

## **Committee/Council: Action Paper 1**

**Issue: Social acceptance of mental illness**

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### **Introduction**

The average individual belongs nowadays to a group of people called society. The formation of a society is dependent on factors such as geographic location, political ideology and cultural and heritage background. Societies exist all around the globe, and the members of each society are interconnected through relationships. Nevertheless, not each and every person is a member of a society, on the grounds that some people may differ entirely from the members of the specific society and thus not conform to the norm. Such individuals tend to face public condemnation and social rejection.

A certain type of people belonging to this divergent and vulnerable group are the mentally ill people. Mental illness has been stigmatized by modern society, meaning that certain preconceptions and stereotypes have been formed regarding the behavior and mentality of such people. Such beliefs refer to mentally ill people as “abnormal”, unstable, unable to function properly on a daily basis and dangerous to the sovereignty of a society. Of course, it is scientifically proven that the aforementioned features are not characteristics of a mentally ill person and that each mental disorder comes with its own difficulties and burdens, which may affect an individual according to the severity of the illness.

Social rejection of mental illness entails severe consequences for such individuals. The average human feels the need to be accepted by society, since the feeling of acceptance provides one with the pleasure of being liked by others for what one is and for one’s own values. The feeling of social condemnation is doubtlessly an unbearable one, which subsequently may lead to depression, the aggravation of one’s illness or even the combination of the two.

Thus, a solution, which would facilitate the acceptance of mentally ill people by modern society, is of utmost importance. It would limit the prevalence of depression nowadays as well as diminish the constantly growing percentage of mental illness cases in our time. Mentally ill people have feelings and the right to be treated like the physically ill people.

## Definition of Key-Terms

### Mental health

According to the World Health Organization; "Mental health describes a person's condition with regard to his/her psychological and emotional well-being. Mental health refers to the ability to essentially enjoy life, while maintaining stability in one's life activities and efforts so as to become psychologically resilient."<sup>1</sup>

### Mental illness

According to the American Psychiatric Association; "Mental illnesses are health conditions, which involve changes in behavior, thinking or emotion (or a combination of these). Mental illnesses are linked with distress and problems when it comes to functioning in family, social or work activities."<sup>2</sup>

### Social stigma

A stigma is a behavior or reputation that is socially discrediting in a particular way. It is the mental classification of an individual by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one. Social stigma involves being excluded or treated poorly because of some characteristic, which the individual often has no or little control over.<sup>3</sup>

### Disability

A disability is described as a physical or mental condition, which limits an individual's movements, senses or activities. People with disability may experience a narrower margin of health due to poverty or social exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

### Substance abuse

Substance abuse refers to the hazardous or harmful but also excessive use of psychoactive substances, such as alcohol and illicit drugs. It is characterized by daily intoxication and the inability to reduce consumption, which leads to impairment in occupational or social functioning.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "WHO | Mental Health: a State of Well-being." WHO | World Health Organization, [www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/).

<sup>2</sup> "What Is Mental Illness?" Home | Psychiatry.org, [www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness](http://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness).

<sup>3</sup> "Mental Health & Stigma." *Psychology Today*, 20 Aug. 2013, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-we-worry/201308/mental-health-stigma](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-we-worry/201308/mental-health-stigma).

<sup>4</sup> "Disabilities." *World Health Organization*, [www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/).

<sup>5</sup> "Substance Abuse." World Health Organization, [www.who.int/topics/substance\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/topics/substance_abuse/en/).

## Background Information

### History of mental illness and its treatment

Mental illness was perceived in the past as a problematic behaviour linked to religion, such as the battle between good and evil or the punishment by a higher being, according to each religion. In the 5th century B.C., Hippocrates was the first to initiate medicine as a means of encountering mental illness and promote the prescription of medications for that specific purpose.

In the 16th century, social and physical confinement (in asylums) of mentally ill people made a breakthrough in Europe and the social stigma started shaping up. In the 17th century, a slight amelioration of the prevalent situation was evident, but only in some areas of Europe. In the 1800s, people in the USA developed a negative, distorted view of mental illness, thus leading to the social rejection of such patients.

Briefly, the approach towards mentally ill people has been negative throughout the past centuries and their classification in society was among the most unwelcome groups of people. The social stigma surrounding mental illness has existed for a considerable amount of time and is not a product of the 21st century.

