Tackling the Mental Health Crisis Among

World Health Organization

Empowering Future Generations: Cultivating Global Literacy and Enlightenment

Introduction

Over the past decade, the prevalence of mental health issues among children and adolescents has increased at an alarming rate, with a 13% rise in diagnosed conditions. Currently, one in seven young people aged 10 to 19 is affected by mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and eating disorders. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), half of all mental health conditions develop by the age of 14, yet the majority of these conditions remain untreated, leading to long-term consequences for young people's development and well-being.

Adolescence is a critical period of growth, both physically and emotionally, making it particularly susceptible to mental health challenges. Factors such as academic pressure, social expectations, family dynamics, and exposure to violence or neglect can exacerbate vulnerabilities. The stigma surrounding mental health continues to act as a barrier to care, preventing young people from seeking the support they need. WHO emphasizes that low- and middle-income countries face even greater challenges, as fewer than 10% of adolescents with mental health disorders in these regions receive adequate care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly worsened the situation. Prolonged periods of isolation, educational disruptions, and increased uncertainty have amplified stress levels among adolescents, with many struggling to adapt. It being called a "shadow pandemic," highlighting the disproportionate impact on young people's mental well-being. Suicide, now the fourth leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15 to 19, underscores the urgent need for immediate and effective interventions.

Definition of Key Terms

Mental health

Mental health is a state of emotional, psychological and social well-being that affects how we think, feel and act.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse often means using drugs or alcohol in unsafe ways, which can lead to addiction or dependence. It can harm a person's health, relationships, and overall well-being.

Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal ideation refers to thinking about, considering, or planning suicide. It can range from fleeting thoughts to detailed planning and is often linked to mental health conditions like depression or severe stress.

Crisis Intervention

Crisis intervention is a short-term, immediate response to help individuals facing a mental health crisis or distressing situation. Its goal is to provide support, reduce emotional pain, and restore stability while connecting individuals to ongoing resources or care, trough hotlines, emergency mental health services.

Economic Stress

Economic stress refers to the mental and emotional strain caused by financial difficulties, such as unemployment, debt, or insufficient income. It can impact a person's well-being, relationships, and ability to meet basic needs.

Mental Health Parity

Mental health parity means treating mental health care the same as physical health care in insurance plans. It ensures people can get help for mental health or substance use problems without extra costs or limits.

Community Engagement

Community engagement means working together with people in a community to address shared goals or challenges. It involves building relationships, listening to ideas, and taking action to improve the community. ### Teletherapy

Teletherapy is therapy provided through phone calls, video chats, or online platforms instead of in person. It allows people to get mental health support from anywhere with internet or phone access.

General Overview

Root causes

The mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents are primarily driven by stress and trauma. Stressful situations, including abuse, neglect, and socio-economic struggles, often force young people to develop coping mechanisms, some of which are unhealthy. One of the most common, avoidance, can lead to conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. However, early intervention and treatment are essential in addressing these conditions, and lack of access to supportive services remains a critical barrier:

1. **Social and economic factors**:
   Poverty, violence, and discrimination are widespread issues that significantly contribute to mental health struggles among children and adolescents. Experiences such as sexual violence, bullying, and harsh parenting can leave lasting emotional scars, making it difficult for young people to develop healthy coping strategies. Children living in poverty face heightened risks of mental health problems, as limited

access to resources and support exacerbates their difficulties. Adolescents growing up in such environments often struggle to find help, as systemic barriers, including inadequate mental health services, hinder early diagnosis and care.

2. **Social pressure:**
The rise of social media has introduced new layers of pressure, especially for adolescents. Social platforms often set unrealistic standards for appearance and behaviour, leading to self-esteem and body image issues. Research by UNICEF shows that social media can significantly impact the mental well-being of young people, particularly regarding their self-worth and body image, which can contribute to conditions like eating disorders (UNICEF, 2021). This pressure to conform can manifest in unhealthy behaviours such as extreme dieting, purging, or binge eating, which have lasting physical and psychological consequences.

Most common mental health problems

1. **Anxiety and depression**:
Anxiety and depression are among the most prevalent conditions affecting young people, impacting around 40% of adolescents with mental health issues (WHO, 2021). These disorders manifest in persistent sadness, fear, withdrawal, and a lack of interest in activities. Anxiety and depression significantly hinder academic performance and social relationships, often leading to substance abuse or self-harm if left untreated. These conditions also place a strain on young people's emotional well-being, making early diagnosis and support crucial.

2. **Conduct disorders**:
Conduct disorders, which affect approximately 20% of adolescents, involve aggressive, defiant, or antisocial behaviour. Without appropriate intervention, these behaviours can escalate into more severe issues, such as juvenile delinquency, leading to long-term social and legal consequences. The importance of early therapeutic intervention should be emphasized to prevent the development of more serious behavioural disorders.

3. **ADHD**:
ADHD affects nearly 19.5% of young people and is characterized by symptoms of impulsivity, inattention, and hyperactivity. These symptoms can interfere with academic success and social integration, leading to further isolation and frustration. Proper management, including behavioural therapy and medication, is crucial in supporting adolescents with ADHD to succeed in both school and personal life.

