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# Combating mental illness and promoting learning through inclusion

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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# Health

- Can be defined in many different ways
- The World Health Organization (WHO) definition is one of the most widely used.
- According to the WHO, health is  
"a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity"

# What is a *learning* environment?

The learning environment is important for students' learning and development of knowledge.

A learning environment can be described as a combination of:

1. The physical and/or virtual space.
2. Teachers' skills and development.
3. The organisation of support structures for teachers and students.

# Research on students' mental health

- Many young people feel mentally unwell.
- The situation is worse than previously (20 years back).
- This is particularly true of higher education students.
- Students in higher education experience more stress, lower mental well-being and more anxiety than their contemporaries in the workplace.

# Consequences of mental illness

Poor mental health

Poorer learning or study results

The student becomes a 'worse' course mate  
Impacts on the learning environment of other students

Increased risk of non-completion

The student will be less well prepared for their future working life

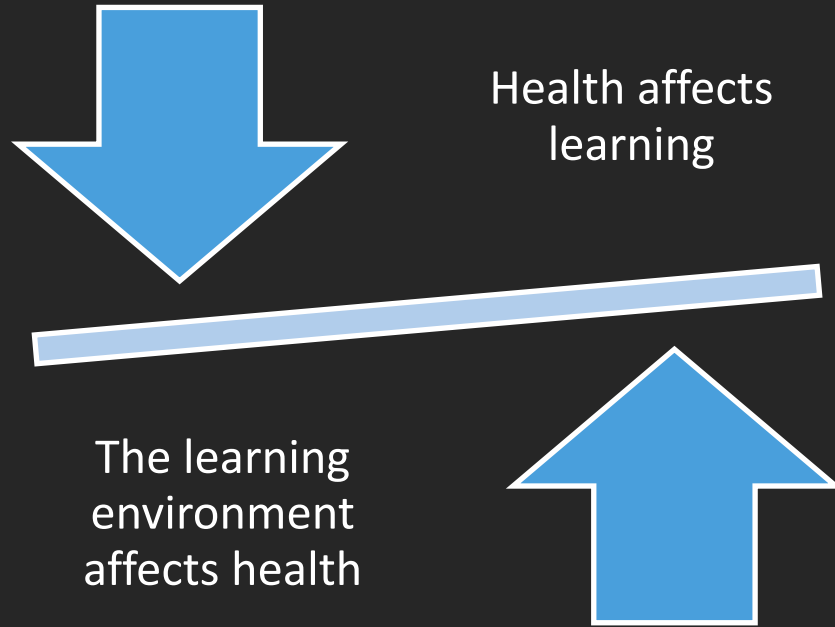
The student's mental illness affects the individual, fellow students and the University's mission

# Some student groups are worse off

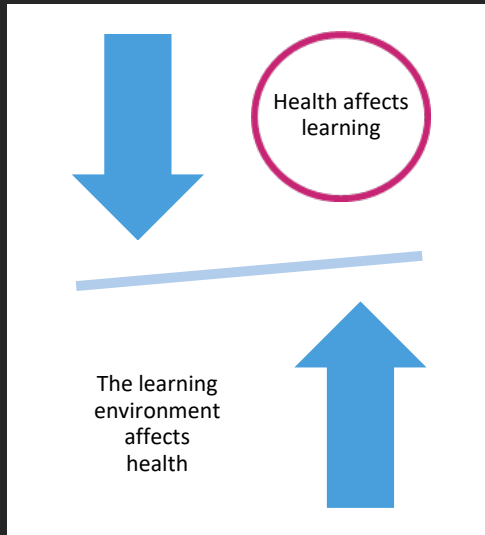
- Women, minority groups and poor students in particular seem to experience more mental ill-health than other students.



- A problem from a diversity perspective and the University's mission to broaden participation.

