NextGen: HN unit specification

Mental Health: A Comprehensive Overview (SCQF level 7)

Unit code: JGN2 47

SCQF level: 7 (16 SCQF credit points)

Valid from: August 2026

This unit specification provides detailed information about the unit to ensure consistent and transparent assessment year on year. It is for lecturers and assessors, and contains all the mandatory information you need to deliver and assess the unit.

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Unit purpose

This unit introduces learners to mental health in Scotland. Mental health is a crucial aspect of overall wellbeing, affecting one in four people in Scotland each year. These issues not only impact individuals but also their families and communities, with strong connections to poverty and social exclusion. Loneliness, a significant public health concern, can worsen mental health problems, especially among vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ or minority ethnic communities, and carers.

Learners explore the various mental disorders, their historical and contemporary treatments, and the evolving landscape of mental health services in Scotland. They gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing mental health and the approaches used to address these challenges.

Entry to the unit is at your centre's discretion. Learners should, however, have effective communication and interpersonal skills. They can demonstrate these with relevant qualifications at SCQF level 6 or experience of working in health care settings.

This is a mandatory unit in the Higher National Certificate (HNC) Healthcare Practice nursing pathway. Learners can also complete it as a stand-alone unit for continuous professional development (CPD). Learners who complete the unit as part of HNC Healthcare Practice may have the opportunity to progress to further study, including Higher National Diploma (HND) or degree-level courses.

Unit outcomes

Learners who complete this unit can:

1. explain the symptoms and effects of a common mental health condition across the lifespan
2. describe the individuals most at risk of developing mental health conditions
3. investigate a range of treatment approaches for common mental health conditions
4. evaluate the most effective community-based mental health promotion strategies in Scotland

Evidence requirements

Diagnostic frameworks

These are official systems or guidelines used by healthcare professionals to identify, classify, and understand mental health conditions. Examples include the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). These frameworks help ensure consistency in diagnosing mental health issues and guide treatment decisions.

Legal frameworks

These refer to laws, regulations, and policies that govern how mental health services are provided and how patients are treated. In Scotland, this might include legislation such as the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, which sets out patients' rights, criteria for compulsory treatment, and safeguards for vulnerable individuals.

Demonstrating a critical understanding means being able to thoughtfully analyse and evaluate how these diagnostic and legal systems affect people receiving mental health care. For example, you might consider how the way a condition is diagnosed can influence treatment options, or how legal protections ensure patient rights but might also create challenges or barriers in accessing care.

In summary, you should explain the systems used for diagnosing mental health conditions and the laws that govern mental health care, and then discuss how these systems influence the experiences, rights, and outcomes of patients.

Learners should refer to current:

- terminology
- regulatory bodies
- national standards
- relevant Scottish and UK legislation
- Scottish policy frameworks and recommended practices

Outcomes 1 and 3

Learners must provide knowledge evidence for these outcomes. This can be oral or written (or a combination of them) and captured in a range of media. It can be produced over a period of time and requires authentication.

To successfully achieve the outcomes, learners must:

- explain the common symptoms and behavioural effects of one of the following:
    - psychosis
    - dementia
    - anxiety disorders
    - mood disorders
    - stress
    - adult personality disorders
- describe the ways in which their selected mental health condition can affect the individual and those around them at different stages of life (for example childhood, adolescence, adulthood, older adult), considering emotional, social, physical and cognitive functions
- outline the current treatment options for their chosen mental health condition

Outcome 2

Learners must provide knowledge evidence for this outcome. This can be oral or written (or a combination of them) and captured in a range of media. It can be produced over a period of time and requires authentication.

