



Photo: Colourbox. Distinguishing mental health and mental illness also creates room for career development practitioners to include mental health awareness more fully in their practice without leaving the boundaries of their competence or role.

Connecting Career Development and Mental Health

Career development practitioners regularly witness positive mental health outcomes emerging from their practice. Clients leave with hope, optimism and a spring in their step. And yet the public do not see the connection between career development and mental health. What can practitioners do to help the public see the connection?

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Policymakers and funders typically do not see nor value career development as a mental health intervention. For example, career development interventions are not found in the description of the

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3, 'Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages,' and we think they should be.

The increasing international attention on mental health, accompanied by significant funding and public awareness campaigns in many settings, does not include career development. In fact, we have heard stories of administrators thinking about *reducing* career services specifically to re-allocate resources to mental health initiatives.

Career development practitioners, researchers, and theorists need to explicitly articulate to stakeholders what career development can contribute to mental health. To help with this articulation, we present here (a) a framework of career development and mental health relationships that may help us better understand and communicate career development's impact on mental health and (b) a three-pronged model of helping individuals with stress control that applies across all career development interventions. We see these models as aids to competence area 7 (Development, networking and policymaking) and overall quality assurance within the *National Quality Framework for Career Guidance*. With regards to quality assurance, 'individual and societal outcomes' clearly should include the mental health and well-being of Norway's citizens. Career guidance cannot avoid influencing mental health, yet career-related service organizations typically do not measure mental health outcomes. Quality assurance systems should explicitly address this issue and promote the assessment of the mental health outcomes of career guidance.

Differentiating Mental Health and Mental Illness

Terminology matters in this discussion. We adopt the model of well-being developed by Corey Keyes in which mental illness and mental health are distinct, but related (see Figure 1). This distinction recognizes it is possible to have many symptoms of a mental illness and positive mental health simultaneously, or poor mental health with no mental illness. Distinguishing mental health and mental illness also creates room for career development practitioners to include mental health awareness more fully in their practice without leaving the boundaries of their competence or role. Evidence suggests that neither career development nor work do much to affect *mental illness*, but that both can strongly contribute to *mental health* (Redekopp & Huston, 2018, 2020). To make the case for the value of career development, the audience, whether client or stakeholder, needs to hear 'mental health' and not 'mental illness.'

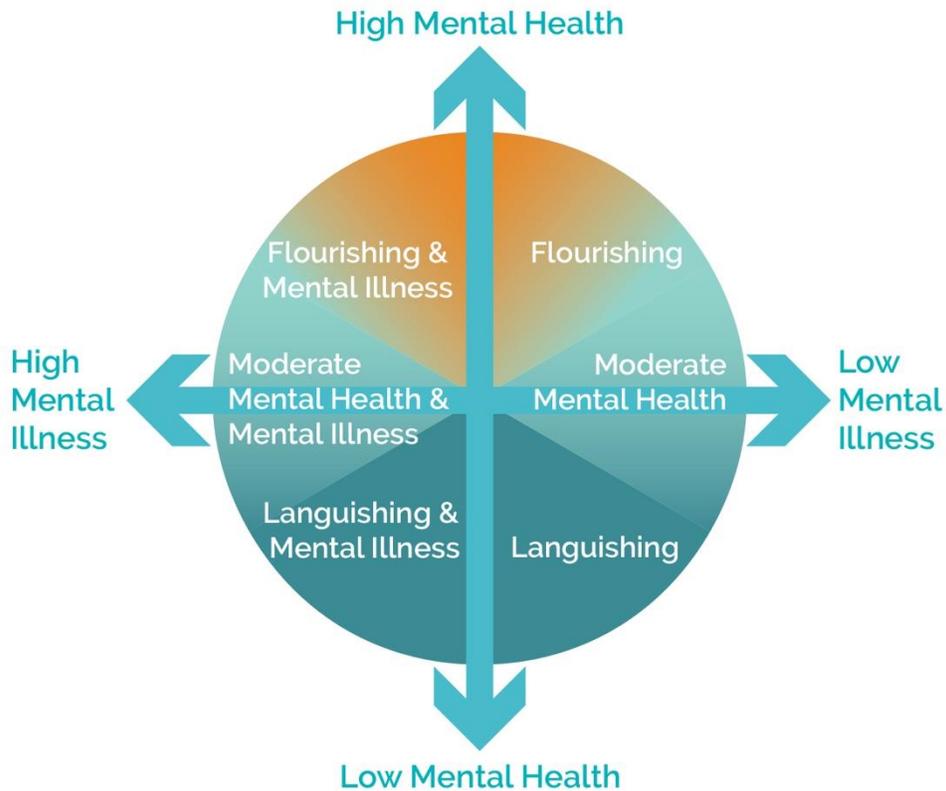


Figure 1. Keyes' Dual Continua Model of Mental Health. Adapted from Keyes (2014), p. 182.

Career development involves much more than finding work. Career development practitioners understand this, but the public often conflate 'career development' with 'finding work'. Practitioners should bear this in mind when communicating the impact of career development, in its broadest sense, on positive mental health.

