

"Unattainable love island style bodies"

Understanding what health means to young people with a learning disability

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Health Inequality

People with a learning disability have worse physical and mental health compared to people without a learning disability.

Average age of death for different levels of impairment



Source: Heslop, P., Blair, P., Fleming, P., Hoghton, M., Marriott, A., & Russ, L. (2013) Confidential Inquiry into premature deaths of people with learning disabilities (CIPOLD): Final Report. Norah Fry Research Centre

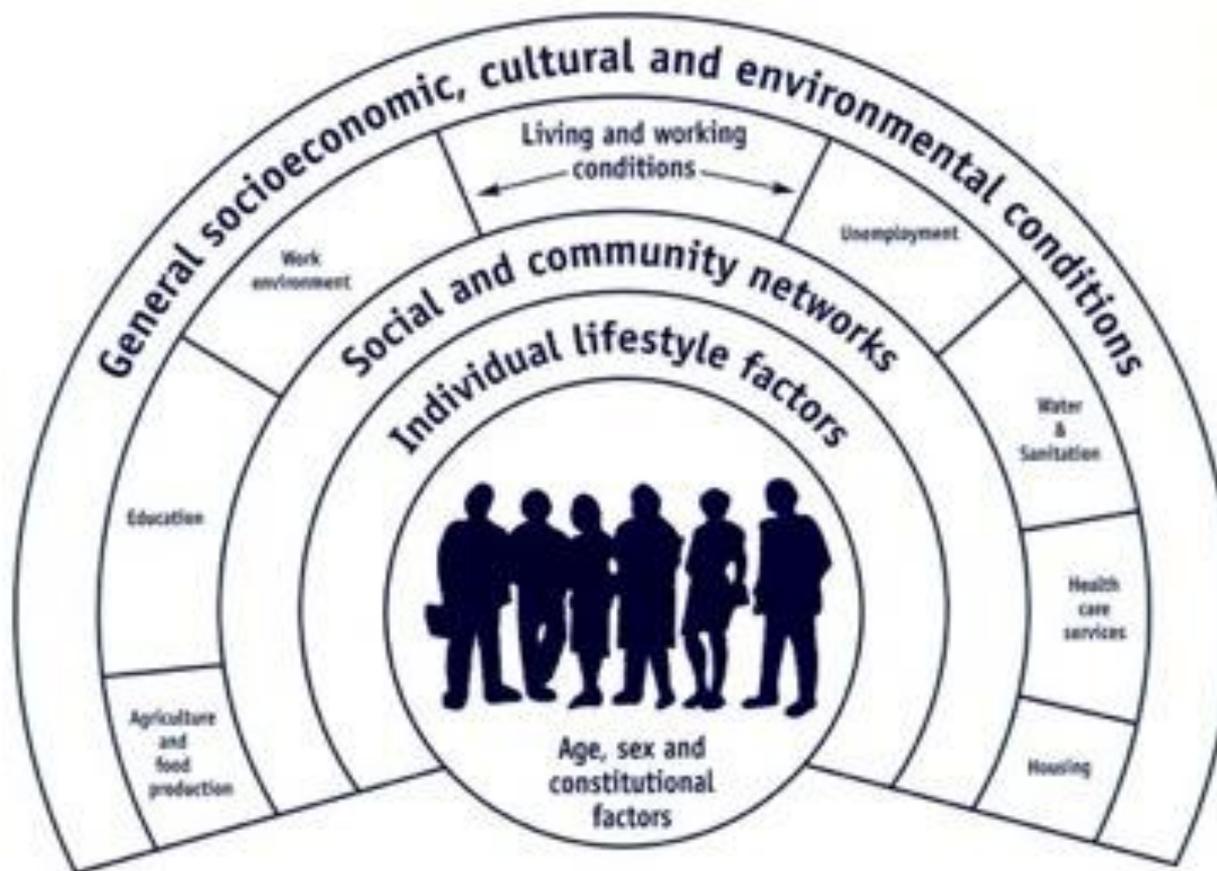


The importance of socio-economic factors

- ▶ Socio-economic factors can contribute to the ‘primary barriers’ preventing people with learning disabilities from being able to live a healthy lifestyle.
- ▶ Controlling for socio-economic factors and opportunities for social participation in the community, significantly reduces the difference in health outcomes and risk factors between people with learning disabilities and the general population.
- ▶ People with learning disabilities face an increased likelihood of stigmatisation, discrimination and poor mental health.

