

Mental Health: Strengthening our Response

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Key facts

- More than 450 million people suffer from mental disorders. Many more have mental problems.
 - Mental health is an integral part of health; indeed, there is no health without mental health.
 - Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders.
 - Mental health is determined by socio-economic, biological and environmental factors.
 - Cost-effective intersectoral strategies and interventions exist to promote mental health.
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Mental health is an integral and essential component of health. The WHO constitution states: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." An important consequence of this definition is that mental health is described as more than the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. In this positive sense, mental health is the foundation for individual well-being and the effective functioning of a community.

Determinants of mental health

Multiple social, psychological, and biological factors determine the level of mental health of a person at any point of time. For example, persistent socio-economic pressures are recognized risks to mental health for individuals and communities. The clearest evidence is associated with indicators of poverty, including low levels of education.

Poor mental health is also associated with rapid social change, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, risks of violence and physical ill-health and human rights violations.

There are also specific psychological and personality factors that make people vulnerable to mental disorders. Lastly, there are some biological causes of mental disorders including genetic factors and imbalances in chemicals in the brain.

Strategies and interventions

Mental health promotion involves actions to create living conditions and environments that support mental health and allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles. These include a range of actions to increase the chances of more people experiencing better mental health.

A climate that respects and protects basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights is fundamental to mental health promotion. Without the security and freedom provided by these rights, it is very difficult to maintain a high level of mental health.

National mental health policies should not be solely concerned with mental disorders, but should also recognize and address the broader issues which promote mental health. This includes mainstreaming mental health promotion into policies and programmes in government and business sectors including education, labour, justice, transport, environment, housing, and welfare, as well as the health sector.

Promoting mental health depends largely on intersectoral strategies. Specific ways to promote mental health include:

- early childhood interventions (e.g. home visits for pregnant women, pre-school psycho-social activities, combined nutritional and psycho-social help for disadvantaged populations);
- support to children (e.g. skills building programmes, child and youth development programmes);
- socio-economic empowerment of women (e.g. improving access to education and microcredit schemes);
- social support for elderly populations (e.g. befriending initiatives, community and day centres for the aged);
- programmes targeted at vulnerable groups, including minorities, indigenous people, migrants and people affected by conflicts and disasters (e.g. psycho-social interventions after disasters);
- mental health promotional activities in schools (e.g. programmes supporting ecological changes in schools and child-friendly schools);
- mental health interventions at work (e.g. stress prevention programmes);
- housing policies (e.g. housing improvement);
- violence prevention programmes (e.g. community policing initiatives); and
- community development programmes (e.g. 'Communities That Care' initiatives, integrated rural development).

WHO response

WHO supports governments in the goal of strengthening and promoting mental health. WHO has evaluated evidence for promoting mental health and is working with governments to disseminate this information and to integrate the effective strategies into policies and plans.

More specifically, WHO's mental health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP) aims at scaling up services for mental, neurological and substance use disorders for countries especially with low- and middle-income. When adopted and implemented, tens of millions can be treated for depression, schizophrenia, and epilepsy, prevented from suicide and begin to lead normal lives – even where resources are scarce.

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