

# HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY: PREVENTION OF DISEASE AND ILLNESS; MAINTENANCE OF HEALTH

**J.J. Sanchez-Sosa**

*School of Psychology, National University of Mexico, Mexico*

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## Summary

Many factors contribute to either preserving or losing our health. Some are, by their nature, within our reach and others are difficult to access. One that at the same time constitutes a key element affecting our health and is generally accessible to us is our own behavior. Sometimes we learn health-protecting behaviors and habits from our natural and social environment, but sometimes we acquire ways of conduct that place us at risk or make us sick. Health psychology is the field devoted to analyzing how basic psychological principles and mechanisms are applied to improve our chances of staying healthy. It also involves the design and implementation of interventions aimed at recovering our health when we get sick. In more extreme cases it helps us adapt to chronic conditions, reduce disability or facilitate rehabilitation. In all cases, health psychology bases its interventions on either basic or applied research. The first is aimed at discovering natural or social regulatory mechanisms of the health processes; the second is aimed at designing and implementing effective and practical interventions with the best possible cost-benefit ratios. Health psychology is a fast growing specialty offering promising perspectives for helping preserve or promote health under the widely varying conditions found in the diverse countries and regions of the world.

## 1. Introduction

It has been said that we tend to appreciate our goods especially (or only) when we lose them, and health does not seem to be an exception. When we are busy and feeling

relatively well, we may frequently take our own health (and that of our loved ones) for granted. This lack of concern generally takes the form of doing little to prevent disease or to preserve the well-being and adequate functioning that comes from staying healthy. Indeed, health does not mean only the mere absence of disease but includes a whole array of elements—physical, psychological, and interpersonal—that help us go through life functioning well. Whatever we do at home, at work, at school, in the community, in nature, or while traveling is likely to get seriously disrupted, making us suffer and fail to achieve our goals when our health deteriorates or collapses.

The general idea that there is a strong link between health and human behavior has received attention from antiquity. Indeed, thinkers such as Galen, the Roman pioneer of medicine, proposed that in order to conceive of or treat illness one has to consider the psychological aspects surrounding the loss of health. Since these early beginnings, renewed human knowledge and science have found this fundamental tenet gaining strength with fresh scientific findings and new human experience. Indeed, many things we do, believe, and feel contribute to either staying healthy, getting sick, or recovering from illness. The aim of this article is to help clarify how psychological functioning interacts with other factors and circumstances to affect our position on the health–disease continuum, and how some key contemporary health problems can improve through the development of psychological interventions aimed at either preventing illness or recovering health.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Professor Sanchez-Sosa** obtained his Licentiate in Psychology degree from Mexico's National University (UNAM, 1970), and his M.A. (1975) and Ph.D. (1983) from the University of Kansas, USA. He is full-time faculty at UNAM and has taught over 15 different courses in both the licensing and postgraduate divisions. He has advised numerous doctoral, master's, and licensing degree theses. He has served as a member of doctoral dissertation defense committees by invitation to universities in Switzerland, the USA, and Spain.

Professor Sanchez-Sosa is author/editor of six books and some 60 articles/chapters on health, educational, and professional psychology. He was editor of the *Mexican Journal of Behavior Analysis* and has served on editorial boards of scientific journals in psychology edited and published in Mexico, Spain, the USA, Canada, and Germany. Reviewing responsibilities have also included scientific program committees of numerous congresses and conventions, as well as committees reviewing grant proposals and scholarship applications.

He was founding president of the Mexican Academy of Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback. He has served as president of the Mexican Psychological Society, the Mexican College of Psychologists, the Mexican Academy of Doctors in Social and Human Sciences, dean of UNAM's School of Psychology, and president of the International Society of Clinical Psychology (ISCP). He is currently secretary general of the Union of Latin American Universities, "Iztacala" Professor (Cathedra) of Psychology and vice-president of the International Union of Psychological Science (IUPsyS).

Among other distinctions, Professor Sanchez-Sosa received a "Wilhelm Wundt" Meissen effigy in recognition as keynote at the 1980 International Congress of Psychology, the Fulbright Senior Scholar in Residence at the University of California, Riverside, USA (1989), and a doctorate honoris causa from the University of Ottawa, Canada (1996).