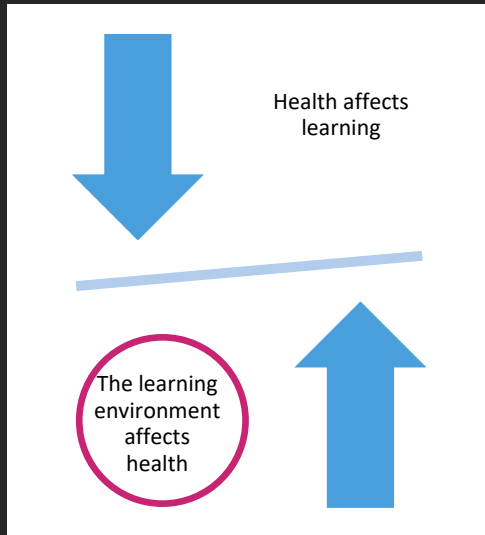


# Measures to improve student health



- Interventions usually target **individuals**
- Examples: therapy, stress management, tips for students on study technique.
- These interventions are often deployed **after** problems have occurred/worsened.

# Measures to improve the learning environment



- **Structural/organisational level** interventions.
- Examples: design courses from a health perspective, and work with inclusion, accessibility and participation.
- Interventions **are planned in advance** to promote good conditions for well-being and success in studies.



## Example

**A reactive intervention at an individual level:**

Spending a lot of time in the garden picking off Spanish slugs that threaten your plants' growth potential.

Image:  
iStock



## Example

**A proactive intervention at the structure level:**

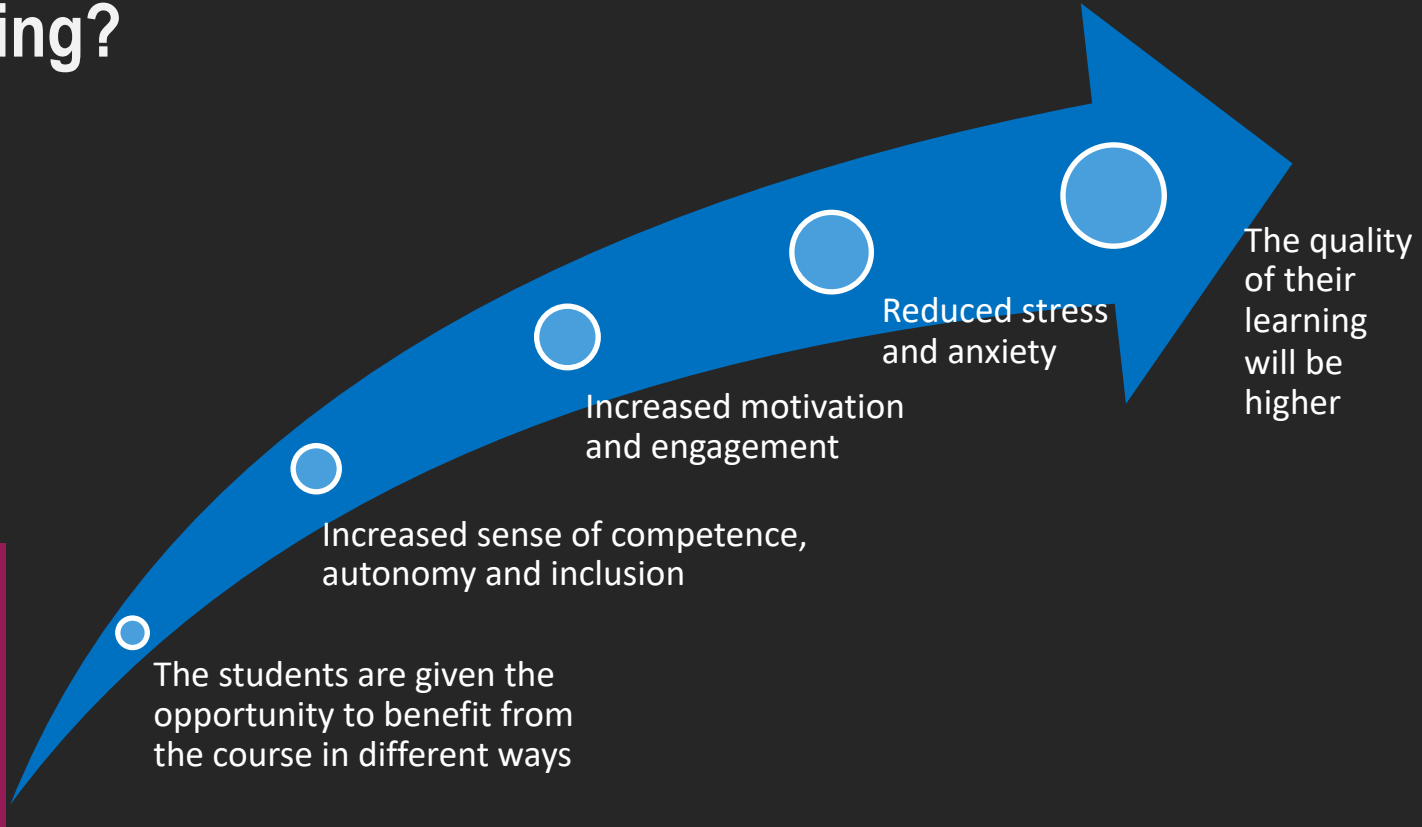
Spending the time in the garden watering and improving the soil so that the plants thrive and can survive despite setbacks.