### Causes of mental illness



Figure 1: Factors affecting mental health<sup>6</sup>

Mental illness can be caused by various factors, such as biological, psychological and environmental ones. <sup>6</sup>

Biologically, many mental disorders have been attributed to the defective functioning of nerve cells in the human brain. Those cells are responsible for the chemicals of the brain, the so-called neurotransmitters, whose dysfunction may lead to a chemical imbalance and subsequently to abnormalities in the nerve cell circuit. Medicines and psychotherapy are essentially focused on triggering those chemicals so as to ensure

<sup>6</sup> "How Mental Health Difficulties Affect Children." KidsMatter, [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/about-mental-health/should-i-be-concerned/how-mental-health-difficulties-affect-children-0](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/about-mental-health/should-i-be-concerned/how-mental-health-difficulties-affect-children-0).

normality in the brain circuit.

Some mental illnesses are hereditary, which means that they may already exist in the genes of a person in a family. The offspring of that person may inherit the genes and thus become susceptible to the specific illness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they will definitely manifest symptoms of the disorder throughout their lives. Apart from this, any infections or serious injuries, which may have caused damage to the brain, may trigger mental illness. Use of banned substances and malnutrition might pave the way for mental illness as well.

One’s psychology pertaining to past events plays a huge role in the development of mental disorders. Any experiences, which may include the physical, emotional or sexual abuse of a person, could essentially cause a mental disorder. Additionally, any distressing event in one’s life, such as the death of one’s parent, directly affects one’s mental state.

The environmental determinants of mental illness encompass a wide variety of events and situations, which may peak a person’s susceptibility to mental illness. Major losses, divorces, problematic relationships in a family, a stressful life, low self-confidence and generally radical changes in one’s life.

Common mental disorders

There are several types of mental disorders, such as anxiety, mood, psychotic, eating, impulse control and addiction, personality disorders. Two special disorders include the obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Anxiety disorders are physical conditions, which involve excessive amounts of stress, worry and/or fear on a daily basis for the individual suffering. Some of the most common anxiety disorders are the generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), agoraphobia, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder and separation anxiety. OCD and PTSD are linked to anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders are the most common

Everyday Anxiety	Anxiety Disorder
Worry about paying bills, landing a job, a romantic breakup, or other important life events	Constant and unsubstantiated worry that causes significant distress and interferes with daily life
Embarrassment or self-consciousness in an uncomfortable or awkward social situation	Avoiding social situations for fear of being judged, embarrassed, or humiliated
A case of nerves or sweating before a big test, business presentation, stage performance, or other significant event	Seemingly out-of-the-blue panic attacks and the preoccupation with the fear of having another one
Realistic fear of a dangerous object, place, or situation	Irrational fear or avoidance of an object, place, or situation that poses little or no threat of danger
Anxiety, sadness, or difficulty sleeping immediately after a traumatic event	Recurring nightmares, flashbacks, or emotional numbing related to a traumatic event that occurred several months or years before

Figure 2: Difference between everyday anxiety and anxiety disorder<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “Understand the Facts.” Anxiety and Depression Association of America, ADAA, [adaa.org/understanding-anxiety](http://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety).

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unique characteristics of each person, and personality disorders may negatively affect those characteristics and bring a halt to one's socialization. Common personality disorders are the borderline personality disorder, the schizoid personality disorder and the paranoid personality disorder.

### Treatment of mental illness<sup>9</sup>

Many people diagnosed with a mental illness regain strength through participating in individual or group treatment. While there is no universal cure that works for everyone, there are many different treatment options, which individuals can choose from. However, since there are many different factors that contribute to the development of each illness, it is difficult to predict when, or to what degree someone is going to recover. Here is a list of some of the treatments available to an individual:



Figure 4: Possible ways to treat mental illness<sup>9</sup>

#### Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy explores the feelings, behaviors and thoughts of an individual and seeks to improve its well-being. When paired with medication, it usually is the most effective way to promote recovery. With the insights and knowledge, a person gains during psychotherapy, he can then learn how to cope with the stress and problems surrounding him. The sessions can take place one-on-one, in a group or with family members.

#### Medication

Some people are helped by taking medication for a short time-period; others may need it on an ongoing basis. While medication is effective, there are possible side effects that come with the benefits. Research shows that most mental illnesses are paired with changes in our brain chemistry, which is why medication is so effective, since it helps the brain to restore its usual chemical balance, so that symptoms are reduced or eliminated. A common risk, however, is that an individual suddenly becomes dependent on his prescribed medication, which can be even more harmful to the user.

