

Pathways to Lifelong Mental Wellbeing October 2021

Promoting Global Mental Health and Wellbeing: Everyone's Business!

Good mental health is an integral part of a healthy life. Nonetheless, increasing mental ill health is one of the most acute public health challenges in Sweden and globally. Every third person suffers from a mental illness at least once in their lifetime, and the probability of women being diagnosed with anxiety or depression is twice as high as that for men. Young people are at particularly high risk, and since the mid-1980s the proportion of Swedish young people with symptoms of mental illness has quadrupled. Shockingly, in 2020 in Sweden, more than seven times as many people died by suicide than in traffic accidents. There is a substantial treatment gap, with an uptake of 7-28% for common mental disorders. Clearly, there is an acute need to tackle the ongoing global mental health crisis.

Mental health is a complex multidimensional construct that is shaped by and in turn shapes our biological, psychological and social functioning throughout life. Promoting mental health is challenging even at the best of times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge has become more apparent due to the intensified need to effectively address the increased levels of mental ill health across the globe.

It is well established that protection and improvement of public mental health and wellbeing require multi-sectoral action across all societal levels, but we also need to better understand the available approaches and how they can be successfully implemented so as to benefit more people. In other words, we do not need to “reinvent the wheel”, but instead to ask how available prevention and intervention methods can be efficiently applied and adapted across different societies and contexts to promote mental health and wellbeing.

In an attempt to find some concrete answers to this question, 800 delegates from 76 different countries – from academia, healthcare, industry, politics and civil society – met online for the Uppsala Health Summit, in autumn 2021. The summit included plenary sessions and workshops. The aim of the meeting was to freely discuss innovative ways to prevent mental ill health and to intervene to improve global mental health and wellbeing.

This post-conference report summarizes conclusions from the 8 workshops at Uppsala Health Summit 2021.

- Implementation of the Swedish method Physical Activity on Prescription
- Psychological Flexibility, Mental Health, COVID-19 and Beyond
- Public Mental Health: Semantic and Taxonomic problems regarding mental health and application and implication of new techniques
- Hormones and Mood
- Addressing Peripartum Depression
- Public mental health promotion as an integral part of clinical and community care programmes
- How to improve access to evidence-based psychological interventions
- Animal-Assisted Interventions –how they can improve wellbeing among children faced with mental health difficulties at school

As evident in the titles, the workshops focused on disparate aspects of mental health, but some common themes emerged from the discussions – themes considered generally important in promoting global mental wellbeing. First, it was suggested that a perspective change on mental health is key to fighting the stigma associated with mental ill health and mental disorders. Naturally, this can be accomplished by promoting a better public understanding of what mental health really is. Ideally, all people across all societal levels and countries should clearly understand the multidimensional nature of mental health, that it ranges from very good mental health to mental disorders, and that everyone, even healthy individuals, commonly experience mental distress (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety) as a natural part of life. It was suggested that, in some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped people realize this fact. This was also emphasized by WHO's Europe regional advisor on mental health Dr. Ledia Lazeri, in her opening keynote presentation in which she stated that: “The pandemic has made it clear that mental ill health can affect everyone”.

As such, somewhat ironically, the pandemic may have had some beneficial effects on mental health in the form of reducing stigma by making people, all across the world, more aware that mental health is everyone's business. Having said this, increased public education on the mental health construct, preferably from an early age as part of the school curriculum, was suggested as a concrete measure for mental health prevention and resilience building. Spreading the word about mental ill health is particularly important in developing countries, where the importance of mental health is less appreciated and prioritized.

One obvious question discussed in many of the workshops was potential concrete and scalable ways of reducing the burden and incidence of global mental health problems, including what the most promising targets are in reaching these goals? In his plenary session, "Acting early: from developmental science to scalable intervention", Dr. Vikram Patel emphasized the importance of primary intervention or "stopping mental health problems before they start". This perspective is based on the fact that adversities in early life are profoundly associated with poor mental and physical health across the life course, regardless of culture and context. Some concrete evidence-based methods for early intervention programmes that target adverse early environments/ events are: parenting interventions, teaching life skills in schools including emotion regulation and problem-solving, as well as providing access to low-intensity mental health care within educational institutions.

One important aspect of promoting mental health in schools is to provide a less stressful environment. One of the workshops discussed animal-assisted prevention in schools to support mental health, particularly for children with neurodevelopmental disorders. This method has proven to be effective both on its own and as a complement to other methods, such as neurodidactics, across countries and contexts. For this reason, it could contribute to reducing the societal costs associated with early school dropout due to mental ill health in children.

A given topic for discussion at the Summit was how evidence-based psychological treatments can be made more readily available through the use of innovative methods. Here "The Improving Access to Psychological Treatment" (IAPT) programme was suggested to be a concrete and successful method. It has led to a new psychological approach based on low-intensity cognitive behavioural therapy (LICBT) delivered through a stepped-care model, including various self-help techniques delivered through the internet and smartphone apps. It was underlined that government-level commitment and investment are required to make broader use, across countries and contexts, of this good example of re-organizing service delivery models as well as to develop new psychological approaches.

As previously mentioned, the pandemic has certainly raised awareness of the increasing mental health problems around the globe, as it naturally increased some of the risk factors for mental ill health, such as isolation, uncertainty and threats to our daily lives. Interestingly however, as was discussed in one of the workshops, research has shown that psychological resilience factors, such as psychological flexibility, can protect against mental health problems in the context of COVID-19. Such findings are of practical importance as they point to malleable public health targets during the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 and in the event of similar widespread health threats in the future.

The pandemic situation has highlighted the role of a well-functioning context in our mental health and wellbeing and, thus, the importance of community-based support. A concrete inspirational and successful example of such community care is the Friendship Bench approach from Zimbabwe. Here, grandmothers are trained to deliver CBT-based therapy on wooden benches that are placed around the community. This method has proven to be very effective in promoting mental health in low-resource settings and is an innovative way of delivering community-based mental health services at a low cost as well as of building resilience and community support.

Further, physical activity is known to have beneficial effects on our mental health. The Swedish method Physical Activity on Prescription (PAP-S) was discussed in one workshop. It is an evidence-based method of creating and maintaining mental health that should be implemented more widely across countries and cultures, perhaps through a common digital platform. It is also a good example of a highly accessible self-help method that all of us can implement in our lives, as we see fit, to improve our mental health and wellbeing.

Finally, the increased vulnerability to mental ill health and mental disorders among women during their reproductive years was discussed in two of the workshops. There is a clear need for increased awareness, both among the general public and the women themselves, of the life challenges associated with the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and postpartum, and the menopausal transition, which are linked to increased levels of depressive disorders in large parts of the female population. Clearly, more research is needed in this area to develop prevention, screening and treatment methods that are specific to women. Joint efforts between academia, healthcare providers, and policymakers are required to promote women's wellbeing.

In sum, The Uppsala Health Summit 2021 resulted in several innovative ideas and recommendations for how global mental health and wellbeing can be protected and promoted across societal levels and cultures. The summit constitutes a small but important step towards increased awareness of the fact that joint action, across societal levels and countries, is key to improving global mental health and wellbeing. We are all part of the problem as well as the solution!

In what follows, the conclusions and recommendations from each of the eight workshops are presented in summaries authored by workshop leaders.

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