

Promoting Mental Health

CONCEPTS ■ EMERGING EVIDENCE ■ PRACTICE

A Report of the
World Health Organization,
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse
in collaboration with
the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
and
The University of Melbourne



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Foreword

The World Health Organization (WHO) embraces a definition of health as “physical, mental, and social well-being”. Of these elements, mental well-being historically has been misunderstood and often forgotten. WHO has spent the last five years actively addressing the barriers that prevent access to mental health care and campaigning for the full incorporation of mental health in world-wide public health. Thanks greatly to their hard work, mental health now ranks as a priority within the international health and development agenda. Governments across the world and health professionals across the disciplines are now more aware of the importance of mental health issues to the overall health of individuals, communities, cities, and even entire nations.

Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice clarifies the concept of mental health promotion and is a potent tool for guiding public officials and medical professionals in addressing the behavioural health needs of their societies. It presents striking evidence that there is a strong link between the protection of basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of people and their mental health. In these times, when conflicts between individuals and communities are on the increase and economic disparities are widening, this message is especially relevant. 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.

WHO recognizes that besides the vital need for expanding services to those who currently receive none, prevention of mental disorders and vigorous promotion of healthy behaviours are critical for decreasing the international burden of mental illnesses and for helping people to realize their full potential. WHO's efforts include international reviews of scientific evidence for interventions; wide dissemination of evidence, particularly in lower and middle income countries; and assisting governments and non-governmental organizations in using the evidence to develop actual programmes.

Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice emphasizes that everyone has a role and responsibility in mental health promotion and encourages integrated participation from a variety of sectors such as education, work, environment, urban planning and community development as the best way to make the most positive improvement in people's mental health. It appropriately focuses on resource-poor settings; however, money is not the key determinant to ensure good mental health. Awareness and active involvement by each member of the community often have the greatest impact.

I congratulate WHO on this excellent work and urge policy-makers the world over to use this important information to effect real improvement in the mental health and well-being for all their people.

Rosalynn Carter
Chair, Mental Health Task Force
The Carter Center
Atlanta, Georgia
USA

Foreword

"... not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

"... attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health."

"... to foster activities in the field of mental health, especially those affecting the harmony of human relations."

These objectives and functions of the World Health Organization (WHO) are at the core of our commitment to mental health promotion.

Unfortunately, health professionals and health planners are often too preoccupied with the immediate problems of those who have a disease to be able to pay attention to needs of those who are "well". They also find it difficult to ensure that the rapidly changing social and environmental conditions in countries around the world support rather than threaten mental health. This situation is only partly based on the lack of clear concepts or of adequate evidence for effectiveness for health promoting interventions. This has much to do with how the professionals and planners are trained, what they see as their role in society and, in turn, what society expects them to do. In the case of mental health, this also has to do with our reluctance to discuss mental health issues openly.

Promoting Mental Health: Concepts, Emerging Evidence, Practice is WHO's latest initiative to overcome these barriers. It describes the concept of mental health and its promotion. It tries to arrive at a degree of consensus on common characteristics of mental health promotion as well as variations across cultures. It also positions mental health promotion within the broader context of health promotion and public health. The evidence provided for the health and non-health interventions for mental health benefits is likely to be useful to health policy planners and public health professionals. The emphasis, however, is on the urgent need for a more systematic generation of evidence in the coming years, so that a stronger scientific base for further planning can be developed.

Prevention of mental disorders and promotion of mental health are distinct but overlapping aims. Many of the interventions discussed in this report are also relevant for prevention. However, the scope as well as the target audience is considered much wider for mental health promotion. For this reason, WHO is releasing this report on promotion separately from a forthcoming report on the evidence for prevention of mental disorders.

I trust that the present full report, along with the summary report released earlier, will create a more definite place for mental health promotion within the broader field of health promotion and will be useful for the countries that WHO serves.

Dr Catherine Le Galès-Camus

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World Health Organization, Geneva

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