#### Community support groups

Support groups are meetings, where individuals can come together to share their experiences, stories and lives, which help reduce loneliness and isolation but also boost self-acceptance. Oftentimes, people find themselves

<sup>9</sup> [Image](#)

alone in the world, but support groups help them see that there are others who struggle with similar situations and in turn can help each other to get better.

Throughout the years, there has been a lot of change when it comes to treating mental illnesses. Lobotomy started in 1936· this type of surgery was performed by using an “icepick”, which would be introduced into the frontal lobe of the brain. This method was used to treat schizophrenia and severe depression. It was on the cruel side of treatments and was stopped in 1967, after people demanded more humane treatments for mentally- ill patients. Around that time the “Comprehensive Mental Health Bill” (1964) and the “Medicare and Medicaid Act” (1966) were passed, in order to help those with mental illnesses.

On the other hand, there are some treatments that are still used to this day; a case in point is the so-called Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT). It was invented in Italy in the late 1930s. The therapy works by using electricity to induce seizures, by sending electrical impulses into the brain to stimulate the neurons that are not working properly. This treatment lasts about 8 seconds but does cause a short seizure. It was used to treat severe depression but also to help people with hallucinations or suicidal thoughts. In the past, treatments without anesthesia could cause memory loss, fractured bones and other severe side effects. Nowadays, this type of therapy is done under general anesthesia, but the principle is still the same. ECT appears to cause slight changes in the brain chemistry, which can swiftly reverse the symptoms of certain mental illnesses. Though ECT still causes some side effects, it is much safer today and is mostly done as a “last resort” when every other treatment has failed.

#### Discrimination against mentally ill people<sup>10</sup>

Nowadays, one in four people will experience, at some point in their lives, a mental health problem.<sup>11</sup> More than 450 million people all around the world suffer from mental health problems. Although so many people are affected, there is a strong social stigma paired

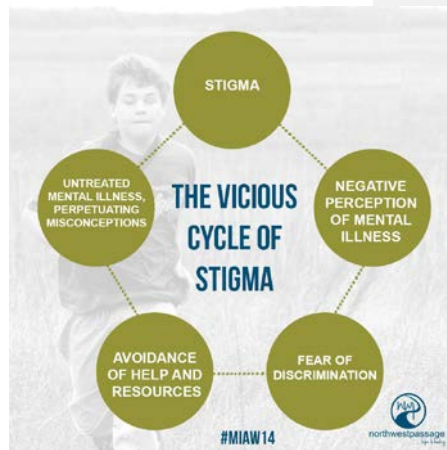


Figure 5: The vicious circle of social stigma<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> [Image](#)

<sup>11</sup> "WHO | Mental Disorders Affect One in Four People."

WHO | World Health Organization, [www.who.int/whr/2001/media\\_centre/press\\_release/en/](http://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/).

with mental health, meaning that people who suffer from mental illnesses often experience discrimination in all aspects of their lives. Oftentimes, people’s mental problems are made worse by the discrimination they experience, not only from society, but also from friends, employers and even families. As can be seen, it is an endless cycle; Discrimination worsens someone’s mental health, which in turn delays his/her recovery, this all leads to social isolation, unemployment and poverty, which are all linked to mental ill health. This, for the most part, is simply because society has stereotyped views about mental illnesses and their effect on people. A surprisingly vast amount of people shares the belief that the mentally- ill are violent and dangerous, when in fact the contrary is true; they are more likely to be attacked or to harm themselves rather than others. Lastly, like in almost any topic nowadays, the media play a major role. Often portraying the mentally- ill as dangerous or evil, they just enforce the above-mentioned stereotypes. To sum up, if the discrimination against such people is to be stopped, controlling the media and proving these stereotypes wrong is of the utmost importance.