4. **Eating disorders**:
Approximately 2.4% ages 13-14, 2.8% ages 15-16 and 3.0% ages 17-18. The most common types include:
Anorexia Nervosa: Intense fear of weight gain leading to severe food restriction.
Bulimia Nervosa: Binge eating followed by compensatory behaviours like purging.
Binge Eating Disorder: Recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food without purging
Eating disorders have serious physical and emotional consequences, including malnutrition, heart issues, and an increased risk of anxiety and depression. Given

their increasing prevalence and severe impacts, early detection and treatment are essential.

Major Parties Involved

UNICEF

UNICEF supports policies and programs to strengthen mental health services, focusing on vulnerable children in low-resource settings and providing mental health support in emergencies.

World Health Organisation

WHO creates guidelines, provides research funding, and collaborates with countries to improve mental health services for young people. Their *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030* sets global mental health targets, advocating for prevention, treatment, and support systems

National Governments

Governments are responsible for implementing mental health policies, funding services, and establishing school-based mental health programs. Countries like the UK and Australia have led initiatives to integrate mental health support into public education systems.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs like Save the Children and Mental Health America provide critical services, advocacy, and awareness campaigns, often targeting vulnerable or marginalised groups.

Educational Institutions

Schools are essential for early mental health intervention, training teachers, providing resources, support programs and safe spaces for children and adolescents to discuss and address mental health issues.

Technology Companies

Many tech firms now create digital mental health tools (e.g., mental health apps, teletherapy services) and use social media platforms to promote mental health awareness among youth. Initiatives from companies like Google and Meta have focused on providing resources for mental wellness and preventing cyberbullying.

Timeline of Events

1984	Founding of WHO and Mental Health Inclusion.
1960s-70s	Initial Awareness of Youth Mental Health Issues. Research Emerges and community mental health movements start forming.
1980s	Recognition of Mental Health in Education. School based programs start.

1990	WHO's *Global Burden of Disease* Study. WHO's study highlights mental health as a major contributor to global disease burdens, particularly affecting young people. This leads to a push for countries to recognize mental health as a key area for public health investment.
2001	WHO's *Mental Health: New Understanding, New Hope* Report. This report emphasises the importance of mental health for all ages, including adolescents, and encourages countries to develop mental health policies that include youth.
2013	Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030. WHO and member states commit to a plan with specific goals to address mental health issues, focusing on early intervention, stigma reduction, and expanded access to services for children and adolescents.
2018	UNICEF's youth well-being index and advocacy. UNICEF publishes findings that highlight the scale of mental health issues among adolescents, with campaigns urging governments to take stronger action on youth mental health globally.
2019	Increased focus post-pandemic research. Studies and reports show the pandemic has intensified mental health issues among youth due to isolation, educational disruptions, and stress. Governments and organisations worldwide increase funding and mental health initiatives focused on youth.
2021	WHO-UNICEF joint policy recommendations. WHO and UNICEF jointly release comprehensive guidelines recommending integrated mental health services, community involvement, and expanded school-based support to tackle the crisis.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Several global initiatives have been undertaken to address the mental health crisis among children and adolescents, but challenges remain. The following are key attempts that have shaped current approaches:

1. **WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan (2013-2030)**
   The World Health Organization (WHO) launched this global action plan to reduce the mental health burden worldwide. It focuses on improving mental health services for all age groups, particularly children and adolescents, advocating for early intervention, expanding access to services, and reducing stigma. One of its major strategies is to integrate mental health into general healthcare systems to ensure that young people receive timely care at local levels.

2. **UNICEF's Youth Mental Health Advocacy**
   UNICEF has long advocated for the mental health of young people, particularly through its "The State of the World's Children" report. The 2021 report highlighted that mental health is a critical issue for children and adolescents, with significant consequences for development and future outcomes. UNICEF's advocacy has helped bring attention to the need for greater investment in mental health resources, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where these services are often unavailable. The organization also calls for the inclusion of mental health education in schools and better community-based care models.
3. **School-based mental health programs**
   In several countries, including the UK and Australia, the integration of mental health services into schools has been a major focus. Programs aimed at providing early intervention for mental health issues through school counselors, social workers, and peer-support networks have been implemented. Research shows that school-based programs can provide a unique opportunity for reaching young people early in their development, especially for those who might not otherwise have access to mental health services.

Possible solutions

To address the growing mental health crisis among young people, the following solutions are suggested:

1. **Universal mental health education**
   A global initiative to implement mental health education in schools from a young age could help reduce stigma and promote early detection of issues. By providing age-appropriate, evidence-based programs in schools, children and adolescents could be equipped with the knowledge and skills to better manage their mental health and seek help when necessary. This could be part of a wider effort to promote overall well-being and resilience among young people.
2. **Expanded use of digital mental health tools**
   Leveraging technology can provide young people with greater access to mental health support, especially in underserved areas. Mobile apps, online therapy platforms, and telehealth services could expand the reach of mental health services, offering anonymous and immediate support. These tools can also help overcome barriers such as long wait times, lack of trained professionals, or geographical isolation. Additionally, integrating mental health services with existing platforms such as school and social media networks could provide seamless access.
3. **International funding and support for mental health services in low-resource settings**
   International collaboration to secure funding for mental health services, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, is crucial. WHO and UNICEF's guidance on improving access to mental health care stresses the importance of strengthening national mental health systems. Donor countries and

organizations could play a pivotal role in supporting these efforts, ensuring that mental health services are available to all young people, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographical location.

Useful documents

1. WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan (2013-2030): https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240031029
2. The State of the World's Children 2021: https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021
3. WHO and UNICEF have many more useful documents if needed.

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