

Mental health – more than a brain

What is the aim of this position paper?

- To establish the position of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub (RCRC Movement MHPSS Hub) on the scope of mental health.
- To clarify and qualify key-terminology used in relation to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

Who is this Position Paper for?

- RCRC staff and volunteers providing MHPSS.
 - RCRC staff and volunteers doing policy, advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy work on MHPSS.
- External actors engaging in MHPSS: research, discourse, funding, provision.

How to use this Position Paper?

- RCRC staff and volunteers can benchmark their MHPSS work against best Movement practises.
- RCRC staff and volunteers can align advocacy messaging with official RCRC positions.
- External actors can inform and qualify their MHPSS engagement.

Why is the content of this Position Paper relevant?

- Language matters: what terms we use, and how we apply them, has an impact on what needs are prioritised, and how they are addressed.
- A qualified, respectful and precise terminology is essential to deliver MHPSS activities without doing harm.
- Consciousness of how trends in language can affect our work is vital to prevent erosion of protection standards.

Clarifying terms

Brain health is defined as the state of **brain functioning** across cognitive, sensory, social-emotional, behavioural and motor domains, allowing a person to realize their full potential over the life course, irrespective of the presence or absence of disorders (WHO, 2022).

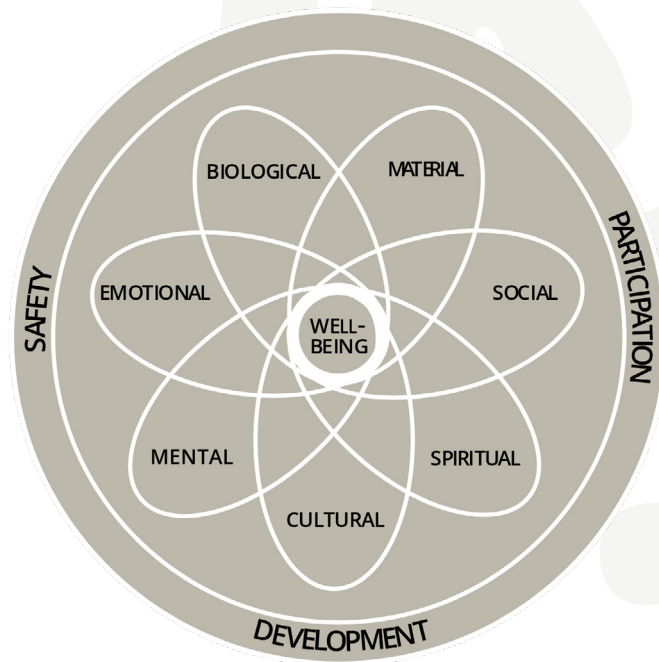
Mental health is a state of **mental well-being** that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. It is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development (WHO, 2022).

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Brain health is an important element of mental health
But mental health is much more than brain health

In addition, the composite term mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is used in emergency settings to describe any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental health conditions (IASC, 2007).



*Williamson, J. & Robinson, M.,
Psychosocial interventions or
Integrated programming for well-
being?, Intervention, (2006).*

Multisectoral and holistic approach

MHPSS is by definition a **multisectoral** area of work that must be anchored in and integrated across an entire organization. The RCRC MHPSS Framework prioritises this multisectoral integration as a critical step to reach more people, ensure access to all levels of care, and to reduce stigma, discrimination and exclusion. MHPSS services should be an integrated part of all health programmes and ideally disaster management, migration, protection, social work and education activities conducted by National Societies.

A biological condition of **brain health** might be mainly addressed through **health activities**. However, other sectors or departments such as social services also play a role in prevention activities and follow up support. The **multisectoral** approach applies not just to **addressing** conditions but also in **preventing** conditions and **promoting** brain health → this may be where other sectors, especially community-based approaches and psychosocial activities play a strong role.

[Get more information and resources on integration of MHPSS across sectors in the RCRC Movement](#)

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Brain and **mental health** related conditions are individual by nature and yet we rely on collective efforts and engage in shared experiences in our response:

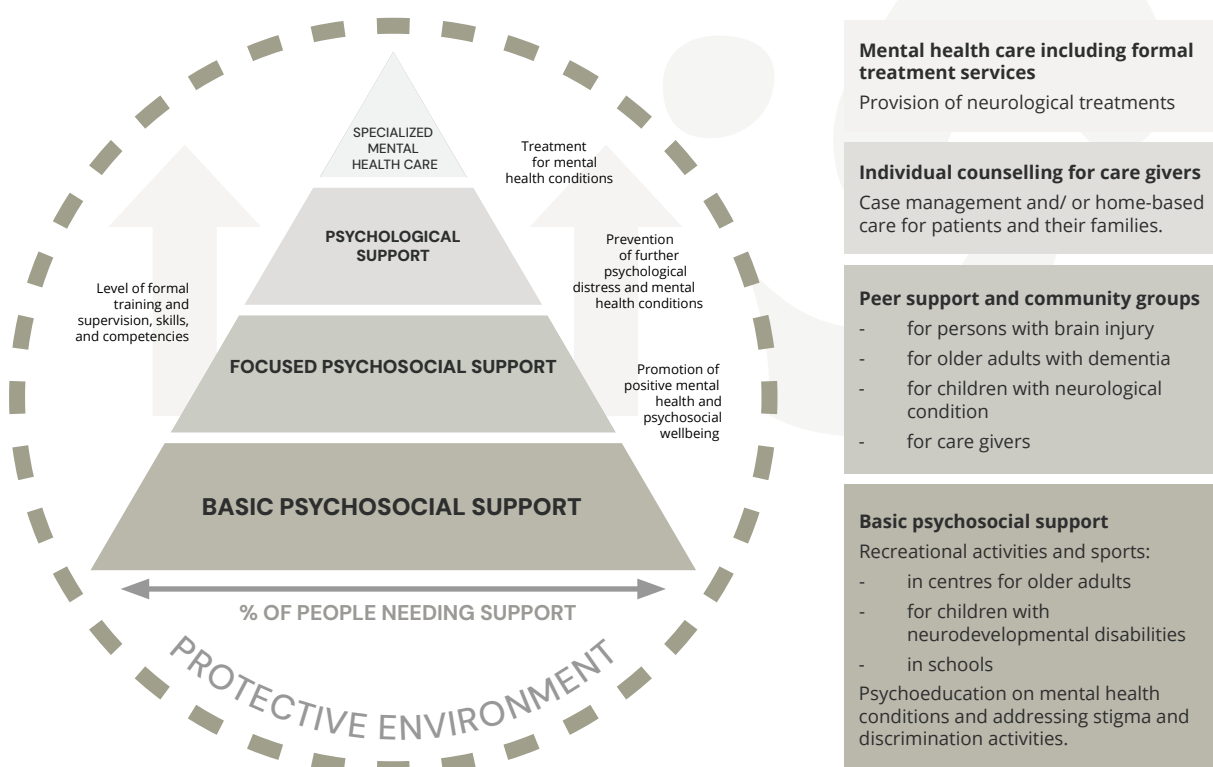
Volunteers delivering psychological and psychosocial support activities are an essential component in addressing specialized needs.

Supporting the social, spiritual and cultural aspect of well-being are fundamental **promotion** and **prevention** approaches for brain health and mental health conditions alike.

Examples of conditions

Neurological and neurodevelopmental Conditions	Mental health conditions
Neurological conditions	Depression
Epilepsy	Anxiety
Dementias	Schizophrenia
Brain injury	Bipolar disorder

Examples of activities provided by RCRC Movement Staff and Volunteers for persons with mental, neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions



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Why it is important to continue to use the broader concept of mental health and wellbeing:

- Overuse of the term brain health when referring to broader mental health and wellbeing concepts risks:
 - reducing our scope to the physiological aspects of mental health.
 - ignoring psychosocial, cultural and spiritual aspects of recovery and wellbeing.
 - an exclusive focus on bio-medical solutions such as the provision of medication, which is not always the right approach, and should be proscribed alongside the provision of psychosocial support.
- In addition, the trend of overemphasising the term “brain health” is generating a narrative of a “fixed illness” that can only be addressed with medication, risking:
 - jeopardizing the general gains in terms of mental health awareness and the destigmatising that comes with it.
 - ignoring the continuum of mental health that is dynamic and changes in time.
 - equating the natural human experience and diversity to illnesses and disorders.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff working on MHPSS should always use the broader and most encompassing term Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing to refer to any content related to mental health, brain health and psychosocial wellbeing, to

- reflect the ever changing and evolving nature of mental health and wellbeing
- empower individuals to know how much can be done at different levels to improve mental health and wellbeing
- recognise the indivisible nature of all the elements that constitute a person’s wellbeing
- acknowledge the key role of multiple sectors and actors in securing persons’ mental health and wellbeing (individuals, communities, educators, social workers, health professionals, among others)
- align with the WHO guidance on brain health and mental health.

References

RCRC Movement, 2021. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement’s Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Framework. <https://mhpsshub.org/resource/the-international-red-cross-and-red-crescent-movements-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-framework/>

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