Mental illness in the digital era<sup>12</sup>

Today the vast majority of young people are social media users; technology is now the norm. However, all this technology seems to change how children socialize and develop, as they have to cope with challenges such as cyberbullying and often find themselves competing online with others. As digital citizens, it is our responsibility to be aware of the impact this can have on future generations, with depression and anxiety rates among teenagers rising up to 70% in the past 25 years. Children nowadays have become dependent on approval from others online, in the form of “Likes” or “Followers”. As they only portray their best side, by uploading only their best pictures and finest moments, many

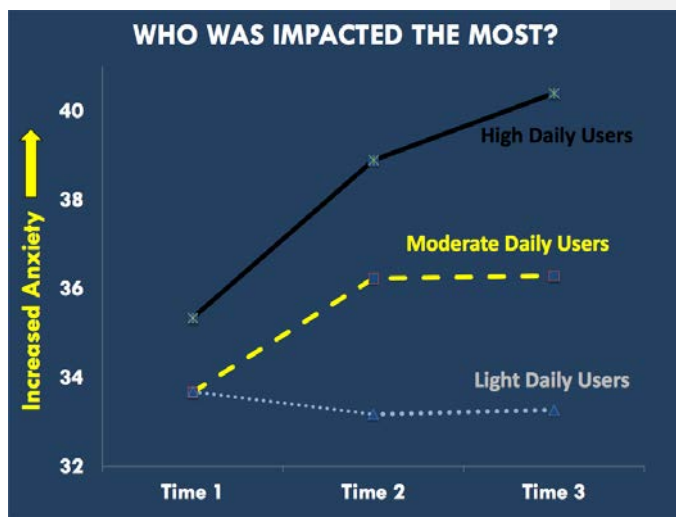


Figure 6: The impact of social media on the amount of one's anxiety according to daily usage<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> [Image](#)



likes give them a sense of security. The problem with this is that if all teenagers upload information with the only goal being to show off, cyberspace quickly turns into a competition where people beg for the most attention. The only thing resulting from this competing with each other is anxiety and low self-esteem. Moreover, this is especially worrying since children are not mature enough to comprehend what they see online is not necessarily an accurate representation of the real world. This has gone so far, that some studies actually show that there can be a so-called "Like-addiction".

To sum up, nowadays, social media have the biggest influence on children. In order to keep future generations mentally healthy, solutions surrounding cyberspace have to be found. Luckily, there are multiple campaigns and programs against cyberbullying, which help victims but also discourage offenders. On the other hand, it is quite hard to interfere with children's beliefs especially at that age, which makes this issue quite difficult to deal with.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### World Health Organization

In 2013 the WHO (World Health Organization) proposed a mental health action plan (Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020), which was adopted by the 66th World Health Assembly. It is described as a landmark achievement, since it focuses international attention on a long-neglected problem, which is rooted deeply in the body itself of human rights principles.

### United Nations Human Rights Commission

In 2016, The UNHRC (United Nations Human Rights Commission) issued a resolution calling for the recognition of the rights of people with a broad spectrum of mental illness. The resolution also called on member states to work towards the implementation of WHO's Action Plan of 2013. While both documents concentrate on a comprehensive approach to mental health, the UNHRC resolution advocates more forcefully the protection of the rights of those with mental health issues.

### World Federation for Mental Health

The World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH), which was founded in 1948, is the only international multidisciplinary advocacy and education organization

concerned with all aspects of mental health. The purpose of this NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) is to advance the prevention of mental and emotional disorders but also the proper treatment and care of those with such disorders. WFMH also was a co-sponsor of the 7<sup>th</sup> World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioral Disorders, held in Perth, Australia.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1930s	Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) started gaining popularity.
1940s	Initiation of the Lobotomy procedure for the treatment of mental illness.
7 April 1948	Foundation of the World Health Organization (WHO), nowadays celebrated annually as World Health Day.
1954	The first antipsychotic drug entered the global market.
17 December 1991	Establishment of the “Principles for the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and for the Improvement of Mental Health Care” by the United Nations.
13 December 2006	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was held, which facilitated the establishment of right for disabled persons, including the ones psychosocially disabled/suffering from mental illness.
28 September 2017	United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution on Mental Health and Human Rights.

## Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

- **A/RES/46/119**

General Assembly 75th plenary meeting, 17 December 1991; “The protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care”; The resolution demonstrates the UN Principles set for the protection of mentally-ill individuals and the amelioration of mental health care, while also calling for the Secretary General to act in favor of their immediate adoption by the member states.

- **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (A/RES/61/106)**

13 September 2006, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Inclusion Development. The convention initiated the classification of various types of disabilities and the establishment of equal rights for disabled individuals, while highlighting aspects where certain disabilities hinder one’s activities to exercise one’s rights and thus appropriate legislation has to apply.