To successfully achieve the outcome, learners must:

- describe the at-risk group associated with their chosen condition
- investigate the influence of health inequalities and the challenges faced in accessing appropriate care
- identify key risk factors, including:
    - socioeconomic disadvantage
    - social exclusion
    - membership of vulnerable groups
    - adverse childhood events
- evaluate how barriers such as poverty, stigma, and limited service provision can impact both the onset and management of mental health issues across the lifespan

Outcome 4

Learners must provide knowledge evidence for this outcome. This can be oral or written (or a combination of them) and captured in a range of media. It can be produced over a period of time and requires authentication.

To successfully achieve the outcome, learners must:

- investigate and present statistical evidence of the prevalence of their chosen mental health condition in Scotland
- evaluate the most effective community-based health promotion strategy aimed at reducing the prevalence of this mental health condition in Scotland

Knowledge and skills

Knowledge	Skills

Outcome 1
Learners should understand:
• the symptoms and behavioural effects of:
  ○ psychosis
  ○ dementia
  ○ anxiety disorders
  ○ mood disorders
  ○ stress
  ○ adult personality disorders
• the impact of mental illness on the individual and others at different stages of the lifespan
• The diagnostic and legal frameworks used in mental healthcare
	Outcome 1
	Learners can:
	• explain the common symptoms and behavioural effects of:
	  ○ psychosis
	  ○ dementia
	  ○ anxiety disorders
	  ○ mood disorders
	  ○ stress
	  ○ adult personality disorders
	• explain how these conditions might affect the individual and significant others at different stages of the lifespan
	• Explain how the legal and diagnostic frameworks impact individuals

Knowledge	Skills

Outcome 2
Learners should understand:
• what ‘at risk’ means in terms of mental health
• the groups at risk of developing mental health conditions, such as:
  ○ those with existing poor mental and/or poor physical health
  ○ people living in poverty
  ○ individuals with disabilities
  ○ those from LGBTQIA+ or minority ethnic communities
  ○ carers
  ○ the elderly
• the influence of health inequalities and the challenges faced in accessing appropriate care
• key risk factors, including socioeconomic disadvantage, social exclusion, and membership of vulnerable groups
• how barriers such as poverty, stigma, and limited service provision can impact both the onset and management of mental health issues across the lifespan
	Outcome 2
	Learners can:
	• explain what ‘at risk’ means in terms of mental health
	• identify the groups most at risk and explain why they are at risk
	• discuss the influences of health inequalities on mental health conditions
	• discuss the challenges faced by at-risk individuals in accessing appropriate care
	• evaluate a range of risk factors and barriers

Outcome 3 Learners should understand: • psychopharmacology • the growth of psychotherapy • mindfulness • suicide intervention • community care • service user involvement • recovery models	**Outcome 3** Learners can: • investigate a range of current treatment options for common mental health conditions

Knowledge	Skills
Outcome 4 Learners should understand: • the prevalence of mental health conditions in Scotland • current community-based mental health promotion strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of mental illness in Scotland	**Outcome 4** Learners can: • investigate and present statistical evidence of the prevalence of mental health conditions in Scotland • examine the most effective community-based mental health promotion strategies aimed at reducing the prevalence of mental illness in Scotland

Meta-skills

You must give learners opportunities to develop their meta-skills throughout this unit. We have suggested how to incorporate the most relevant ones into the unit content, but you may find other opportunities.

Self-management

This includes focusing, integrity, adapting and initiative. The most relevant are:

- focusing:
    - researching
    - evaluating understanding on an ongoing basis through formative assessment
- integrity:
    - discussing own values, ethics and personal development
- adapting:
    - critical reflection
    - accommodating new ideas through research and practical experience
- initiative:
    - independent research
    - collaborating with other professionals to share enthusiasm and knowledge

Social intelligence

This includes communicating, feeling, collaborating and leading. The most relevant are:

- communicating:
    - collaborative working

    - sharing ideas and perspectives

- feeling:

    - discussing own values and personal development
    - showing empathy
    - personal reflection
    - building relationships

- collaborating:

    - teamworking
    - working towards shared goals within practice

Innovation

This includes curiosity, creativity, sense-making and critical thinking. The most relevant are:

- curiosity:

    - researching and observing, to understand the link between theory and practice

- sense-making:

    - holistic thinking
    - researching
    - evaluating understanding

- critical thinking:

    - analysing research
    - making informed decisions

Literacies

This unit provides opportunities to develop the following literacies.