Ref: Heslop et al. 2013; Tuffrey-Wijnes, Giatras, Goulding, Abraham, Fenwick, 2013; Allerton and Emerson 2012; Messent, Cooke & Long 1999; Hatton, 2016.

Determinants of health



The Main Determinants of Health (Adapted from Dahlgren & Whitehead, 1991) □

This research aimed to explore...

How young people with learning disabilities conceptualise health

And

How this conceptualisation of health relates to their health behaviours

Approach

▶ **Data collection:**

- ▶ Interviews with 15 young people who have learning disabilities
- ▶ 2 focus groups
- ▶ Use of prompts, vignettes, images, videos to allow for multiple avenues of communication

▶ **Data analysis strategy**

- ▶ Thematic analysis (deductive and inductive)

What does health mean?

Health as a practice, something you do

- ▶ **Health as something you eat** – participants listed multiple healthy and unhealthy food types.
- ▶ **Health as something you do** – participants talked about exercise, but they were less specific about what this entailed.
- ▶ **Health as the way you look** – participants described healthy people as ‘skinny’ and ‘muscular’ and like “*unattainable Love Island style bodies*”.
- ▶ **Mental health** - most participants didn't initially think about mental health, and they found it hard to articulate what it is. Descriptions of mental health focused on autonomy and 'freedom'.

‘Someone who observes the eat well plate. That’s what a healthy person is.’ - **Tom**

"*six pack, muscles [pause], and speed.*" - **James**

"*I’m healthy because I look healthy and i’m good looking*" - **Daniel**

"*Mental health is about being free, being able to do what you want and feel happy*" – **James**

Health Behaviours

Understanding what a healthy behaviour looks like doesn't necessarily lead to healthy behaviours

"The other day I went to the shop at college got 2 bags of crisps and 4 chocolate bars for lunch, yeah, it's really bad." - **Jade**

"[I drink] energy drinks normally. Like sonic exotic." - **Sarah**

"...my mum normally makes chicken, like some wings with, I don't know, it's not really... because it's home cooked it doesn't have a lot of fat so it makes it different. But, if I eat outside, yeah it has a lot of fat."
- **Zahara**

Barriers to healthiness

Barriers to health



- Stress
- Money
- Social / peer pressure
- Fun / enjoyment

“People drink because it makes them forget everything, and makes them have fun.” - *Daniel*

“Price mainly. The cheaper one is always going to be unhealthy and the most expensive one is always going to be healthy. My families on a budget.” – *Tom*

“It all started because my nan passed about 5 years ago. Uh it was stressful then.” – *Daniel*

“I live in a hostel yeah, and a lot of people drink and smoke weed and stuff” – *Abioye*

Resistance

Some participants 'resisted' healthiness, they tended to participate in multiple, and acknowledged unhealthy behaviours.

“Sugary stuff is very healthy [laughs]” – *Daniel*

“Cigarette is bad for you! [laughs] no, cigarettes are a good thing for you.” – *Jake*

Are health behaviours aligned with general attitudes towards institutions, rules and norms?

Facilitators of healthiness

Facilitator to health



- Self-determination/ control
- Social/ Family influence
- Enjoyment

“I want to look fit. I want to feel good about myself, and I do it for me. Yeah, that’s it.” - *Zahara*

“Exercise makes me happy. I might wake up feeling a bit low, and then I exercise and work out an I feel refreshed.” - *Mohammed*

“I don’t drink sugary drinks, it messes with your brain. I haven’t experienced it, but I know from talking to teachers at school, and health professionals who does a lot of PE.” - *Tom*

Exploring differences in behaviour

Internalised

Reaction



Exercise is empowering,
and helps the young
person feel in control.

Experienced stress
and conflict.

Change in health
behaviour coincides with
change in life.

Supportive of
'healthiness', but do not
always participate in it.

Choose food based on
enjoyment, taste,
availability.

Present bias

React against ideals of
'healthiness'

Moments of stress
encourages 'acting-out'
and some unhealthy
behaviours.

Attitudes to health align
with attitudes to life more
generally.

Emerging learnings

- **Messages** - Clear, simple messages are easily understood and remembered. This supports awareness, but it doesn't necessarily lead to action.
- **Messenger** - images of 'healthiness' are aligned with public health messages, but they are also aligned with images of health branded by popular culture, this can create a sense of healthiness becoming 'unattainable'.
- **Behaviours** - Health behaviours may be associated with other social behaviours, and the best way to address them may be to better understand the source of 'reaction'.
- **Coping mechanisms** – food, smoking and drinking are sometimes used as coping mechanisms. At the same time, sport can be a positive mechanism, and it can help people feel in control.

