symptoms of illness directly (e.g. reducing stress helps with controlling blood sugar levels in diabetes), or indirectly through better adherence to treatment, and improving health-related behaviour (improve sleep, eat well, exercise). In

cases where an illness is being managed as well as possible, assistance with the psychological components of illness and treatment can improve quality of life and reduce the overall impact of ill-health on a person's life.

- Health psychologists have expertise in developing education and behaviour change programs to help people to recover from or self-manage chronic illness, trauma, injury or disability.
- Psychological treatments also reduce problems that can accompany and contribute to illness and injury, such as **chronic pain, addiction, poor sleep, eating problems, anxiety, depression** and **adjustment**.
- Health psychologists help people to cope with the diagnosis and medical treatment of acute health problems and to facilitate medical care.
- Health psychologists assist people to cope with terminal illness, including the impact of loss, bereavement, death and dying.
- Health psychologists design and test interventions to improve health systems and relationships between health professionals, doctors, nurses and psychologists, and monitor impacts on health determinants that encourage recovery from illness and injury.
- Health psychologists develop programs and directly help people to self-manage their own illnesses.

Health promotion psychology

Some of the top public health problems - obesity, violence, smoking, drug and alcohol use - have a lot to do with behaviour. Health psychologists bring unique expertise in how behaviour can be influenced and how healthy behaviour can be encouraged, to create change on a large scale.

Health promotion psychology aims to promote positive health behaviours and reduce harmful health behaviours such as poor dietary habits, smoking, alcohol and other drug abuse, and physical inactivity. It aims to

reduce risk factors associated with chronic conditions such as obesity, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer and injuries.

Health psychologists design public health programs with the goal of changing behaviour in areas such as exercise, alcohol, cigarettes, drug consumption, and injury and cancer prevention (e.g. 'SunSmart', 'Life. Be in it'). Typically these programs are guided by Health Behaviour Theories (e.g. Health Belief Model, Theory of Planned Behaviour) and are 'evidence based', meaning they are based on methods that have been shown in research to be beneficial. Often the research that is done to prove the worth of these programs involves hundreds or thousands of participants.

Such programs commonly reach large portions of the population, and are based on the idea that even small changes, when added across thousands of people can help reduce healthcare costs and improve quality of life. Some of the health promotion programs currently in place can be found at <http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/health/health-promotion>.

In addition to the development and implementation of these large-scale promotion programs, health psychologists also consult with other health professionals and community members on:

- how different diseases are distributed in the population;
- what are the modifiable behaviours that can reduce the prevalence and impact of these diseases;
- the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that contribute to ill health;
- and how these might be changed

Skills of health psychologists:

Health psychologists have knowledge and skills in the following areas:

- Understand the connections between the medical health of a person and their mental health.
- Helping people make healthy but often difficult lifestyle changes.
- Developing and evaluating interventions that can enhance health and wellbeing, including treatments that can help people to cope with illness or associated problems (e.g. facilitating friends and family to help with recovery).
- Understanding how psychological and behavioural factors interact with the physical systems of the body and social factors to influence health and illness.
- Helping patients get the most out of their medical treatments, through better adherence, and better understanding of how the treatments work.
- Quantifying the extent and type of health problems experienced by various groups in Australia.
- Understanding the way that people behave or the underlying attitudes that put their health at risk and how they might change these behaviours to prevent illness and promote health.
- Identifying and treating the psychological impact of illness.
- Working with other health professional to help maximise outcomes for patients.

This sounds great!! How do I become a health psychologist?

Whilst a number of professionals including clinical psychologists, nurses, occupational therapists, medical practitioners, and others may work in some of the areas described as “health psychology”, only those who have completed a 6-year sequence of APAC accredited study can complete the further 2 years of supervision to Endorsement and thus be permitted to identify as a Health Psychologist.

A Google search of “study health psychology” will help you find appropriate university courses across Australia.

To learn more about health psychology, contact your state section of the APS College of Health Psychologists -

<https://groups.psychology.org.au/chp/>

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