- academic writing and referencing
- using domain-specific language
- understanding evidence-based literature

Numeracy

Learners develop numeracy skills by:

- analysing research statistics in relevant data
- managing time-sensitive tasks

Communication

Learners develop communication skills by:

- participating in spoken question-and-answer sessions, and small and large group discussions
- receiving, and responding appropriately to, verbal and non-verbal communication in the learning and care practice environments
- creating and responding to written and digital communications in the learning and care practice environments
- completing written assignments and accurately referencing sources of information
- collaborating with others in the practice setting

Digital

Learners develop digital skills by:

- using digital platforms to access information to support learning and understanding
- using a PC or other devices to develop coherent portfolio and project work

- using digital platforms to engage and collaborate with professionals and carers in the sector

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you should encourage learners to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

This includes:

- a general understanding of social, economic and environmental sustainability
- a general understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- a deeper understanding of subject-specific sustainability
- the confidence to apply the skills, knowledge, understanding and values they develop in the next stage of their life

Delivery of unit

You can deliver this 2-credit unit as a mandatory unit in the HNC Healthcare Practice nursing pathway or as a stand-alone unit for CPD.

When you deliver the unit as part of a qualification, you can integrate teaching, learning and assessment with the other mandatory and optional units.

There is a variety of media resources that you can use to support your delivery of the unit. The notional design length of the unit is 80 hours. We suggest the following distribution of time, including assessment:

Outcome 1 — Explain the symptoms and effects of a common mental health condition across the lifespan (20 hours)

Outcome 2 — Investigate the individuals most at risk of developing mental health conditions (20 hours)

Outcome 3 — Investigate a range of treatment approaches for common mental health conditions (20 hours)

Outcome 4 — Evaluate the most effective community-based mental health promotion strategies in Scotland (20 hours)

Additional guidance

The guidance in this section is not mandatory.

Content and context for this unit

Explain the symptoms and effects of a common mental health condition across the lifespan (outcome 1)

This outcome offers a broad introduction to mental disorders, the various forms they may take, and their effects on service users, their friends and families, and the wider community.

Learners should understand that mental health conditions can have profound effect on individuals and those around them at various stages of life. They should explore the symptoms and behavioural effects of:

- psychosis
- dementia
- anxiety disorders
- mood disorders
- stress
- adult personality disorders

Learners should develop a broad understanding of how mental health issues impact individuals across the lifespan. In childhood, mental health issues can impact emotional development, leading to difficulties in forming secure attachments and managing emotions. Socially, children may struggle with peer relationships and face bullying or social isolation. Physically, stress and anxiety can manifest in symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches.

During adolescence, mental health conditions can affect self-esteem and identity formation. Emotionally, teenagers may experience mood swings, depression, or anxiety. Social impacts include withdrawal from friends and family, and difficulties in

academic performance. Physically, adolescents may engage in risky behaviours or experience changes in sleep and eating patterns.

In adulthood, mental health issues can influence career and personal relationships. Emotionally, adults may face challenges such as depression, anxiety, or stress. Socially, this can lead to strained relationships, social withdrawal, or difficulties in maintaining employment. Physically, chronic stress can contribute to health problems like hypertension or heart disease.

In old age, mental health conditions can affect cognitive functions and emotional wellbeing. Emotionally, older adults may experience loneliness, depression, or anxiety. Social impacts include isolation and reduced social interactions. Physically, mental health issues can exacerbate existing health conditions and impact overall quality of life.

