

# Health Psychology

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson will cover the study of the brain-body connection by examining:

1. Brain-Body Connection
2. Health Psychology

## 1. Brain-Body Connection

The connection between the brain and the body can be especially important to understand because each can affect the other in turn. The brain can cause bodily disorders, and the body's reactions can lead to mental disorders. Many mental disorders have underlying physical symptoms that can accompany them. These reoccurring symptoms point to important causes or effects in the mental disorder process.

A good example is what we call **stress-induced illness**, where anxiety can cause people to become sick more often and more easily. This is because stress can reduce the effectiveness of the body's immune system and reduce a person's ability to fight off illness.

An important part of living a healthy life is what we call **wellness**. Wellness is a positive state of mental and physical well-being. A person is not only disease-free, but also feels good about themselves. This idea of wellness comes from an area of psychology called **positive psychology**, which is a part of the humanist view of psychology. The humanist theory was developed by psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

This theory moves away from the more negative aspects of human thoughts and behaviors that might be apparent in other theories, like psychodynamic or behaviorist theories, and instead focuses on human strengths and virtues in light of optimal behavior.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Aspects like creativity or happiness are areas of study for positive psychology.

Focusing on these positive qualities not only improves a person's mental health, which is necessary for a good life, but also improves their physical health, because of the brain-body connection.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Stress-Induced Illness

Where anxiety can cause people to become sick more often and more easily

### Wellness

A positive state of mental and physical well-being

### Positive Psychology

An area of humanist psychology that focuses on human strengths, virtues, and optimal behavior

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## 2. Health Psychology

An area of psychology that studies the brain-body connection is called **health psychology**. This is an area that studies the relationship between behavior and health, and it uses psychological principles to promote health and prevent illness. This area focuses particularly on how behavior affects our health.

Today one of the major causes of death in the United States are **lifestyle diseases**, which are diseases or problems that relate to the way that a person lives and the choices that he or she makes.

➦ **EXAMPLE** This can include people having certain kinds of high-stress jobs, engaging in high-stress hobbies like base jumping or extreme sports, and forming unhealthy or maladaptive habits like smoking or having sexual relations with many different partners.

People that make these sorts of choices in their lives are more likely to develop diseases or injuries, and have a shorter life span as a result. Behavioral risk factors are any behaviors or actions that a person takes that increase the chance of injury, illness, or premature death.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Behavioral risk factors can include actions like taking drugs, which can be physically harmful, or eating poorly, which can lead to obesity. It also includes specific choices that a person makes, like driving dangerously or being very aggressive and getting into fights.

On the other hand, a person can adopt health-promoting behaviors, which can prolong their life and make illness or injury less likely to occur. These include behaviors like eating well, exercising, and getting out regularly. Social interactions with friends and family can actually be very healthy for an individual and reduce stress and anxiety.

Behavioral medicine is a related psychological and medical field that studies how behavior can affect the treatment of illnesses, disorders, and problems. This is the problem-solving area related to those behavioral risk factors, especially in regards to mental disorders.

The goal of both behavioral medicine and positive psychology is twofold. First, these fields of study want to prevent diseases by discouraging behavioral risk factors and by finding ways to reduce stress, anxiety, or any physical problems that can contribute to mental disorders. The second goal is to promote healthy behaviors. This means encouraging people to do things like eat well and exercise, encouraging them to be social and outgoing, and promoting activities that lead to increased happiness.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Health Psychology

Studies the relationship between behavior and health and uses psychological principles to promote health

and prevent illness

## Lifestyle Diseases

Diseases and problems related to the way a person lives and the choices he or she makes



### SUMMARY

The **brain-body connection** is the link between the mind and body, and how they affect each other. The brain can make the body sick, and conversely, the body can make the brain sick. One example is a stress-induced illness, where anxiety can cause people to become sick more often and more easily.

Wellness is an important part of living a healthy life, and is an overall feeling of well-being--an idea that comes from an area of psychology known as positive psychology. **Health psychology** is the branch of psychology that studies the relationship between behavior and health and uses psychological principles to promote health and prevent illness.

One of the major causes of death in the U.S. today are lifestyle diseases, which are diseases related to the way a person lives and the choices they make. People that make poor lifestyle choices are more likely to develop diseases or injuries, and have a shorter life span. These behavioral risk factors increase the chance of injury, illness, or premature death. The fields of positive psychology and behavioral medicine both strive to prevent diseases caused by behavioral risk factors and promote healthy behaviors.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia Author Erick Taggart.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Health Psychology

Studies the relationship between behavior and health and uses psychological principles to promote health and prevent illness.

#### Lifestyle Diseases

Diseases and problems related to the way a person lives and the choices he or she makes.

#### Positive Psychology

An area of humanist psychology that focuses on human strengths, virtues, and optimal behavior.

#### Stress-Induced Illness

Where anxiety can cause people to become sick more often and more easily.

#### Wellness

A positive state of mental and physical well-being.

