

Concept of Mental Health Promotion and Developing Country-Specific Plans for Mental Health Promotion

*Report of the Regional Workshop
Bangkok, Thailand, 17-19 November 2005*

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1. Introduction

The role of health promotion in mental health is embedded in the WHO definition of health (1948): “Health is a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” The Ottawa Charter (1986) defines health promotion as “a process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health.” More recently, the Bangkok Charter on Health Promotion (2005), among other things, calls for making the promotion of health a key focus of communities and civil society.

Within the context of health promotion, health has been considered less as an abstract state and more as a means to an end which can be expressed in functional terms as a resource which permits people to lead at an individual level, a socially and economically productive life. Promoting the mental health of individuals and communities is therefore a major function of health promotion. There is substantial evidence to show that effective health promotion strategies can lead to better health.

Good mental health is a goal that most of us share, and mental health promotion is a means of reaching that goal. Mental health is promoted through processes which give people the ability to function well, or which remove barriers that may prevent people from having control over their mental well-being. Mental health promotion applies to the whole population in the context of everyday life. It is not only for those who experience mental illness, or for those who are considered to be at risk for mental illness. Mental health promotion initiatives build on the existing networks of social support in communities, and create new relationships that enhance our sense of belonging. Secondly, it is important to consider that mental health promotion can take many forms. Because positive mental health is the result of many interacting factors, there is no single way to promote it. Communities are made up of a diverse range of people, so efforts to promote mental health need to consider a variety of strategies and approaches that are relevant to the full range.

To be successful, mental health promotion efforts require active involvement of people in identifying mental health needs, setting priorities, controlling and implementing solutions, and evaluating progress towards goals - essentially a community development model. Also there is an urgent need to create awareness among policy-makers of the paramount importance of mental health promotion. This will lead to the recognition and integration of mental health promotion activities in the national health programmes, with adequate funding. Countries must see actions in health promotion, including mental health promotion, as justifiable social investments, that can contribute effectively to overall national development.

As a follow-up of the meeting of technical experts on mental health promotion held at the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia from 14-15 October 2005, a regional workshop on the "Concept of mental health promotion and developing country-specific plans for mental health promotion" was organized by WHO/SEARO in Bangkok from 17-19 November 2005. Participants from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand attended the workshop. There were two technical experts from India: Dr Jitendra Nagpal (expert on life-skills education) and Dr Ratna Sharma (expert on meditation for stress relief). Six community members from Bangkok were invited to present their views on their expectations from mental health promotion programmes.

2 Objectives of the workshop

2.1 General objective

The general objective of the workshop was to provide information and guidelines to Member Countries on mental health promotion.

2.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives were:

- To discuss the concept and determinants of good mental health.
- To discuss the feasibility of developing country-specific plans for mental health promotion by countries.

3. Summary of proceedings

The workshop was inaugurated by Dr Seri Hongyok, Deputy Director General, Department of Mental Health, Thailand. The address by Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region was read by Dr Vijay Chandra, Regional Adviser, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO/SEARO.

Dr Vijay Chandra introduced the concept of mental health promotion. He said that there is increasing awareness that strategies for promoting mental well-being are extremely important to enable individuals to enjoy good health. The approach should be to identify determinants of mental well-being which should be promoted and identification of risk factors for disease which should be reduced/controlled. Once risk factors and determinants of mental well-being are identified, Member Countries can develop their own country-specific programmes for promotion of mental health. This can then be delivered as a package to the community in their own countries. The community must understand what is implied by mental health promotion because once people understand what is being advocated they will accept the recommendations more easily.

Dr Prawate Tantipiwatanaskul, Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Thailand, presented a working paper on mental health promotion prepared on the basis of the discussions held in New Delhi. He pointed out that over the past 20 years the interest in promoting mental health has grown. Mental health is increasingly seen as fundamental to physical health and quality of life and thus needs to be addressed as an important component of improving overall health and well-being. In particular, there is growing evidence to suggest interplay between mental and physical health and well-being and outcomes such as educational achievement, productivity at work, development of positive personal relationships, reduction in crime rates and decreasing harm associated with use of alcohol and drugs. It follows that promoting mental health through a focus on key determinants should not only result in lower rates of some mental disorders and improved physical health but also better educational performance, greater productivity of workers, improved relationships within families and healthier communities.

Health promotion strategies are based on the question of how health is created. The objective is to offer people more control over the determinants of their health. Mental health promotion, thus, involves actions that allow people to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles and create living conditions and environments that support health. Good mental health goes hand in hand with peace, stability and success, and promoting mental health presents a powerful case for including mental health promotion in the public health policies of all countries.

Dr Chandra's presentation also discussed:

- That mental health can be enhanced by effective public health interventions
- A climate that respects and protects basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights is fundamental to the promotion of mental health
- Intersectoral linkage is vital for mental health promotion.

3.1 Country presentations

Participating countries presented their activities on mental health promotion.

Bangladesh

The mental health programme is now orienting itself to development not only of the tertiary care programme but also of a community-based mental health programme. There are training programmes on mental health for primary health care physicians, health workers and religious leaders. The goals of the programme are:

- Enhancing the ability of the primary health care physician in

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