**World Health Organization**

# Improving mental health is a priority for public health, human rights and sustainable development

*November 2022*

Mental health is a vital element of individual and collective well-being. As such, it is critically important to everyone, everywhere. Globally, mental health needs are high and responses are often inadequate. However, there are clear pathways to transforming mental health services, including through universal health coverage (UHC) for mental health.

## Key messages

- In 2019, the United Nations General Assembly made specific mention of "people with mental health problems" in its resolution on UHC. That same year, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched its Special Initiative for Mental Health,[i] embedding mental health into its own strategic efforts to expand UHC.

- The global situation with respect to care for people with mental health conditions remains extremely challenging.

- Action on and investment in mental health services and systems are insufficient.

- There are strong arguments for investing in UHC for mental health: it advances public mental health, reduces human rights violations and promotes socioeconomic development.

- Investing in mental health can close the vast mental health care gap and advance UHC.

- WHO's *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030* represents a commitment from all countries to improve mental health care. A new *World Mental Health Report* provides ample evidence and guidance for turning that commitment into action. While the report acknowledges that no country can implement all options in the global action plan, it also recognizes that countries have many opportunities to make real progress towards better mental health for their populations.

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i. For more information on the WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health, please visit: https://www.who.int/initiatives/who-special-initiative-for-mental-health

## Background and challenges

Mental health is critically important to international development. It impacts, and is impacted by, each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that make up the world's blueprint for a better and more sustainable future for all. Yet, the global situation for mental health remains challenging. Nearly 1 billion people live with a mental health disorder, accounting for 1 in 6 years lived with a disability globally. Just two conditions alone, depression and anxiety, cost US\$ 1 trillion every year in lost economic productivity. And people with severe mental health conditions die on average 10 to 20 years earlier than the general population, while one out of every 100 deaths is due to suicide, approximately 703 000 deaths annually.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an estimated 25% increase in depression and anxiety in 2020. In the most recent WHO Mental Health Atlas, large gaps in the response to these issues were reported. While the majority (75%) of WHO Member States indicated the existence of mental health policies or plans, only a third (31%) reported that these were being implemented. Overall, there is a median allocation of just 2% of health budgets going to mental health. Only 25% of WHO Member States reported integrating mental health into primary health care, while only just over half reported that care for persons with depression, psychosis or bipolar disorder is included in national health insurance or reimbursement schemes.

In the face of these challenges, three arguments underscore the value of striving for change in mental health. First, investing in mental health advances public health. It reduces suffering and helps improve physical health outcomes. This is particularly relevant to UHC, as including mental health in UHC packages of essential services addresses crucial public health needs. Second, more action on mental health can promote human rights and reduce human rights violations. People around the world living with mental health conditions are frequently excluded from communities and denied basic human rights. Recognizing that mental health needs are on a par with physical health needs through UHC inclusion can help end these violations.

The third argument is that investing in mental health enables social and economic development. Poor mental health reduces productivity, puts a strain on social relationships and compounds cycles of poverty and disadvantage, all of which hinders development. Investing in the care of people with depression and anxiety tackles these problems, giving a 4:1 return on investments made.

## Key actions and policy recommendations

WHO published the *World Mental Health Report: Transforming mental health for all* in 2022 to inspire and inform change. This report provides the following recommendations on achieving UHC for mental health:

- Mental health needs should be viewed in parity with physical health needs in all UHC plans and processes.
- Psychosocial and psychological interventions, in addition to essential medicines, should be provided to treat mental health conditions, in UHC basic packages and financial protection schemes.
- Mental health care should be decentralized and accessible through a range of health and social care services.
- Training should be provided throughout health systems to ensure staff are competent to deal with mental health conditions.

In conclusion, the *World Mental Health Report* outlines 12 key societal and health care shifts that are needed to accelerate progress towards the objectives of WHO's global action plan, and to transform mental health for all.

1. Countries should work to ensure that mental health is valued by all.
2. Countries need to promote equal participation of people with mental health conditions in society free from discrimination.
3. Governments need to appropriately budget and resource mental health services across sectors.
4. Countries can develop real and active multisectoral collaboration to address the determinants of mental health.
5. Countries need to step up implementtion of strategic and well-functioning mental health promotion and prevention programmes.
6. Mental health care professionals should take a balanced, evidence-based biopsychosocial (not just biomedical) approach to care.
7. Mental health care professionals should provide person-centred, human rights-based and recovery-oriented care.
8. Countries should embed mental health care into services across a range of sectors – not just the health care sector.
9. Countries should provide coordinated mental health services with universal health coverage.
10. Countries should develop a network of community-based mental health services, rather than centring care on psychiatric hospitals.
11. Health care managers should integrate mental health care into primary health care.
12. Countries should activate and strengthen community providers and informal support for mental health.