Career Development Effects & Mental Health

The model described below categorizes the outcomes of career development into five sets of effects, each having a link to mental health outcomes (see Figure 2). Each set of effects interact with the others, but the sequence below acknowledges that each set of effects builds on the preceding ones.



Figure 2. Career Development Effects Model. From Redekopp & Huston (2020, p. 61).

Life Effects

Life effects are outcomes that directly change a person’s life circumstances, such as obtaining work, gaining an income, social status/identity, and pattern or routine. These are the effects for which someone typically seeks career development services, and there is good evidence that each effect contributes to mental health. Particularly strong is the evidence that work is generally better for mental health than unemployment.

Ability Effects

The career development field continues to move from a ‘help with decision-making’ approach to a ‘learn the skills of career management’ strategy. Regardless of other outcomes, most career development service providers can now claim that clients have acquired competencies that will serve them well in the future. ‘Coping’ is a key component of mental health.

Self-Perception Effects

Clients see themselves differently after being involved in career development processes, particularly if they have acquired career management competencies and obtained work or meaningful training or

education. Self-efficacy, self-esteem, identity, hope, and purpose are outcomes that have direct links to mental health.

Opportunity-Perception Effects

The work of career development practitioners results in clients seeing the world differently. These perception changes include increased tolerance for uncertainty, cognitive bandwidth, and optimism. Individuals see more opportunity when they have developed abilities, and clarified perceptions of themselves and their aspirations. These perception changes contribute to mental health, but the evidence is less direct than with the previous effects.

Opportunity Effects

Perceptions of people change when they act differently. The now confident, outward-focussed, self-managed individual who has engaged in their own career development is perceived - by educators and employers - in a different way after a career intervention. This can result in enhanced work, learning, and relationship opportunities. The evidence for these increases is indirect. Anecdotally, however, we all have seen employers, educators and other influencers take an interest in a person when the person has shown enthusiasm.

It may be that these opportunities do not directly enhance mental health, but lead to the possibility of better employment, more pay, and higher status. If this is a virtuous circle, the opportunity effects lead to new life effects, which in turn create new ability effects, self-perception effects, opportunity-perception effects, and opportunity effects.

Career Development as a Stress Intervention

Career development functions to both prevent and ameliorate stress. Physical health concerns associated with stress are well-understood (e.g. hypertension, heart disease, stomach issues, back pain). Stress can be a factor in the development and trajectory of common mental illness conditions (depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders). Stress is a necessary and unavoidable part of both managing difficult challenges and working towards meaningful life.

Stress is a composite reaction (physiological, cognitive, and behavioural) to the perception of a threat. The reaction is popularly known as a 'fight or flight response' wherein the body is readied for a physical response to a physical threat. Humans respond the same way to modern day non-physical demands. If a demand is important and an individual perceives an inability to cope with it, then a stress response ensues. This involves physiological arousal, excessive worry, diminished appraisal of ability, and avoidance or procrastination. A transactional perspective suggests an approach that asks clients to 1) reduce demands if possible, 2) learn coping skills for managing demands, and 3) learn to change the stress reaction, for example through relaxation or positive thinking (Hiebert, 1988). Career-related concerns are among the most worrisome and stressful demands individuals face.

Connecting to the National Quality framework

Career Competences: Learning Outcomes of Career Guidance

Practitioners help clients develop skills for navigating career-related demands. Practitioners often witness clients' career-related stress and anxiety. They also see immediate stress reduction as clients start to understand they will be able to cope. Perceiving one's ability to cope reduces stress, regardless of the accuracy of the perception and even before coping skills are learned. This effect is noticeable early in a career development intervention. As clients learn skills and witness themselves coping with demands, they further benefit by knowing they will cope with future challenges. This attribution is known as proactive coping or 'hope,' a key motivator and an ingredient of positive mental health.

Accordingly, learning career competencies (i.e. ability effects, as described above) is a necessary complementary treatment in any effort to support mental health. Career-related concerns are universal: supporting career-related coping leads to positive mental health outcomes in all populations. Knowing these connections also allows practitioners to help clients to be active agents in reducing demands, increasing coping abilities or managing stress. It helps them to understand that developing career-related coping skills will support mental health now and in the future.

Competence Standards for Professional Career Guidance

To become more competent, practitioners must develop their own knowledge of the factors that promote positive mental health. They need to build skills for navigating conversations with people experiencing mental health challenges, both in individual practice and in their educational role. They need to understand the boundaries of their role and skills and work with and refer to other agencies and stakeholder to ensure support. They may also need assessment skills.

What is Next?

There is much that needs to be done. Practitioners need to:

- gather evidence of the mental health outcomes to which their practices contribute,
- enhance their ability to present this evidence, with compelling stories alongside evidence to administrators, funders, policymakers, and allied professionals (educators, mental health workers, human resources specialists),
- inform the public about career development connections to mental health outcomes.

All practitioners need to communicate evidence of career guidance's impact on mental health. Only then will there be the possibility that health and well-being policies and programs, as exemplified in the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 3, include consideration of career development concerns.

Guest editor [Professor Pete Robertson](#), Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland, has processed and edited several articles on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

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