

Adolescent mental health: An urgent challenge for investigation and investment

It is estimated that around 20 per cent of the world's adolescents have a mental health or behavioural problem. Depression is the single largest contributor to the global burden of disease for people aged 15–19, and suicide is one of the three leading causes of mortality among people aged 15–35. Globally, an estimated 71,000 adolescents commit suicide annually, while up to 40 times as many make suicide attempts. About half of lifetime mental disorders begin before age 14, and 70 per cent by age 24. The prevalence of mental disorders among adolescents has increased in the past 20–30 years; the increase is attributed to disrupted family structures, growing youth unemployment and families' unrealistic educational and vocational aspirations for their children.

Unassisted mental health problems among adolescents are associated with low educational achievement, unemployment, substance use, risk-taking behaviours, crime, poor sexual and reproductive health, self-harm and inadequate self-care – all of which increase the lifetime risk of morbidity and

premature mortality. Mental health problems among adolescents carry high social and economic costs, as they often develop into more disabling conditions later in life.

The risk factors for mental health problems are well established and include childhood abuse; family, school and neighbourhood violence; poverty; social exclusion and educational disadvantage. Psychiatric illness and substance abuse in parents, as well as marital violence, also place

adolescents at increased risk, as does exposure to the social disruption and psychological distress that accompany armed conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian crises. The stigma directed towards young people with mental disorders and the human rights violations to which they are subjected amplify the adverse consequences.

In many countries, only a small minority of young people with mental health problems receive basic assessment and care, while most suffer needlessly, unable to access appropriate resources for recognition, support and treatment. Despite the substantial progress in developing effective interventions, most mental health needs are unmet, even in wealthier societies – and in many developing countries, the rate of unmet need is nearly 100 per cent.

Mental health problems in young people thus present a major public health challenge worldwide. Preventive efforts can help forestall the development and progression of mental disorders, and early intervention can limit their severity. Young people whose mental health needs are recognized function better socially, perform better in school and are more likely to develop into well-adjusted and productive adults than those

whose needs are unmet. Mental health promotion, prevention and timely treatment also reduce the burden on health-care systems.

Greater public awareness of mental health issues and general social support for adolescents are essential to effective prevention and assistance. Safeguarding adolescent mental health begins with parents, families, schools and communities. Educating these critical stakeholders about mental health can help adolescents enhance their social skills, improve their problem-solving capacity and gain self-confidence – which in turn may alleviate mental health problems and discourage risky and violent behaviours. Adolescents themselves should also be encouraged to contribute to debates and policy-making on mental health.

Early recognition of emotional distress and the provision of psychosocial support by trained individuals – who need not be health workers – can mitigate the effects of mental health problems. Primary health-care workers can be trained to use structured interviews to detect problems early on and provide treatment and support. Psycho-educational programs in schools, supportive counselling and cognitive-behavioural therapy, ideally with the involvement of the family, are all effective in improving the mental health of adolescents, while the complex needs of young people with serious mental disorders can be addressed through stepped referrals to specialist services.

At the international level, a number of instruments and agreements are in place to promote the health and development of adolescents, most notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The integration of mental health into primary health-care systems is a major endeavour to reduce the treatment gap for mental health problems. To that end, the World Health Organization and its partners have developed the 4 S Framework, which provides a structure for national initiatives to gather and use strategic information; develop supportive, evidence-informed policies; scale up the provision and utilization of health services and commodities; and strengthen links with other government sectors. Such integration will increase the accessibility of services and reduce the stigma attached to mental disorders.

One of the most urgent tasks in addressing adolescent mental health is improving and expanding the evidence base, particularly in resource-constrained countries. Systematic research on the nature, prevalence and determinants of mental health problems in adolescents – and on prevention, early intervention and treatment strategies – will be pivotal to ensuring adolescents' rights to health and development in these settings.