AMERICAN MOCK WORLD
HEALTH ORGANIZATION AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

AFRO REGIONAL GUIDE

REGIONAL CONFERENCE 2019

GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH: FROM SILENCE TO SOLUTIONS

OUAMWHO

SUMMARY OF THE AFRICAN REGIONS

The African region as a whole is under constant threat from public health crises including infectious disease outbreaks, famine, and war. Because of the severity of these issues, African countries are prone to neglect mental health, an area of health that is already dominated by superstition and stigma. Many of Africa's mental health issues are amplified by the geopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances of the region. Areas destabilized by conflict and terrorism are more likely to produce mental health crises, as war brings exposure to traumatic events, such as displacement, physical and sexual violence, and bereavement. War orphans and child soldiers, for example, are significantly more likely to suffer from a mental disorder.

Furthermore, access to mental healthcare specialists is often sparse in Africa, and when these services are available, very often they are much more centered the capital and urban areas. For example, in Kenya, 70% of mental health facilities are located in the capital of Nairobi. This is largely a consequence of colonialism and neo-colonialism, as many developed countries concentrated resources and neglected developing rural areas, leading to poor infrastructure and disparity of access. Unfortunately, mental health care in African countries is generally stigmatized and underfunded to the point where African countries currently dedicate on average less than 1% of their health budget to mental health, compared to 6-12% in North America and Europe. This lack of access to mental health facilities and treatment only serves to worsen the issue.

IMPORTANT TOPICS

Newborn & Child Mental Health

New mothers are at special risk for mental health issues due to changes in hormones and neurochemistry. The most common of these illnesses is postpartum depression, which can affect anywhere from 10-15% of women worldwide, and in the most severe cases, can even result in suicide or infanticide. Mental illnesses in the mother can have profound impacts on the child, leading to difficulty in development and further mental health crises later in life. These issues are amplified in many areas of Africa, especially areas facing issues with poverty or instability. However, postpartum depression can be effectively treated even by non-specialists; the main issue is identifying the illness and providing access to care.

One of the most important issues for childhood mental health and development is socioeconomic status and access to necessities such as nutrition and shelter. Malnutrition and impoverishment are directly linked to mental health issues, so being able to alleviate these concerns can greatly help in reducing mental illness. Another issue especially prominent for child mental health in this region is political instability. Children affected by war are at a heightened risk for developing mental illness, and these especially include children orphaned by war and child soldiers. These populations require special attention, as they are at extremely high risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

IMPORTANT TOPICS

Adolescent Mental Health

Adolescent mental health is another important area of need. The majority of mental health issues emerge during this time, with 50% of all mental disorders emerging around the age of 14, and 75% of all mental illness emerging by the mid 20's. Puberty and entering school both can cause stress and changes that amplify these issues.

In the African region, said issues are especially prevalent in schools because resources for education are often stretched thin, thus recognizing mental health issues is more difficult. As well, this is amplified by the political instability in many African countries; when school is not a safe place for students, or access to education is either banned or unreliable, adolescents are much more likely to develop mental health disorders. Additionally, many areas have limited access to mental health specialists, especially for adolescent mental health. Finally, one of the other most common issues in this region with regards to adolescent mental health is in patient rights, as many countries do not have laws requiring patients and their families to have access to information regarding their disorders, lack laws ensuring confidentiality, or requiring authorities to inform patients and their families of their rights and treatment options.

IMPORTANT TOPICS

Adult & Elderly Mental Health

With the aging global population, adult and elderly mental health is becoming more of a priority. The African region is no exception to the aging population, especially as advancements are made in preventing infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. Following the worldwide trend, the population of the African region is getting older. This increasing older population often has difficulty recognizing the symptoms of mental health issues, as they have had less exposure to information that the younger generation has available.

Many countries lack routine screenings for illnesses which most commonly affect the elderly, such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease, exacerbating this issue. This is important in the context of mental health as age-related mental health risk factors such as elder maltreatment and age-based discrimination are becoming more relevant. Traditionally, many African societies expected extended family and younger members to take care of the elderly, but due to changing economics and demographics, this is proving increasingly challenging, create an unfilled need for elderly care.

IMPORTANT TOPICS

Mental Health in Emergencies

Mental Health in Emergencies is especially important in the African region because of frequent conflict and a lack of disaster preparedness. Unfortunately, political instability and neo-colonial influences have led to devastating conflict in the African region, especially in areas rich in natural resources. South Sudan, for example, has been ravaged by conflict over natural oil resources to the point of over 2 million refugees fleeing the country and another estimated 2 million internally displaced people in the country.

Due to the influx of refugees and internally displaced people, countries affected by war and neighboring countries are at higher risk for trauma related mental health disorders. Refugees and internally displaced people face a significantly high risk for mental health disorders such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders. The WHO estimates that 1 in 5 internally displaced people are in need of mental health care. This conflict-driven displacement, along with displacement caused by natural disasters, has created an immense need for better mental health resources during times of emergency in the African region.