**Improving mental health**



Your teacher has given you some pictures.

They show people doing things that are good for their mental health, and some things that make their mental health worse.

**To talk about in your group**

1. Do you agree with each picture of a healthy activity?
2. Do you agree with each picture of an unhealthy activity?
3. Can you think of any more healthy activities?
4. Can you think of any more unhealthy activities?

**To work on in your group**

Write a short story called “Ali’s healthy day”.

Include in your story:

* things Ali does that are good for mental health
* things Ali avoids doing because they are bad for mental health.

*Biology > Big idea BHD: Health and disease > Topic BHD1: What are health and disease? > Key concept BHD1.1: Good and ill health*

|  |
| --- |
| **Response activity** |
| **Improving mental health** |

**Overview**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Learning focus: | The physical health and the mental health of an organism can range from good to ill, and are affected by numerous factors. |
| Observable learning outcome: | Identify factors associated with good and ill physical health in humans, other animals, and plants. |
| Activity type: | Discussion |
| Key words: | Health, disease |

This activity can help to give students the opportunity to explore their thinking about mental health and encourages social construction of new ideas (meaning making) through dialogue. It is intended to be used in response to the following diagnostic question:

* Diagnostic question: Healthy mind

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **P** | **PRIOR UNDERSTANDING**  This activity explores ideas that are usually taught at age 5-11, to aid transition from earlier stages of learning. |

**What does the research say?**

When children aged 5-9 in Australia (Brindal et al., 2012), 9-11 in the US (Reeve and Bell, 2009) and 14-15 in Turkey (Çetin et al., 2013) were asked to draw and write about healthy and unhealthy things, most of the students’ answers related to food and drink (over 60% in the US study) and physical activity. Ideas about social health and wellbeing were rarely seen. A separate study found that some adolescent children also referred to fresh air in relation to healthiness (O’Higgins, Sixsmith and Gabhainn, 2010).

Emotional or mental health was not commonly depicted or described by the children up to age 11 (appearing in less than 4% of answers in the US study), although depictions of healthy activities usually included people who were smiling – possibly to indicate happiness because they were doing the “right thing”. In the Australian study, one girl depicted herself reading and explained that it was healthy because it was “exercising the brain”, while another student referred to relaxing and being calm. Emotional and mental health featured more commonly in answers from the Turkish children aged 14-15.

Asking children to draw, discuss and write is an established technique for probing their understanding of health and disease, which has been said to enhance participation by children (Wetton and McWhirter, 1998; Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999; Harrison, 2002).

**Ways to use this activity**

Students should complete this activity in pairs or small groups.

In part 1, each pair or group looks at drawings of people engaging in activities that are good for their mental health, and activities that make their mental health worse; these drawings may be those produced by students in the diagnostic activity ‘Healthy mind’ (in which case you may wish to swap drawings between groups so that students are not looking at their own drawings, to reduce sensitivities), or they could be sourced from elsewhere.

In part 2, each pair or group writes a story (or a series of bullet points) to describe things that an imaginary person does during a ‘healthy day’ that help to improve their mental health, and things that the person avoids doing.

There is evidence that the gender of the character in a ‘storying’ activity may influence the perception of appropriate health behaviours (Mooney and Lorenz, 1997). The gender neutral name Ali is used in the student activity but could be changed if desired.

The focus throughout the activity should be on group discussion to answer the questions about the drawings and to decide what to include in the story of the ‘healthy day’. It is through the discussions that students can check their understanding and develop their explanations. Listening in to the conversations of each group will often give you insights into how your students are thinking.

The quality of the discussions can be improved with careful selection of groups, or by allocating specific roles to students in a group. For example, you may choose to select a student with strong prior knowledge as a scribe, and forbid them from contributing any of their own answers. They may question the others and only write down what they have been told. This strategy encourages contributions from more members of each group.

After their discussions, each group should be prepared to report the key points of their discussions to another group, or to the class.

**Equipment**

For each pair/group:

* drawings of people engaging in activities that are good for their mental health, and activities that make their mental health worse (either produced by the students in the diagnostic activity ‘Healthy mind’, or sourced from elsewhere)
* paper (if not writing on the student worksheet)

**Expected answers**

The stories of the ‘healthy day’ are likely to contain a range of activities, but activities that can help to promote good mental health include socialising with friends, talking about feelings, getting appropriate amounts of rest, spending time outdoors in the fresh air, and activities that also promote good physical health such as physical exercise and eating well (Mental Health Foundation, 2019). Lethargic activities, too much screen time, and eating junk food were mentioned by students as unhealthy activities in the study by Brindal et al. (2012).

Brindal notes that physical health may become a less valued constituent of self-image as children get older, perhaps due to influences such as peer pressure. Students who suggest that activities associated with physical ill health (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol, and eating junk food) are good for their mental health may feel that there are benefits to “fitting in”. Engaging in discussion and asking them to explain their answers will give useful insights into their thinking.

Students with deeper understanding of the relationship between behaviours and good mental health may indicate *how much* of each activity is appropriate, and may go so far as to explain that while an activity done in moderation can be good for mental health, too much or too little of the same activity may lead to mental ill health.

**Acknowledgments**

Developed by Alistair Moore (UYSEG), from techniques described by Wetton and McWhirter (1998), Harrison (2002), Reeve and Bell (2009), and Brindal et al. (2012).

Images: adapted by UYSEG from pixabay.com/Prawny (1099709)

**References**

Backett-Milburn, K. and McKie, L. (1999). A critical appraisal of the draw and write technique. *Health Education Research,* 14(3)**,** 387-398.

Brindal, E., et al. (2012). How do Australian junior primary school children perceive the concepts of "healthy" and "unhealthy"? *Health Education,* 112(5)**,** 406-420.

Çetin, G., et al. (2013). Students' views about health concept by drawing and writing technique. *Energy Education Science and Technology Part B: Social and Educational Studies,* 5(1).

Harrison, B. (2002). Seeing health and illness worlds – using visual methodologies in a sociology of health and illness: a methodological review. *Sociology of Health Illness,* 24(6)**,** 856-872.

Mental Health Foundation. (2019). *RE: Biology curriculum content [Personal communication].*

Mooney, K. M. and Lorenz, E. (1997). The effects of food and gender on interpersonal perceptions. *Sex Roles,* 36(9/10)**,** 639-653.

O’Higgins, S., Sixsmith, J. and Gabhainn, S. N. (2010). Adolescents’ perceptions of the words ‘health’ and ‘happy’. *Health Education,* 110(5)**,** 367-381.

Reeve, S. and Bell, P. (2009). Children's self-documentation and understanding of the concepts 'healthy' and 'unhealthy'. *International Journal of Science Education,* 31(14)**,** 1953-1974.

Wetton, N. M. and McWhirter, J. (1998). *Images and Curriculum Development in Health Education,* London, UK: Falmer Press.