Image:  
iStock

# Work to promote mental health and learning

- Both types of interventions are important.
- However, reactive interventions at the individual level are more common.
- Proactive interventions at structural level need to be developed.
- Working with inclusion is one approach.

# How can inclusion promote students' mental health and learning?



Planning and design of teaching to reach students with different backgrounds/ne

# Inclusion is both end and means

- Inclusion (equality) can serve as a tool for achieving various objectives, such as good education, health and well-being.
- Inclusion is also an end in itself.
- Other objectives may in turn be a means of achieving the inclusion objective.



Slide 1 UNDP Sweden. The global sustainability goals.

# Inclusive learning environment - starting points

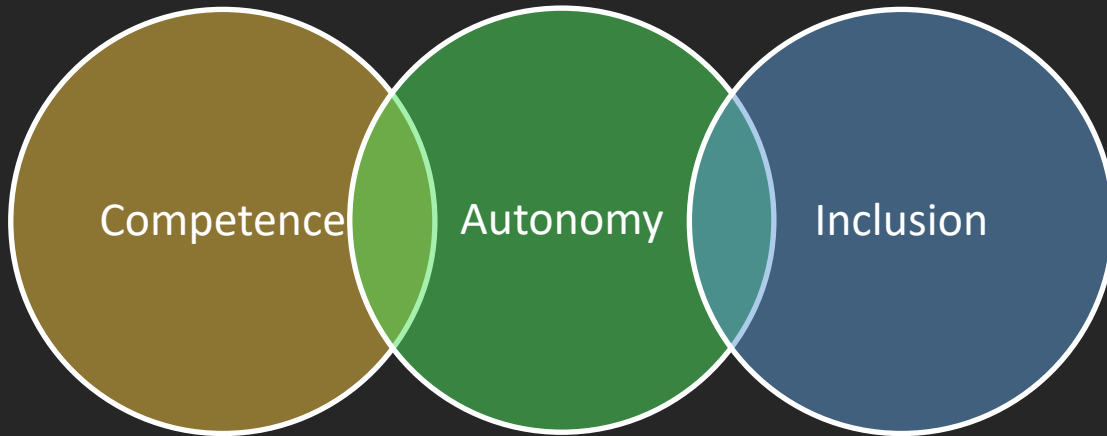
- ✓ Plan for students having different needs.
- ✓ Show consideration for students' different needs in teaching.
- ✓ Focus on designing a learning environment that is inclusive for all/more students.

# Things to keep in mind

Special educational adjustments that are necessary for an individual student often benefit the whole student group.

