PROPOSED THEORY OF CHANGE FOR GLOBAL MENTAL HEALTH

HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Introduction

Background

The core concepts that inform this conceptual framework emerged from evidence briefs drafted in the framework of the consultation process, diverse internal and external stakeholder consultations, and interviews with people with lived experience.[a] In this brief, the concepts are briefly defined and then further supported by evidence from scholarly and gray literature. The framework covers possible objectives, as well as core principles and activities associated with these objectives. In this way, it provides a roadmap that fleshes out the logic and underlying assumptions to which policies and programs might speak, including conceptual linkages that connect improved mental health to human development and well-being.

Conceptual Framework Strategy

A promising conceptual approach to mental health may focus on promoting increased access to evidence-based mental health services, as well as strengthening the capacity of health systems to deliver mental health services in low- and middle-income countries. The conceptual framework should take a human rights-based approach, emphasizing the fundamental rights of individuals with mental health conditions, and speak to the root causes of mental health problems, including social determinants that impact people's mental well-being such as poverty, social isolation, discrimination, and exposure to violence.

The core objectives of this conceptual framework are:

✔ improving the overall mental health and well-being of individuals and communities by tackling the root causes of poor mental health,

✔ improving access to mental health services,

✔ reducing stigma and discrimination associated with mental health conditions,

✔ providing tiered mental health services,

✔ increasing the capacity of community-based health systems,

✔ expanding the availability of evidence-based treatments, and

✔ advancing the human rights of people with mental health conditions

Implementing these strategies would improve the health and well-being of individuals and reduce the impacts of mental ill health on societies and economies.

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[a] Between 2022 and 2023, RTAC conducted extensive consultations with a variety of stakeholders to understand their perspectives on global mental health.

Root Causes and Social Determinants

The key social determinants of poor mental health include many social, economic, and environmental factors that can impact an individual's mental well-being. Tackling the root causes and social determinants of mental health will result in a more comprehensive approach to mental health that addresses the underlying causes of mental ill health, rather than simply treating symptoms. Some key social determinants of poor mental health related to the overarching activities of international development and humanitarian organizations include poverty, inadequate housing, exposure to violence, access to mental health care, and environmental factors.

Poverty

A growing body of research links poverty and unemployment to mental health outcomes. This research suggests that poverty has a significant negative impact on mental health, leading to increased stress and a lack of access to basic needs such as food, housing, and healthcare.[1] Related unemployment and food insecurity can lead to feelings of hopelessness and depression[2] and can negatively impact the ability of individuals to provide for themselves and their families. A systematic review of research completed in 2017 found a strong relationship between income inequality and mental health conditions.[3] The review found as well that increasing income is associated with improved mental health outcomes. Subsequent meta-analyses completed in 2022 have uncovered a correlation between neighborhood-level poverty and mental ill health,[4] and suggest that cash transfers and other poverty alleviation programs can improve the mental health of adolescents in low- and middle-income countries.[5]

Inadequate Housing

Poor quality or overcrowded housing can contribute to stress and anxiety. At a more fundamental level, homelessness can have a profound impact on mental health, particularly among children.[6] Recent systematic reviews have found that interventions such as "housing first," vouchers, and residential treatment programs can successfully foster stability, improving many aspects of mental health and well-being.[7,8]

Exposure to Violence

Exposure to violence, whether through personal experiences or secondary exposure to media and other sources, can have a profound impact on people's mental health. Robust evidence aggregated across multiple studies supports the efficacy of psychosocial interventions in adults with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in humanitarian settings, as well as among children in such settings.[9]

Access to Mental Healthcare

The lack of access to mental health care influences timely and appropriate treatment for mental health conditions. This can lead to worsening symptoms, decreased quality of life, and increased morbidity and mortality. Access to mental health care is influenced by a variety of social determinants including poverty, discrimination, and stigma about mental health.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors that may play a role in adverse mental health outcomes include the physical environment (e.g., toxins, poor air quality), community factors (e.g., violence), and climate change. For example, after climate-induced disasters, increased exposure to environmental toxins has been associated with poor mental health outcomes.[10]

These factors and other social determinants of mental health interact and can have a cumulative negative impact on the well-being of individuals and communities. This conceptual framework recognizes that addressing the social determinants of mental health is an important part of promoting good mental health for all.

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Improve Access to Mental Health Services

Improving access to mental health services in low- and middle-income countries requires a multi-faceted approach. Diverse strategies for increasing access are covered in a separate brief. Findings from another evidence brief identified three core strategies for consideration: 1) increasing tiered and community-based care, 2) integrating mental health in other healthcare settings, and 3) expanding digital interventions and telehealth.