In addition to understanding how mental health conditions affect individuals throughout their lives, it is important that learners understand how these conditions are diagnosed and the legal frameworks, regulations and policies that govern mental health services and how patients are treated. This should include investigating relevant legislation, for example the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 which sets out patients' rights, criteria for compulsory treatment, and safeguards for vulnerable individuals. Diagnostic frameworks such as DSM-5 and ICD-11 ensure consistency in diagnosing mental health conditions and guide treatment options.

Learners can explore other legislation and policies, such as:

- the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000
- the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007
- the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Scotland [accessed April 2026]

Around one in four people in Scotland are affected by mental health problems in any given year. Poor mental health, including mental disorders, can have a significant impact not only on individuals, but also on their families and the wider community.

Investigate the individuals most at risk of developing mental health conditions (outcome 2)

Learners should first understand what is meant by 'at risk' in the context of mental health. They investigate the individuals most at risk of developing mental health conditions, considering the influence of health inequalities and the challenges faced in accessing appropriate care. Learners identify key risk factors, including socioeconomic disadvantage, social exclusion, and membership of vulnerable groups. They evaluate how barriers such as poverty, stigma, and limited service provision can impact both the onset and management of mental health issues across the lifespan. There are clear links between mental health difficulties, poverty and social exclusion.

Loneliness, for example, is a substantial public health issue that can contribute to both the onset and continuation of mental health difficulties. Certain population groups are at increased risk, such as:

- those with existing poor mental or physical health
- people living in poverty
- individuals with disabilities
- those from LGBTQIA+ or minority ethnic communities
- carers

The risk of loneliness is greater for those experiencing mental health problems than for those with solely physical health concerns, and it is especially high among individuals dealing with anxiety, depression or stress (Scottish Government, 2021).

Learners should consider the impact that services themselves have on individuals and if the structures put in place to help individuals can traumatise or re-traumatise them.

When discussing at-risk individuals, learners should consider:

- socioeconomic disadvantage
- the cumulative effects of financial stress and insecurity
- social exclusion

- the mental health impact of isolation, discrimination, and lack of social support
- adverse childhood experience (ACES)
- membership of vulnerable groups
- groups at higher risk, including people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, minority ethnic communities, and carers
- specific challenges faced by each group, such as stigma and lack of culturally competent services

They should also discuss barriers to accessing appropriate care, such as:

- poverty: how financial constraints limit access to mental health services, treatment options, and ongoing support
- stigma: the role of societal attitudes in preventing individuals from seeking help, and the impact of internalised stigma on self-esteem and willingness to engage with services
- limited service provision: geographical disparities (urban versus rural), waiting times, and the availability of culturally sensitive care

You should encourage learners to reflect on how risk factors and barriers manifest differently at various life stages — childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older adult. For example, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience early trauma, while older adults may encounter isolation and reduced access to services.

Learners should examine local or national statistics relating to mental health and at-risk populations in Scotland to support their discussions. They should also, in conjunction with outcome 4, evaluate how health inequalities and barriers to care affect both the development and management of mental health conditions.

Investigate a range of treatment approaches for common mental health conditions (outcome 3)

The historical treatment of mental disorders has been dominated by the biological model. Traditionally, people experiencing severe mental health challenges were placed in mental hospitals, reflecting stigmatisation rooted in both ancient beliefs and more recent societal attitudes. These perceptions continue to influence how mental

health is viewed today. However, mental health is not static. Some individuals may experience a single episode of mental illness — such as reactive depression or drug-induced psychosis — that can be effectively treated, while others may live with ongoing, chronic mental health issues. While medical model treatments can help reduce the impact and distress of symptoms, they often do not provide a cure.

Having explored the historical dominance of the biological model, it is important to consider how contemporary approaches now integrate psychological and social perspectives. While psychiatric medicine plays a significant role, you should also introduce learners to alternative models of treatment, particularly the psychological, humanistic and social models. The psychological model focuses on interventions such as cognitive and behavioural therapies aimed at changing thought patterns and behaviours. The humanistic model emphasises personal growth, self-actualisation and the importance of individual experience within a supportive therapeutic relationship. The social model looks at how societal structures, relationships, and environmental factors affect mental health, advocating for changes that reduce stigma and promote inclusion. There is now greater emphasis on the subjective experiences of service users, and such testimonies are essential for providing patient-centred care.