# Three principles for a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment

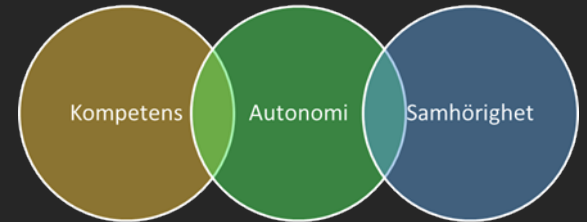
The following three needs are considered fundamental for students to thrive, feel well and grow with their studies:



# Three principles for a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment

## 1. Competence

- All students need to be treated as competent individuals.
- Obstacles to education or inadequate opportunities for personal growth need to be removed.
- Support and encouragement from teachers important.



# Examples of how competence can be stimulated

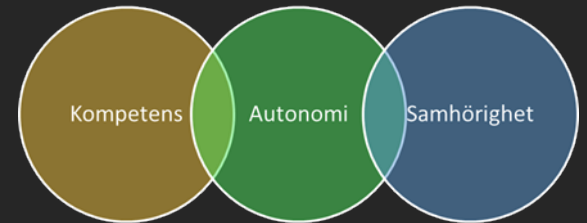
- ✓ Communicate positive expectations to the students, regardless of their background.
- ✓ Provide feedback to students about their learning process.
- ✓ Adapt instructions to the students' needs.
- ✓ Give space to the students' interests and experiences in the teaching.
- ✓ Consider whether some students are listened to more than others. Why might that be?

# Three principles for a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment

## 2. Autonomy

Autonomy can be about students':

- attitudes to knowledge
- autonomy in relation to research work
- production/creation of knowledge
- independence in relation to their own learning



# Promoting autonomy requires

## 1. Good conditions:

Students need to be given the opportunity in **different ways** to:

- ✓ engage in their learning
- ✓ gather information
- ✓ report their knowledge.

## 2. Awareness-raising:

Students need help in making their progression visible.

# Examples of how autonomy can be stimulated

Create opportunities for students to be independent by:

- ✓ Letting students try out their own ideas.
- ✓ Offering variety in types of instruction and assessment.
- ✓ Make sure that information reaches all students.
- ✓ Ensure that classrooms/digital classrooms are accessible.

# Examples of how autonomy can be stimulated, continued

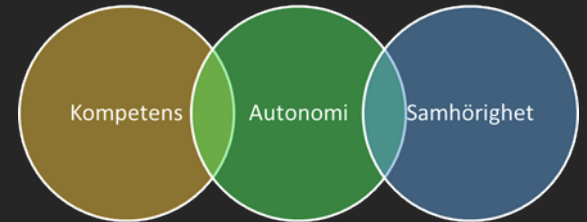
## Heighten students' autonomy by:

- ✓ Encouraging reflection (e.g. logbooks).
- ✓ Giving feedback
- ✓ Letting students learn through collaboration.

# Three principles for a health-promoting and inclusive learning environment

## 3. Inclusion

- Students need to experience social connection with fellow students.
- Respect from and connection with other students and staff is important.
- The learning environment needs to be free from threats, violence, discrimination and victimisation.



# Examples of how inclusion can be stimulated

- ✓ Make sure that all students get their say.
- ✓ Make sure students listen respectfully to each other's views.
- ✓ Use group activities for both social connection and learning processes.
- ✓ Empower students through conversations, discussions and joint problem-solving.
- ✓ Treat students with respect at all times so that students never lose face.

# Summary

- More and more students are feeling mentally unwell during their studies.
- By developing a good learning environment, we can promote the mental health of students.
- Inclusion can serve as a tool to improve the learning environment.
- Competence, autonomy and inclusion are three important fundamental principles.
- Examples of inclusion and health-promoting methods include positive expectations, feedback and safe group activities.



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This presentation was developed as part of the **Sustainable and accessible learning environments** project at the Faculty of Social Sciences.