

How does language reflect our changing attitudes to health?

Over the last twenty years, the society has changed in many respects. One of the areas in which our lifestyles and thinking have developed is related to people’s approach to health and to a growing awareness of importance of care for both mental and physical health. This may be due to public health campaigns, better access to information about health-related issues as well as better understanding of consequences of some lifestyle choices such as smoking or certain types of diet. In this worksheet, we are going to explore how these changes in approaches to health have been reflected in people’s language use.

Language change — healthcare — health — lifestyle — mental health

Task 1

How did the society change over the past twenty years? Discuss some of the major changes with your partner or a group. Which of these changes do you think have affected our language and the words we use when talking about health and healthcare? Did some new words appear or are some words used more often than previously? Use the space below to make notes on both, the areas of change in the society and the changes in the language used to talk about health. A few Guardian headlines were selected to help you with the brainstorming.

Health / Weekend lie-ins not enough to recover from sleep loss, study finds

Cancer / Nearly half of all children with cancer go undiagnosed and untreated

NHS / Diabetics with rare eating disorder to get specialist help

Measles / Shock rise in global outbreaks 'disastrous' for children, UN says

Stress and anxiety: a user's guide / From work to family - the experts' guide to a low-stress life

Task 2

Mental health is an important aspect of people’s overall health. It has been argued that today people are more aware of the importance of mental wellbeing and that mental health is being talked about more openly than in the past. Let us look whether this is also reflected in people’s conversations. Search BNClab for the following words and note whether their use increased or decreased over the last twenty years - you can also add your own words ['OR' allows you searching for more words simultaneously]:

- depression OR depressed increased/decreased
- stress OR stressed increased/decreased
- increased/decreased

What are some possible explanations for the trends that you’ve observed in the data?

Task 3

In Task 2, we were searching for terms related to mental health. The tasks suggested searching for nouns such as *depression* along with their related adjectives such as *depressed*. Both of the terms are quite frequent in current spoken English. However, while 'being depressed' and 'having depression' may be synonymous to a large extent, the two words can also function in a different way. Have a look at the concordance lines below taken from the conversations in the British National Corpus 2014.

- Can you describe the differences in how the two words are used?
- Can you think of reasons for this difference?
- Is the pattern that you have identified similar to how you use these two words?

children S: all go and play with him cos I was a bit	depressed	about it S: oh yeah well it 's a sad song is n't
S: you 're winning are n't you ? you 're really instantly	depressed	when you 're losing you 're like oh you 're really god
work and you 're just like oh good god S: I was so	depressed	last week at work S: I know S: it 's so miserable m
: ' holiday and then when he came back he felt really	depressed	and like miserable about his life S: oh god what 's
ded by at least three people because I am literally so	depressed	S: yeah S: sit there questioning life it was like I need
know whereas with her it was like I was drained and	depressed	after I met her so even though she 's really nice I

d S: to work with people that had had er severe	depression	. Ex alcoholics , schizophrenics . Aye . Where you
up ? S: Well no , if he 's suffering from	depression	you do n't want S: Do you think he 'll come
day night ! S: if Catherine says he 's got clinical	depression	we S: Aha . S: do n't want that here ! S: Well

Task 4

One area of lifestyle related to health is the physical fitness and the level of physical activities. Do you think people today are more aware of the importance of exercise on their physical and mental wellbeing?

Search BNClab for these expressions related to physical activity: gym – yoga – for a run.

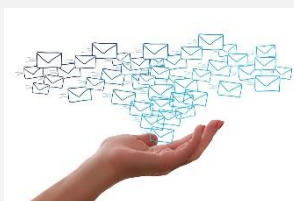
Gym _____

Yoga _____

For a run _____

Note whether the frequency of their use changed overtime. How can you explain the trends that you found? You can use the Gender, Age and Social class buttons to explore the findings further.

Research bite



Using corpus methods to study communication related to health can have important practical implications in real life. Dr Kevin Harvey from Nottingham University compiled a corpus of one million words from the Teenage Health Freak website. The website offers anonymous advice in response to emails sent by young people seeking advice and information about health-related topics. The Adolescent Health Email Corpus (AHEC) has been served to investigate and understand the language used by young people to communicate about their health concerns related to, for example, sexual health, mental problems and eating issues. The findings from this corpus can be used by healthcare professionals to improve their communication with people from this age group.