

How to cultivate mental and emotional health

Philippine Daily Inquirer · 5 Sep 2018 · C6 · MAMA DIARIES AUDREY TAN-ZUBIRI

Mental health could be among the top concerns of today's generation. But it's still largely uncharted territory.



When asked what mental health means, some people will cite depression, ADHD and schizophrenia. But these are mental disorders.

Others say mental health is being happy. But this is simply a mood.

Still others say it's "all in the mind." But such is a dangerous attitude.

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) 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 short, it's the ability to respond to challenges.

Fortunately, mental health, just like physical health, is something we can all work on. Both should be fostered as early as possible.

As parents, we take great pains to ensure that our children are physically and mentally well. Sound body and mind are closely connected. WHO's constitution declares, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

Activities, diet, sleep

Taking care of our child's physical health is the first order of the day. Physical activities, not necessarily in the form of rigorous exercise, are a must for a healthy child.

Physical activities also release natural, feel-good chemicals called endorphins, which give children more energy and confidence to go about their day-to-day activities.

A balanced diet must also be maintained. Parents know that a healthy diet will provide children the essential, required nutrients to grow and develop.

A healthy diet is related to a child's mental health. As his or her body grows and develops at the same pace as his or her peers, the child will gain selfconfidence.

The child must also have enough time to sleep. While others believe that sleep can be reduced for additional study, training or leisure time, it is worth noting that behavioral prob-

blems, such as the inability to focus and concentrate, anxiety, irritability, hyperactivity, among others, actually stem from lack of sleep.

Another factor of physical health is a child's physical environment. It can serve either as a "risk" or "protective" factor, depending on how safe and secure it is for a growing child. Safety should be seen in the physical sense, in which a child can grow in a physical space free from harm, and in the emotional sense, in which the child is not threatened or exposed to stressful or traumatic experiences.

Emotional relationship

Once parents have fostered good physical health practices for their child, it's time to focus on emotional health practices.

Most, if not all, experts seem to agree that unconditional love of the family or the primary caregiver is at the heart of emotional health. A child who is assured of love and acceptance—for who he or she is, and not simply for accomplishments or in exchange for good behavior—will be less vulnerable to emotional problems.

Love and acceptance may be at the heart of a child's emotional health, but proper guidance and discipline are just as important. Parents are advised to be loving but always firm and consistent in what is acceptable behavior, and with rules and consequences.

As much as children need freedom to be loved for who they are, they also need limits to keep them on the right path until they are old enough to know what they are doing.

It is not a sign of weakness to explain, at the child's level of understanding, the reason for certain rules and possible consequences of the child's actions.

Doing so gives children a clearer understanding of a parent's decision and more reason to listen to you, rather than forcing them through fear, coercion or bribery.

Discipline

Disciplining a child is not about parents' direct controlling, but teaching the child to control himself.

Self-confidence and self-esteem can come from parents' genuine encouragement and appreciation of a child's efforts and accomplishment. However, parents must be honest and not give false flattery or be too quick to give empty praise.

Otherwise, parents run the risk of raising a child whose self-esteem may suddenly fall apart once he or she is faced with real failure and is no longer sheltered by the parents.

Parents can build up healthy self-esteem in their children by praising specific positive actions such as their initiative, efforts to practice, resolve to continue trying even after failing, and other actions.

Allowing a child to fail, rather than constantly shielding them from failure, will do more good in the long run.

Parents can also help children set realistic goals commensurate to their abilities. Limits can be tested little by little until they surpass their own achievements and failures.

Failure, meanwhile, should be seen by children as learning opportunities, rather than sources of shame or disappointment.

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