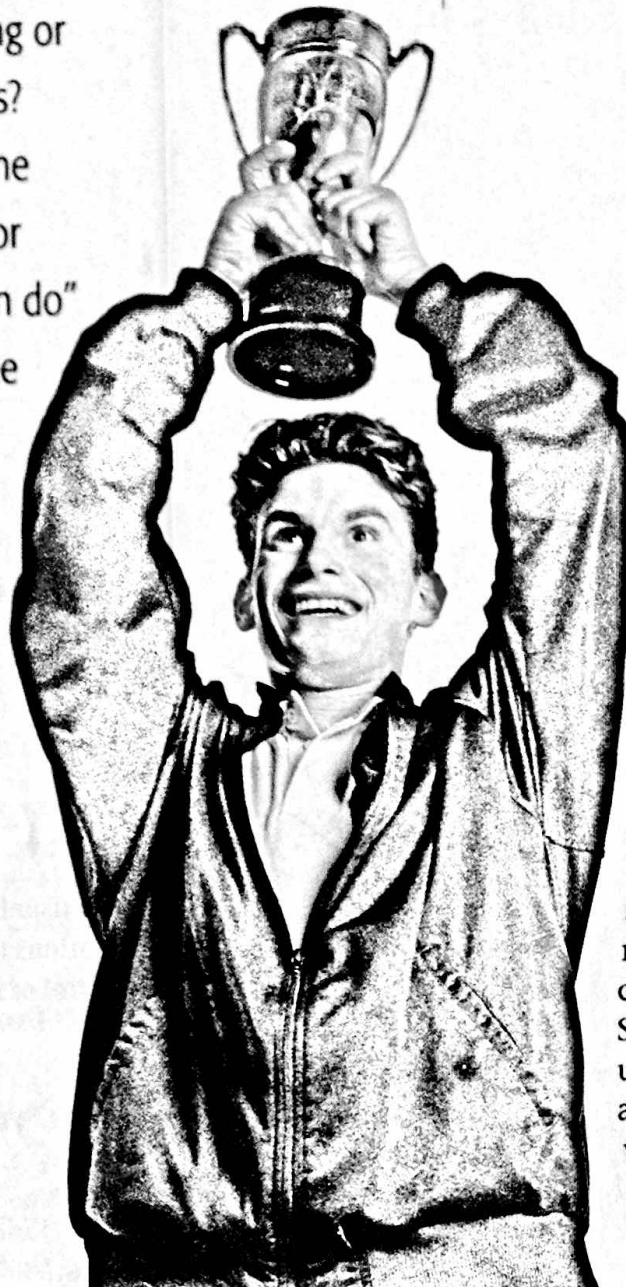


# What Is Mental Health?

Close your eyes. Quickly think of three images that suggest positive mental health. Do you see someone smiling or chatting with friends? Do you see someone attacking a project or problem with a "can do" attitude? Do you see yourself?



## HEALTH TERMS

**mental health  
feedback**

## HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Mental health means much more than not being mentally ill.
- There are varying levels of mental and emotional health.
- Self-esteem is central to mental and emotional wellness.