- **A/HRC/32/L.26**

Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution on Mental Health and Human Rights, 28 September 2017. The resolution calls for the protection of all human rights, especially for mental patients, and the development of strategies in each member state in order to eradicate discrimination and violence against mentally ill individuals.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

### World Health Organization

The WHO proposed the “Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020” in May 2013, which was then adopted by the 66th World Health Assembly,

consisting of 194 Member States. It recognizes the vital role of mental health when it comes to achieving health for all people. Being based on a life-course approach, the aforementioned plan aims to achieve equity through universal health coverage and stresses the importance of prevention. Four major objectives are to be achieved through this plan:

- More effective governance for mental health
- Provision of social care services
- Implementation of strategies for promotion and prevention
- Strengthened information systems, evidence and research

Should these targets be achieved by 2020, it would mean that not only 80% of countries will have introduced or updated a national plan for mental health in line with international and regional human rights instruments, but also that half of all countries will have updated their mental health legislation to protect human rights.

Additionally, WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP), which was launched in 2008, has recently (2016) been updated to Version 2.0. The mhGAP aims at scaling up services for mental, neurological and substance use disorders for countries especially with low- and middle- income. The programme asserts that with proper care and psychosocial assistance many could be helped to recover.

Furthermore, on the 7th of April 2017, World Mental Health Day, the WHO launched their "*Depression: let's talk*" campaign. Its aim was to improve knowledge about depression and its treatment, but also mental health as a whole.

#### World Federation for Mental Health

The WFMH (World Federation for Mental Health) is on a mission to promote the advancement of mental health awareness, as well as the prevention of mental disorders. Their goals include heightening public awareness about the importance of mental health and improving the care, treatment and recovery of people with such disorders. Every year the WFMH hosts multiple conferences all around the world on different topics surrounding mental health, where people get together to discuss the topic and find new solutions. They also work closely together with the WHO (World Health Organization) and played a major role in promoting the 2013 Action Plan.

#### **Possible Solutions**

Social acceptance of mental illness is a complex issue, since each society is diverse and unique and its approach towards mental illness as well. Nevertheless,

social perception can be changed through certain ways and one of the most important ones is education.

Education regarding mental illness is absent in most curricula of countries across the world. Education of the youth will entail understanding of mental illness and its burdens, as well as pave the way for social acceptance of mentally ill people by the next generation. In addition, public awareness ought to be raised generally as well, in an attempt to ameliorate the current situation by informing adults about the social stigma of mental illness, how it affects such people, why it has to be eliminated, the false preconceptions prevailing, the association of violence with mental illness according to facts and not stereotypes and the positive effects of treatment of mental illness. Thereby, even adults could gain an understanding of the undermined position of mentally ill people in society and the false information corresponding to the stigma and thus possibly alter their beliefs.

Apart from education, contact and essentially communication should be initiated between mental patients and the public. Direct human contact would facilitate the process of comprehending mental illness and subsequently empathizing. It is vital that this occurs from a younger age, and after the individuals have been educated on mental illness, so as to ensure that during human contact no negative feelings are expressed against mental patients. Regarding contact between adults, education could take place simultaneously, so as to enhance the intervention's effect on one's personality.

The next step towards social acceptance would be to equate physical health with mental health. This could be achieved through education as well, but only theoretically and partly. The international community, along with relevant organizations, should take action by conducting research and identifying locations where physical health facilities, such as conventional hospitals, exist, but mental health institutions do not. Such areas could be either rural ones within countries with sufficient mental health services or even whole countries, where other issues are prioritized and mental health is not being taken into consideration at all. Mental illness is as important as physical illness, and patients should definitely have the right to provision of support, medical aid and treatment, regardless of one's location.

Furthermore, even mental health professionals, such as doctors, nurses and other employees in mental health facilities tend to adopt sometimes behaviors promoting the social stigma of mental illness. Therefore, they should receive special education as well concerning the social rejection of such people and the consequences of their adopting of such beliefs. Dealing with negative behaviors even by mental health professionals would repel mental patients from seeking help and

support, which would of course adversely affect the whole situation and leave even more mentally ill people untreated.

Finally, yet importantly, it is imperative that support has to be provided to outpatients already in recovery. The realization of such a concept ought to be done through social actions, in other words social support through special group programs supervised by local churches, youth centers and relevant organizations or the establishment of specialized mental health support centers where possible. Websites providing mental health support via live chat and national mental health support lines could be publicized and endorsed so as to increase awareness about them among mental patients as well.

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