

World Mental Health Day 2021: Mental Health in an Unequal World

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Pondicherry Journal of Nursing (2021): 10.5005/jp-journals-10084-13126

World Mental Health Day is observed every year on October 10.¹ The commemorative day is essentially aimed at creating awareness, besides finding an opportunity to globally disseminate education about various mental health issues. At the World Health Assembly in May 2021, leaders from around the world recognized the important need to boost the availability of quality mental health services at all strata.² As a consequence of the intense deliberations, novel avenues for providing effective and efficient mental health have emerged. In recent years, the important role of mental health has been felt increasingly. This is reflected in achieving global development goals, and in this context, it is noteworthy to mention that mental health has been included in the Sustainable Development Goals, as elaborated by the World Health Organization.³

Having said that, it needs to be taken into due account that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a heavy toll on mental health the world over.⁴ The increase in poverty and its accompanying social determinants of mental health have been aggravated by the pronounced socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ In addition to this, the fact remains that certain vulnerable groups such as frontline health workers, students pursuing professional courses, and persons with debilitating diseases and pre-existing mental health disorders have been the victims of deranged mental health.⁶ As per the statistics released by WHO, more than 250 million people are afflicted with mental issues including stress, anxiety, and depression. Approximately 800,000 people die of suicide each year.^{7,8} All of these casualties could have been prevented by proper intervention and most importantly had the inequalities in providing holistic mental health been minimized globally. Therefore, we must take charge of the mental component of our well-being and get rid of the shame and stigma attached to seeking professional help, if need to be. This is in addition to our sincere efforts in promulgating mental health toward an equal world. Health professionals and particularly the nursing personnel have a big and responsible role to play in this regard. By carrying out objective endeavors, health professionals can play a pivotal role in mitigating the risks that arise out of inequalities in offering quality and timely mental healthcare.

Despite several initiatives, we need to accept the fact that mental health has been under-prioritized. This has led to huge gaps and disparities in mental healthcare. As a consequence, inequalities in mental health have deprived several people in experiencing integrated, resourceful, meaningful, and dignified lives.⁹ Though the intrinsic relationship between equity and mental health has been well comprehended, very few nodal strategies have been undertaken till date to address the inequities and disparities. Growing inequalities due to race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, lack of respect for human rights, and stigma and discrimination against people with mental health conditions

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How to cite this article: Parija SC. World Mental Health Day 2021: Mental Health in an Unequal World. *Pon J Nurs* 2021;14(4):75–76.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

have created a clear societal divide. There is an immediate as well as long-term need to narrow the gap between the patient affected with a particular type of mental health disorder and the quality of treatment that he/she receives, both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. We need to really address this issue emphatically and earnestly.¹⁰

Nursing professionals have a crucial role to play in overcoming inequalities perceived in mental health. Though the fact remains that mental health nurses might not be in an advantageous position to address a few structural determinants of mental health inequalities, they should truly be aware of the possibilities that exist in minimizing the inequalities in the long run.¹¹ Having said that, the nursing professionals have to essentially face and manage several day-to-day issues including exposure to the unpredictable behavior exhibited by the patients, suboptimal work environment, workplace stress, and gross dissatisfaction.

That apart, one has to necessarily take into consideration that workplace stress is quite high in the pandemic times among healthcare workers in hospitals.¹² The healthcare workforce in general and nursing personnel, in particular, are exposed to intense levels of occupational stress culminating in suboptimal mental health. The major contributing factors are heavy workload, duty beyond the stipulated working hours, and the impending casualties in the wards. Time pressure is yet another determinant. It is high time that the mental health of the health professionals had received top priority. Let us not ignore this important consideration. We must realize the fact that mental health in an unequal world does not limit the contributions of the health professionals,¹³ and it is in the fitness of things that the mental health of the health professionals does not take the back seat in the present scenario of an unequal world.¹⁴

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