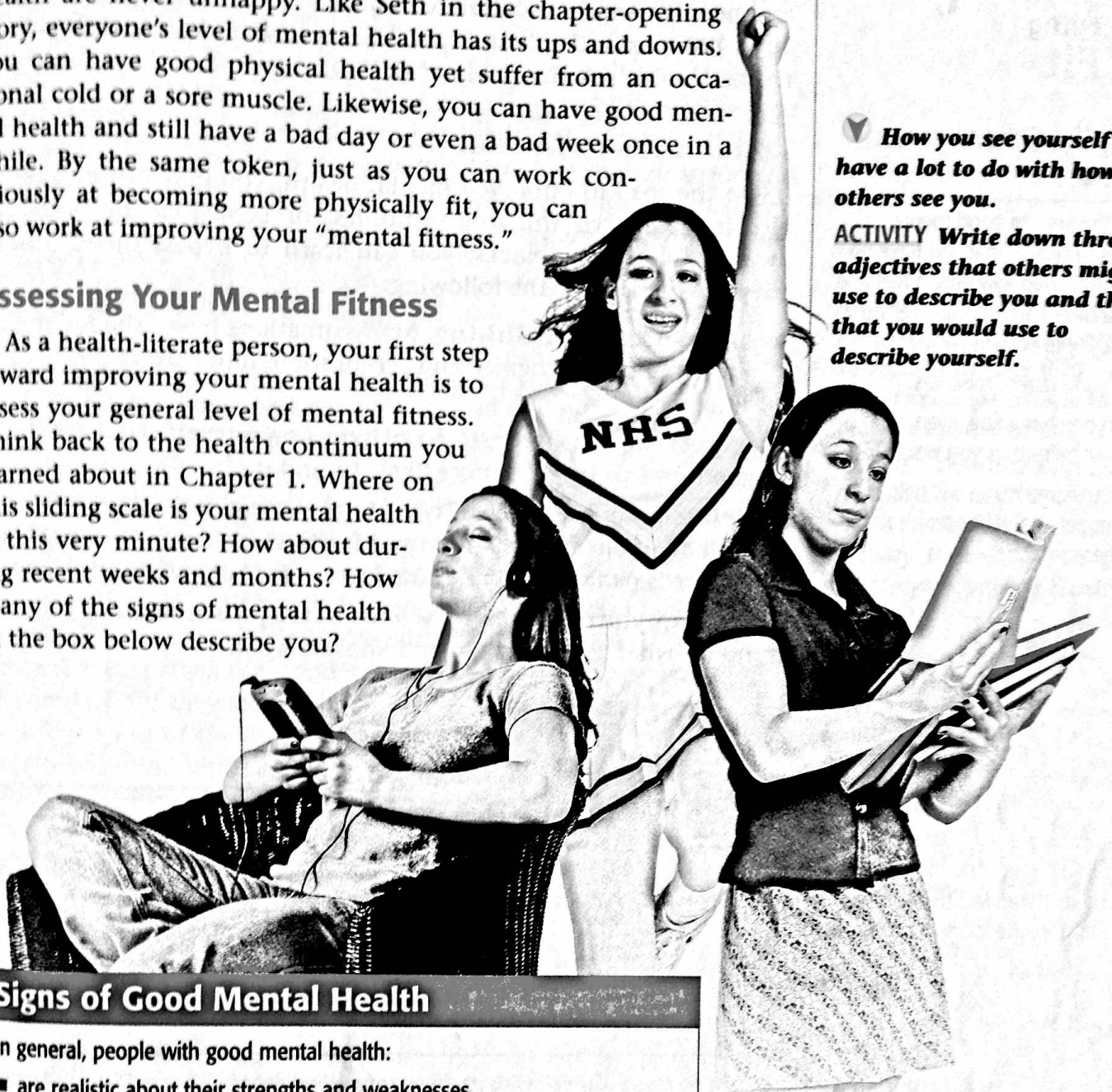
## Your Mental Health

As with physical health, mental health is much more than the absence of sickness. **Mental health** is generally having a positive outlook, being comfortable with yourself and others, and being able to meet life's challenges and demands. Being mentally healthy means being able to cope, adapt, and thrive on many levels. Someone who is mentally healthy can usually handle a wide variety of feelings and situations. He or she will usually make wise and safe choices that demonstrate both strong values and responsible behavior.

This is not to say that people with a high degree of mental health are never unhappy. Like Seth in the chapter-opening story, everyone's level of mental health has its ups and downs. You can have good physical health yet suffer from an occasional cold or a sore muscle. Likewise, you can have good mental health and still have a bad day or even a bad week once in a while. By the same token, just as you can work consciously at becoming more physically fit, you can also work at improving your "mental fitness."

## Assessing Your Mental Fitness

As a health-literate person, your first step toward improving your mental health is to assess your general level of mental fitness. Think back to the health continuum you learned about in Chapter 1. Where on this sliding scale is your mental health at this very minute? How about during recent weeks and months? How many of the signs of mental health in the box below describe you?



▼ *How you see yourself may have a lot to do with how others see you.*

**ACTIVITY** *Write down three adjectives that others might use to describe you and three that you would use to describe yourself.*

### Signs of Good Mental Health

In general, people with good mental health:

- are realistic about their strengths and weaknesses.
- are responsible for their personal behavior.
- avoid high-risk behaviors, such as using tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs.
- are open-minded and flexible.
- are fun-loving and able to relax alone or with others.
- respect both their own and others' needs.
- respect everyone's value as a human being—including their own.
- express their emotions in ways that do not hurt themselves or others.
- invest time and energy into nourishing relationships.
- put their talents and abilities to good use.
- view change as a challenge and an opportunity.



## Giving the Other Person a Break

One of the keys to good mental health is to realize that you have no real control over how others feel and act; you have control only over how you act. Try to remember that

- everyone makes mistakes.
- everyone has value, even if they do not behave as you would like.
- having compassion will help the other person feel better about his or her mistake.

