



What is mental health?

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Abstract

Mental health plays a vital role in how individuals function, connect with others, and respond to daily challenges. This report outlines what mental health is, examines the biological, psychological, and social factors that influence it, and highlights the growing impact of environmental stressors like air pollution and climate change. It also discusses how mental health is connected to our community, especially during times of environmental or social stress. Using the Salton Sea region as a lens, we explore how environmental conditions can shape mental well-being and discuss practical ways to support mental health on both individual and community levels.

What is mental health?

Mental health is just as important as physical health. It shapes how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). Good mental health helps us live full, balanced lives. In this report, we explore the basics of mental health, why it's essential, and how we can take care of it.

We'll also look at the different factors that contribute to mental health, from genetics and life experiences, to environmental conditions like air pollution and climate stress. By understanding both personal and environmental influences, we can build healthier individuals and stronger communities.

What affects our mental health?

Our mental health is influenced by a mix of biological, psychological, and social factors, a model known as the biopsychosocial approach (Verywell Mind, 2023). On the biological side: genetics, physical illnesses, or brain function set a baseline for our mental well-being. Psychologically, our thoughts, feelings, and habits play a key role. For instance, negative thought patterns or poor

stress management can lead us toward distress. Socially, factors like our culture, economic status, and the relationships around us shape how we feel and respond. For example, people with stronger social support systems tend to stay healthier emotionally (Verywell Mind, 2023). Understanding that these three systems helps individuals and professionals treat not only symptoms, but also their

root causes. That means someone might feel better not just from medication or counseling, but also by

changing stressful life situations or building stronger social networks.

When the environment affects our mental health

The environment around us doesn't just affect our lungs or skin, it also affects our minds. In communities surrounding the Salton Sea, environmental issues like poor air quality, extreme heat, water scarcity, and ecosystem collapse are more than just physical concerns. Living near the Salton Sea means living with environmental stress everyday doesn't just affect our bodies, this takes a toll on our mental health too.

Recent research shows that long-term exposure to air pollution like fine particulate matter doesn't just increase the chance of mental illness, it may actually cause it. Zhou et al., (2025) studies this using genetic data to test cause and effect, where they found that high levels of fine particulate matter exposure were linked to higher risks of

anxiety, depression, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders. This matters in communities like those in Salton Sea, where dust storms are more frequent and residents are already managing health and economic burdens.

But nature can also be part of the solution. Bratman et al. (2019) shows how spending time in green spaces or natural settings can reduce stress, improve mood, and even help protect against anxiety and depression. Nature exposure may work by calming the body's stress systems and help people recover from mental fatigue. In the Salton Sea region, efforts to restore shorelines, plant greenery, and create public outdoor spaces can strengthen emotional resilience and improve environmental quality in the community.

References

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