Increasing Community-Based Mental Health Services

Working with communities can help increase access to mental health services and ensure they are culturally appropriate and responsive to local needs. Another meta-review of research studies found that the movement towards community-based care is largely motivated by a desire to increase access and acceptability of mental health services, particularly compared to receiving services in general healthcare facilities.[11] Core strategies for increasing community-based care include delegating basic forms of mental health care tasks to non-specialist health workers, such as community health workers with appropriate training and supervision. Sharing tasks in this way can help increase access to care and reduce the workload of specialized mental health professionals.

Common community-based locations for delivering services in low- and middle-income countries include homes, schools, and refugee camps.[11] A meta-study comparing rates of school-based mental health to outpatient, primary care, child welfare and justice systems, and inpatient care found that schools and outpatient facilities are the most common settings for young people to receive mental health care.[12]

According to several studies, the primary activities that non-specialists have used to provide psychosocial treatments in low- and middle-income countries have been awareness-raising through psychoeducation, skill-building, and rehabilitation. A review of these and other activities delivered by non-specialists suggest greater clinical effectiveness when people with mental health conditions use trusted local providers and are able to achieve family participation.[11] Another systematic review of evidence looked at the effects of family- and parent-focused interventions such as caregiver psychoeducation and caregiver coping skills on mental health outcomes on the mental health of children and youth in low- and middle-income countries. This review showed positive outcomes for child and youth mental health and well-being when caregivers within a community are involved in treatment.[13] All told, recruiting, training, integrating, and supervising more local providers, as well as engaging families, can improve access to effective mental health services.

In another meta-review of community-based mental health care, children and adolescents in low- and middle-income countries emphasized the importance of using traditional healers and social networks when seeking mental health assistance.[14] It is important to recognize, however, that these forms of community-based mental health intervention are extremely understudied.[14] Overall, evidence of the efficacy of mental health interventions delivered by non-specialists in low- and middle-income countries is growing, but more research is needed.[11]

Integrating Mental Health into Primary Care Settings

In many low- and middle-income countries, primary health care is the main source of health care and is often the first point of contact for people seeking health care services. Integrating mental health care into primary care and other health services, such as maternal and child health services, can help to increase access to mental health services for people who might not otherwise seek out care, or those in rural and remote areas where access to specialist care is limited.[15] By integrating mental health care into primary health care, people with mental health problems can receive the care they need without having to travel to specialist mental health clinics, which may be far away or too expensive.

Incorporating mental health services into the broader networks of primary health care services could include providing mental health prevention and promotion, assessment, and treatment services as part of routine primary care. Although integrating mental health care into primary health care can help address the shortage of specialist mental health professionals in many low- and middle-income countries, primary care providers must be trained to provide basic mental health care services in each of these areas, and have appropriate supervision. Evidence suggests that it can be feasible and cost-effective to scale up mental health services in primary care settings.[16]

Integrating mental health care into primary health care can also help reduce stigma associated with mental health problems and improve the overall quality of mental health care.[17] By providing mental health care in a familiar and trusted setting, people are more likely to seek help and receive appropriate treatment.

Expanding Digital Interventions and Telehealth

In a meta-analysis of community-based care in low- and middle-income countries, technological innovations facilitated the delivery of most mental health services.[11] Despite their popularity, however, the effect of online interventions in low- and middle-income countries has not been well-studied, and the effectiveness of such interventions in low-resource contexts is not well documented.[18,19] Still, evidence of the efficacy of online interventions in high-income countries, coupled with a rapid increase in internet access in low- and middle-income countries, suggests that online interventions may increase access and help reduce mental health disparities. Digital interventions may be particularly beneficial in regions where mental health services are scarce or nonexistent.

Expanding Availability of Evidence-Based Care

There is limited research on the effectiveness of many of the forms of mental health interventions commonly implemented in low- and middle-income countries, including traditional healing and medicine. What evidence does exist may not always be applicable to the local context or may speak to approaches that few people use. This can make it difficult to identify effective interventions and to implement them effectively.

A conceptual logic framework for global mental health may need to support research to develop and test locally supported treatments for mental health issues, with a focus on treatments that are feasible and affordable in low- and middle-income countries. Global mental health may need to expand the definition of what counts as "evidence" to incorporate practices not easy to document or measure. International development organizations could also provide direction for technical assistance and capacity building to help low- and middle-income countries implement evidence-based mental health treatments, including training of health care providers, building local capacity to collect and use data to improve mental health care, and supporting the integration of evidence-based mental health care.

Dissemination of information about evidence-based mental health treatments to healthcare providers, policymakers, and the public could also help encourage the adoption of evidence-based practices in work with national governments, service providers, and other stakeholders to develop policies and programs that promote the use of evidence-based care.

To support these efforts, organizations may prioritize initiatives such as developing educational materials, organizing workshops and training programs, and supporting the development of informational websites and other online resources.