Can you find patterns in the ways you react to different situations and people? Are there certain conditions under which you feel more alive, positive, and able to cope? The more you identify such factors, the better able you may be to control them.

## Roadblocks to Mental Health

On the road to improved mental health, you may run into obstacles in your own thinking, attitudes, or behaviors. By becoming aware of these roadblocks, you can learn to bypass them. Among these roadblocks are the following:

- **All-or-nothing thinking.** Many situations have “shades of gray.” Learn to recognize and accept these subtle degrees of difference.
- **Expecting the “worst” in others or yourself.** Look for the good, and you will be more likely to find it.
- **Being a perfectionist.** Trying to be perfect or thinking you can do it all often leads to failure and frustration. Remind yourself that no one is perfect. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- **Letting your actions or words betray your values.** Stand up for what you believe in and know is right.

## Building Health Skills

### Promoting a Positive Self-Image

IT IS NEVER too late to begin improving your self-esteem and, in turn, your mental health. Try the following suggestions:

1. **List your assets or strengths.** Include your mental, emotional, and physical strengths. Read this list every day for a week.
2. **Surround yourself with positive, supportive people.** Choose friends who support you, believe in you, and respect your individual rights and needs.
3. **Find something that you love to do, and do it frequently.** If you're always too busy to do the things you enjoy, you're not fully taking care of yourself. Make time for your favorite activities and pastimes.
4. **Stop making life a contest.** Recognize that there will always be people more and less able than you in all areas of life. Be content with doing the best you can in all areas that really matter to you.
5. **Help someone else.** One way to feel good about yourself is to see the positive effects of your own words or actions on someone else's life.



# Self-Esteem and Your Mental Health

**S**elf-esteem—the confidence and worth that you feel about yourself—is directly related to your general level of wellness. How you feel mentally and physically and how you take care of yourself—your health habits—are all affected by what you think of yourself. Teens with high self-esteem are better able to take failure in their stride and move forward. They often tend to have specific long-term goals and aspirations for their future. Having high self-esteem promotes good mental health.

## The Role of Positive and Negative Feedback

How is self-esteem formed? Over the years you have received feedback—messages from others that indicate who they think you are or what they think you are like. You have received positive or negative feedback from many sources—from your parents or guardians, other adults who first took care of you, as well as from your siblings, your extended family, teachers, coaches, friends, and your peers.

From the moment you were born, you began to receive, process, and store these messages, which came mostly from your family. Some messages were nonverbal. People hugged you, patted you, and smiled at you. Perhaps they frowned at or ignored you. All of these actions made deep and lasting impressions on you. These first caregivers gave you verbal messages, too, like “Oh, what a cute baby!” or “Bad boy!” With all of these verbal and nonverbal messages that you received, you began to develop your self-esteem.

By the time you reached school age, other factors started to play a role in how you viewed yourself. Now, in addition to your family, your feelings were influenced by how friends, neighbors, and teachers reacted to you. During the teen years, feedback from peers takes on a new and greater importance. Messages from the media about what you as a teenager *should* be like have also directly or indirectly begun to shape and influence your self-image.

So what does self-esteem have to do with overall mental health? A person who has received mostly positive feedback will generally have high

▼ **Participating in community projects and volunteering your skills and talents can contribute to positive mental health.**

**ACTIVITY** *Over the next month, learn a new skill or try a new and healthful recreational activity. Record your progress in your private Health Journal.*



self-esteem. Someone who has received lots of negative feedback may be more likely to have low self-esteem and fragile mental health. This person may also misinterpret the feedback she or he gets from others, and may assume messages are negative even when they are not.

## Self-Talk

Feedback comes not just from others but also from yourself. Are you too hard on yourself when you do something wrong or make a mistake? Do you go overboard in focusing on your own limitations or weaknesses? *Negative self-talk*—hurtful or non-constructive messages that you send yourself—can erode your self-esteem as much and sometimes even more than negative feedback from others. Positive feedback on the other hand, can do just the opposite. If someone continually tells you you can do whatever you set out to do, you may start to believe that person—and in yourself.

Listen to the messages you send yourself, and replace any negative self-talk with **constructive criticism**. When you make a mistake, accept it as part of being human and try to learn and grow from the experience. This is one way of reducing the chances of making the same mistake in the future. Get into the habit, moreover, of giving yourself a verbal pat on the back from time to time. Tell yourself “Good job” or “Way to go” when you’ve done something deserving of praise. Your self-esteem and mental health will benefit.