

# Introducing the Optimal Health Model

The mission of the Office of Population Affairs (OPA), in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is to promote health across the reproductive lifespan through innovative, evidence-based adolescent health and family planning programs, services, strategic partnerships, evaluation, and research. A fundamental aspect of achieving this mission involves the integration of the concept of optimal health into OPA projects and initiatives.

## What is optimal health?

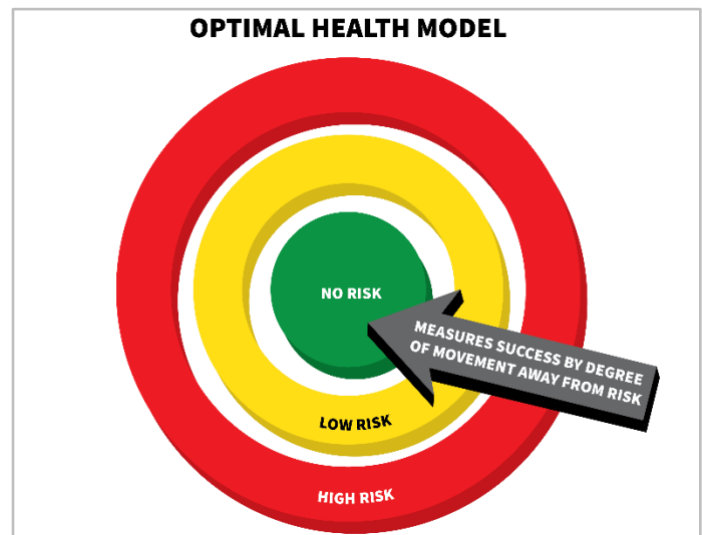
*“Optimal health is a dynamic balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health...Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of learning experiences that enhance awareness, increase motivation, and build skills and, most important, through the creation of opportunities that open access to environments that make positive health practices the easiest choice.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Optimal Health Model

The **Optimal Health Model** prioritizes prevention through policies following these steps:

- ▶ Identify the health concern
- ▶ Identify the risk factors that influence that health concern
- ▶ Respond with an intervention that promotes the best possible health outcome for the population
- ▶ Encourage individuals to make appropriate changes that will lead them towards a position of increasingly lower risk

The model is adaptable to a range of risk behaviors and diseases, and measures success by the degree of movement away from risk. This aspirational public health model can help transform the health conversation and promote optimal health for all.



## How do we apply an optimal health model approach to high risk behaviors?

We talk about population health as applying universal strategies to **prevent illness and/or behaviors** before they are initiated. Public health strategies typically fall into three categories: primary prevention or risk avoidance, secondary intervention or risk reduction, and treatment. Avoiding risk is optimal or preferred to reducing risk, and primary prevention can lead to health outcomes that are generally improved when behavioral risks are avoided. Public health advocates should encourage the development of the skills necessary to make healthy choices and avoid risky behaviors, or if currently engaged in those behaviors, to change the behaviors and avoid them in the future. These healthy choices help move them towards optimal

<sup>1</sup> O'Donnell, M. P. (2009). Definition of Health Promotion 2.0: Embracing Passion, Enhancing Motivation, Recognizing Dynamic Balance, and Creating Opportunities. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 24(1), iv-iv. doi:10.4278/ajhp.24.1.iv



health across the reproductive lifespan. In general, and for any health topic, the aspirational aim would be to catalyze movement as much as possible from high risk to low risk to no risk, while providing reinforcement to those at no risk to maintain that status.

## Optimal Sexual Health

The most reliable way to avoid sexual risk is to delay the onset of sexual activity and to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner.<sup>2</sup> The population approach to sexual health should be a risk avoidance message. Optimal sexual health messages should be family- and community-centered, age appropriate, and culturally informed. The messages should be provided in a context that increases opportunities for individuals to thrive and empowers them to avoid sexual risk. While optimal physical health remains a primary focus, it is important for all public health models to promote the balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health.

## An Individual Approach

The optimal health model is a public health population approach, but it also provides a meaningful lens for adaptation as a highly individualized element of individual-centered care. Those who are not yet sexually active can be encouraged to delay the onset of sexual activity. Additionally, those who have been sexually active can be encouraged not to immediately engage in sexual activity when starting a new romantic relationship. Those who are sexually experienced can reduce their risk by decreasing their number of lifetime sexual partners and by choosing both consistent and correct condom use as well as an acceptable and effective family planning method. Making risk-free choices in the future is always the aspirational goal. The practical application sensitizes healthcare providers and others to identify each individual's forward path towards better health, even if it is not possible for them to attain a risk-free status. In this way, the optimal health model aims to move each individual progressively in a healthier direction.

## Action Steps for Optimal Health

Optimal health is a holistic focus with the aim of attaining the best possible health outcomes by promoting healthier behaviors and not merely the absence of disease:

- ▶ Adopt the optimal health framework as an intentional lens for individualizing care for every person, regardless of current health status.
- ▶ Look for ways to promote the balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health
- ▶ Focus on inspiring individuals towards optimal health with changes that are specific to their individual situation, but always measuring success by the degree of movement away from risk.
- ▶ Highlight the importance of cultivating healthy relationships.
- ▶ Recognize the important role of parents/supportive adults, values, and traditions to influence adolescents' decisions.

***Regardless of an individual's current state of health, the goal of the optimal health model is to encourage behaviors that lead to a healthier life.***

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/default.htm>