Learners should understand that mental health service provision in Scotland is evolving, with less reliance on traditional psychiatry and an increasing availability of alternative treatments such as mindfulness, support groups, exercise and counselling options. These often involve multidisciplinary teams from statutory, independent and voluntary sectors. Learners should become familiar with the range of available treatment options and the different types of care providers.

It is also valuable for learners to consider the broader social and cultural factors influencing Scotland’s mental health. This does not only concern those who use mental health services, but also a significant proportion of the population who do not have positive mental health. Given the scale of mental health challenges in Scotland, it is important to examine the contributing factors. Although improvements have been made in service provision, there is a sense that these efforts are sometimes reactive — addressing symptoms, rather than tackling underlying causes.

Addressing Scotland's poor mental health record requires both individuals and society to reflect on lifestyles, values, attitudes and social relationships. Social inequality remains a significant issue, with those most at risk of low self-esteem and mental health problems being the most disadvantaged in society. This is not solely a matter of poverty, but also about the divide between achievers and non-achievers in a competitive, hierarchical society.

Learners should explore the extent of mental health conditions across Scotland. This means they need to be able to access and understand national statistics, noting rates of common disorders. You should support learners to understand these statistics. They should consider how prevalence varies among different groups, including by age, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location (urban versus rural). Linking back to previous outcomes, they should reflect on how factors such as deprivation, social inequality, and isolation may contribute to increased risk and poorer mental health outcomes.

Learners must use reliable sources, such as Public Health Scotland, Health Improvement Scotland and the Scottish Government. Charity reports can also support understanding.

Evaluate the most effective community-based mental health promotion strategies in Scotland (outcome 4)

The primary aim of health promotion initiatives is to reduce the incidence of disease and learners must explore the community-based mental health promotion strategies currently used in Scotland to promote positive mental health and reduce the prevalence of mental illness. Learners should understand that these strategies often extend beyond clinical treatment, involving preventative measures and community engagement. Key examples include:

- public awareness campaigns: initiatives to reduce stigma and encourage open dialogue about mental health
- peer support groups: community-led groups that offer mutual support and reduce isolation

- mindfulness and wellbeing programmes: activities such as exercise, art, and relaxation classes that promote resilience and coping skills
- school-based interventions: programmes targeting young people, to build emotional literacy, coping strategies and resilience
- outreach services: support for vulnerable populations, including older adults, those in rural areas, and minority ethnic communities

Learners should reflect on previous outcomes to consider how these strategies are shaped by Scotland's social, cultural, and economic landscape. They think critically about the strengths and limitations of current provision, considering barriers such as stigma, service availability, and waiting times. Learners should also consider how these influences impact the individual's ability to participate and commit to any health improvement strategy. Learners should consider if the shift from a predominantly biological model of treatment towards a more holistic, person-centred approach that integrates psychological, humanistic, and social perspectives is more successful. They discuss the contribution of multidisciplinary teams and voluntary sector organisations to the delivery of mental health care improvements in Scotland.

Approaches to delivery

We recommend that you deliver the unit through:

- lectures
- group work
- practical classroom activities
- visiting speakers
- visits to appropriate practice settings

You should support learners to carry out autonomous learning and independent research and use tutorials and group exercises to consolidate learning.

Approaches to assessment

We recommend that, if you deliver the unit as a stand-alone unit, you assess the outcomes holistically. If you deliver it as part of the qualification, you can integrate teaching, learning and assessment across units.

You can use a range of assessment methods, such as:

- assignments
- individual or group presentations
- video diaries
- critical incident analyses
- reflective accounts
- a folio of evidence

You can assess learners through an investigation and a portfolio of evidence, with a contents list that identifies where to find each evidence requirement.