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Reduce the Stigma Associated with Mental Health Conditions

Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other factors can result in increased stress and a strong sense of marginalization, which can have negative effects on people's mental health and well-being. A systematic review of child and adolescent mental health concerns in low- and middle-income countries revealed that low levels of knowledge about mental health conditions and treatments, coupled with pervasive stigma, were common.[14] This study found that stigma is associated with low confidence in professional healthcare services among youth, even though many of these youth view professional services as valid options for treatment. Another systematic review investigating the effectiveness of interventions to reduce stigma and discrimination of mental health conditions in low- and middle-income countries found modest evidence that anti-stigma interventions are effective at increasing knowledge and reducing stigmatizing attitudes.[20] On a more positive note, a meta-analysis of stigma reduction programs in low- and middle-income countries found that the quantity and quality of effective mental health stigma reduction interventions have increased over the past five years, and a wide variety of stigma reduction programs have been successfully implemented in resource-poor settings.[21] As a key determinant that prevents access to and usage of mental health services, programs and policies may need to prioritize stigma reduction programs (see related evidence brief).

Advance the Human Rights of People with Mental Health Conditions

Taking a human rights-based approach to mental health prioritizes non-discrimination and equality and is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including greater access to care, improved quality of care, and respect to the self-determination of people with mental health conditions.

The human rights-based approach to mental health promotes non-discrimination and equality. It promotes the voice and participation of people with lived experience in the global mental health field and seeks to ensure that mental health services are provided without discrimination based on factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status. This approach can result in a more inclusive and equitable mental health system that serves the needs of all people, regardless of background.[22]

This approach is tightly linked to other potential development objectives, such as improving access to mental health services, which emphasize the right of everyone, without discrimination, to access the highest attainable standard of mental health care. It places a priority on increasing access to mental health services for marginalized and disadvantaged populations such as people living in poverty, women, children, and individuals belonging to ethnic and sexual minorities.

In addition to access, a human rights-based approach to mental health must speak to the quality of care. This includes the application of fundamental ethical concerns in the delivery of mental health services such as informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. These principles highlight the autonomy of individuals with mental health conditions and enable them to make informed decisions regarding their treatment and care. It gives individuals a greater sense of control, allowing them to take a more active role in their own care. As described previously, a human rights-based approach also includes increasing access to high-quality, evidence-based mental health treatments.

PHOTO CREDIT: AFP / ADRIANE OHANESIAN.

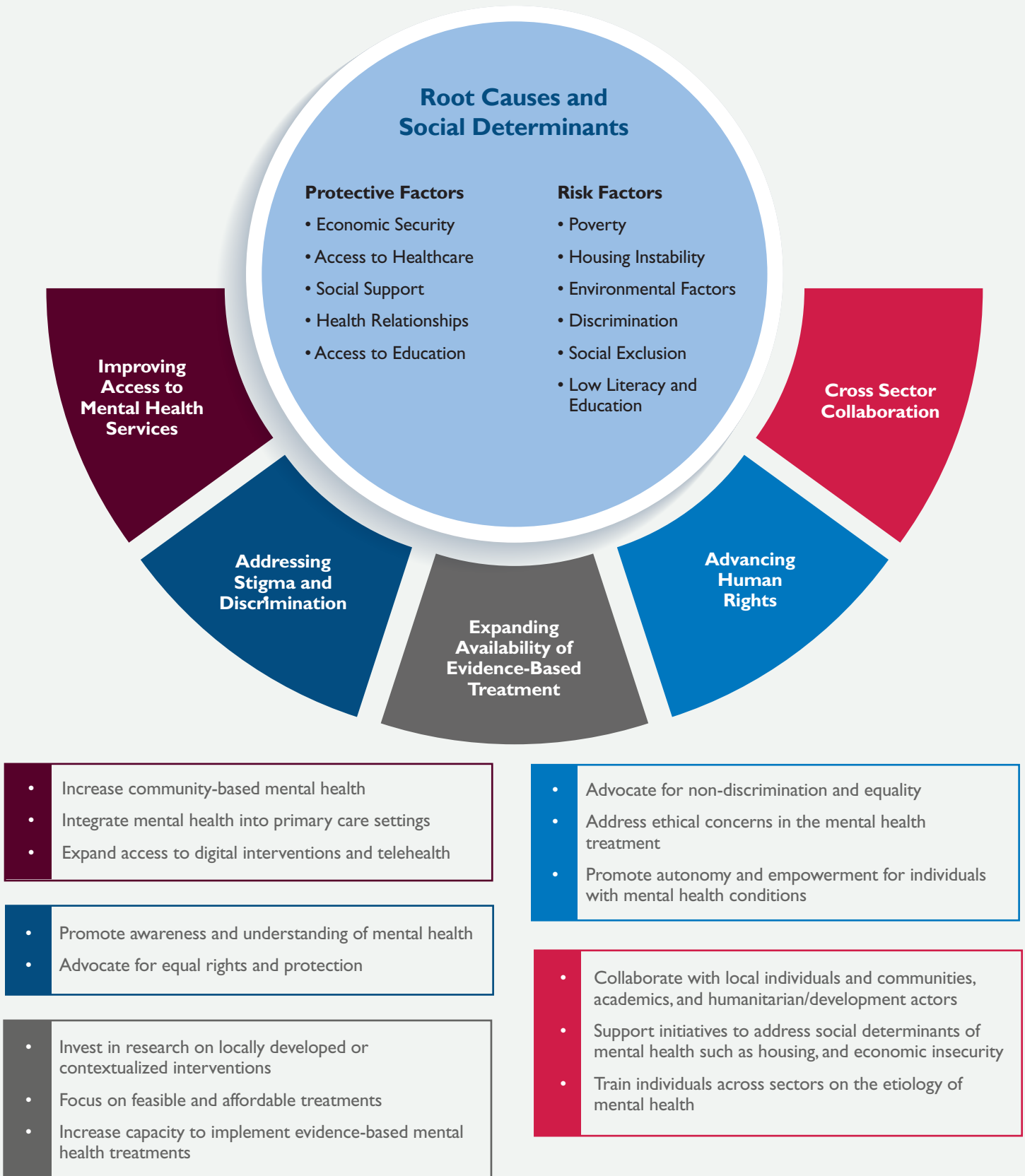# Cross-Sector Coordination and Collaboration

