**What is health?**

The **World Health Organization** (WHO) works to improve the health of people all over the world.

This is their explanation of what health is:

Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

**To talk about in your group**

1. In what ways is this a **good** explanation of health?
2. In what ways could this explanation of health be **improved**?
3. This is one way to explain what health is. Can you think of any other ways?

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

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| **Response activity** |
| **What is health?** |

**Overview**

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| 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: | Evaluate definitions of health. |
| Activity type: | Critiquing a representation, discussion |
| Key words: | Health, disease |

This activity can help develop students’ understanding of ways in which health can be defined. It facilitates the exploration of ideas through small group discussion of the World Health Organization’s definition of health. It can be used in response to the following diagnostic question:

* Diagnostic question: Defining health

**What does the research say?**

Definitions of health have long been debated. The World Health Organisation’s definition states that (good) health “is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2006). It has been suggested that the definition of (good) health be shifted away from the absence of disease, towards an emphasis on an individual’s ability to function and cope with physical, emotional, environmental and social challenges (Huber, Knottnerus and Green, 2011).

Children’s understanding of health, and of behaviours associated with good and ill health, changes with their age and developmental stage (Berk, 2000). The ways in which people define health shifts with age; while children and younger people tend to define health in terms of vitality and physical strength, older people relate health to physical functions and ability to cope with everyday life.

Ill health (or “illness”) can be defined as deviation from the ‘normal’ appearance, functions and behaviour of an organism that impede it from striving towards its functional objectives and culturally desired goals, although defining ‘normal’ and what constitutes a deviation from it even for an individual organism is not necessarily straightforward (Boruchovitch and Mednick, 2002).

The misunderstanding that health only relates to physical health, and in particular physical *fitness*, is common. When the children aged 9-11 in the US were asked to define health, their answers mostly referred to disease (causes and cures), followed by weight gain and loss, and ideas about balanced diet (Reeve and Bell, 2009). A study in Shanghai (Wang et al., 2014) found that when children aged 15-20 were asked to define health, their definitions commonly included the idea that only when people are healthy can they do everything they want and need to do. A study of teachers from a large number of schools in Italy found that they most commonly defined health as the absence of disease, followed by ideas about psycho-physical efficiency, balance, and absence of stress (Miglioretti et al., 2013).

**Ways to use this activity**

Students should complete this activity in pairs or small groups, and the focus should be on discussion to explore ideas and decide how to answer the questions on the worksheet or the PowerPoint presentation. Giving each group one worksheet to complete between them is helpful for encouraging discussion, but each member should be able to report back to the class. Listening in to the conversations of each group will often give you insights into how your students are thinking.

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

*Differentiation*

You may choose to read the WHO definition and questions to the class, so that everyone can focus on the science. In some situations it may be more appropriate for a teaching assistant to read for one or two students.

The quality of the discussions can be improved with a careful selection of groups; or by allocating specific roles to students in each 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.

**Expected answers**

Students might see it as a positive that the WHO definition of health goes beyond physical health and the absence of disease, i.e. that it includes aspects of mental and social well-being. However, they may criticise it for being unobtainable because of its definition of health as *complete* physical, mental and social well-being, and they may suggest that nobody in the world is healthy by that definition. They may also recognise that it is a definition of *good* health; it does not imply that health can range from good to ill.

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