All assessment evidence must be written academically and referenced using the correct format.

Equality and inclusion

This unit is designed to be as fair and as accessible as possible with no unnecessary barriers to learning or assessment.

You must consider the needs of individual learners when planning learning experiences, selecting assessment methods or considering alternative evidence.

Guidance on assessment arrangements for disabled learners and those with additional support needs is available on the assessment arrangements web page.

Information for learners

Mental Health: A Comprehensive Overview (SCQF level 7)

This information explains:

- what the unit is about
- what you should know or be able to do before you start
- what you need to do during the unit
- opportunities for further learning and employment

Unit information

This is a mandatory unit in the Higher National Certificate (HNC) Healthcare Practice. You can also complete it as a stand-alone unit for continuous professional development (CPD). On successfully completing the unit as part of HNC Healthcare Practice, you may progress to further study, including Higher National Diploma (HND) or degree-level courses.

This unit provides you with knowledge of how mental health affects individuals in contemporary Scotland. It examines the range of mental health issues that can occur over a life span, and the effects of these conditions on the service user and others. You investigate the extent of poor mental health in contemporary Scotland and explore how mental health can be promoted at an individual and a societal level. You investigate how Scotland's poor mental health record may lie in the very fabric of our culture, and how the poorest and most disadvantaged in society are most affected.

Entry to the unit is at your centre's discretion. You should, however, have effective communication and interpersonal skills, before starting the unit. You can demonstrate these with relevant qualifications at SCQF level 6 or experience of working in healthcare settings.

The teaching, learning and assessment of the unit takes place in healthcare settings. You should refer to current:

- terminology
- regulatory bodies
- national standards
- relevant Scottish and UK legislation
- Scottish policy frameworks and recommended practices

As you progress through the unit, you become increasingly confident at linking your knowledge and understanding to your practice, and we encourage you to make links between the learning in this unit and others in the qualification.

Your centre provides you with assessments. These can include:

- assignments
- essays
- individual or group presentations
- video diaries
- critical incident analyses
- reflective accounts
- any other appropriate methods

Learners who complete the unit as part of HNC Healthcare Practice may have the opportunity to progress to further study, including Higher National Diploma (HND) or first or second-year entry to degrees in Nursing and Midwifery. You should investigate each university's entry criteria.

Meta-skills

Throughout this unit, you develop meta-skills that are useful for the healthcare practice sector.

Meta-skills are transferable behaviours and abilities that help you adapt and succeed in life, study and work. There are three categories of meta-skills: self-management, social intelligence and innovation.

Self-management

This meta-skill includes:

- focusing:
    - researching
    - evaluating understanding on an ongoing basis through formative assessment
- integrity:
    - discussing own values, ethics and personal development
- adapting:
    - critical reflection
    - accommodating new ideas through research and practical experience
- initiative:
    - independent research
    - collaborating with other professionals to share enthusiasm and knowledge

Social intelligence

This meta-skill includes:

- communicating:
    - collaborative working
    - sharing ideas and perspectives
- feeling:
    - discussing own values and personal development
    - showing empathy
    - personal reflection
    - building relationships

- collaborating:
    - teamworking
    - working towards shared goals within practice

Innovation

This meta-skill includes:

- curiosity:
    - researching and observing, to understand the link between theory and practice
- sense-making:
    - holistic thinking
    - researching
    - evaluating understanding
- critical thinking:
    - analysing research
    - making informed decisions

Learning for Sustainability

Throughout this unit, you develop skills, knowledge and understanding of sustainability.

You learn about social, economic and environmental sustainability principles and how they relate to the healthcare practice sector. You also develop an understanding of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Administrative information

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Superclass: PA

History of changes

Version	Description of change	Date

Please check our website to ensure you are using the most up-to-date version of this unit.