Because mental health outcomes are influenced by factors beyond the individual, a core way to address the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence well-being is through cross-sector collaboration. Collaboration should include local partnerships with policymakers, service users, and civil society, academics with expertise in a variety of disciplines such as psychology, social work, anthropology, implementation science, or economics, and humanitarian and development actors who work in sectors such as, but not limited to, gender-based violence, healthcare, food and nutrition, education, and protection.[24] Working across sectors to increase access to basic needs such as food, shelter, or healthcare may address economic and environmental factors that influence mental health.

Increased economic opportunities such as job training, microfinance initiatives, or strengthening social safety nets are among the strategies to reduce economic insecurity and address social determinants that influence mental health. Training across sectors can also be valuable to increase understanding of the etiology of mental health. Education on trauma-informed care, mental health first aid, suicide prevention, and substance abuse and addiction are among some of the trainings that can increase awareness and knowledge of mental health across sectors.

All told, this research and findings from the consultations and scholarly literature suggest a conceptual framework for global mental health that emphasizes the fundamental rights of all individuals while addressing risk factors contributing to mental health problems, such as poverty, social isolation, discrimination, and exposure to violence. It would highlight the importance of focusing on social determinants that impact mental well-being and would focus on strategies for improving access by increasing tiered and community-based care, integrating mental health in other healthcare settings, addressing stigma and discrimination, expanding the availability of evidence, and innovating on digital interventions and telehealth. To ensure effective implementation, this framework calls for collaboration with local partners, including policymakers, service users, civil society, and academics from various disciplines.

Figure 1 visualizes key components of this conceptual framework for mental health.

Root Causes and Social Determinants

Protective Factors
- Economic Security
- Access to Healthcare
- Social Support
- Health Relationships
- Access to Education

Risk Factors
- Poverty
- Housing Instability
- Environmental Factors
- Discrimination
- Social Exclusion
- Low Literacy and Education

Improving Access to Mental Health Services

Cross Sector Collaboration

Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

Advancing Human Rights

Expanding Availability of Evidence-Based Treatment

- Increase community-based mental health
- Integrate mental health into primary care settings
- Expand access to digital interventions and telehealth

- Advocate for non-discrimination and equality
- Address ethical concerns in the mental health treatment
- Promote autonomy and empowerment for individuals with mental health conditions

- Promote awareness and understanding of mental health
- Advocate for equal rights and protection

- Collaborate with local individuals and communities, academics, and humanitarian/development actors
- Support initiatives to address social determinants of mental health such as housing, and economic insecurity
- Train individuals across sectors on the etiology of mental health

- Invest in research on locally developed or contextualized interventions
- Focus on feasible and affordable treatments
- Increase capacity to implement evidence-based mental health treatments

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Conclusion

The objectives outlined in this conceptual framework may require the allocation of additional resources, the development of new programs and services, and the implementation of new training and education initiatives. With these additional inputs, policies and programs could focus on strengthening the outputs and outcomes consistent with a logic model for global mental health, such as increasing the number of people who seek help for mental health conditions, improving the quality of mental health services, reducing the number of people who experience discrimination due to mental health-related challenges, and ultimately improving people's quality of life consistent with a human rights-based approach.

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