Self-Care 2030

Insights Report

Revolutionising Wellbeing Through Self-Care for Mental Health

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Foreword

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The Seven Pillars of Self-Care are fundamental to ensuring the maintenance of health and allowing individuals to manage many of their own conditions. Each year, on the path to Self-Care for all by 2030, ISF emphasises a different pillar. In 2023, the theme was based on the first pillar and brought attention to the value of health literacy in optimising the role of self-care. In 2024, the second pillar is recognised, and this report is intended to raise awareness about how self-care can help people manage their mental health. Without self-care, our formal healthcare systems would crumble, and it is well recognised that responsible self-care can provide tremendous value to both the individual and to national health services. It is our hope that this report can provide a focal point for further discussions on how people, practitioners and governments can contribute to improvements in mental health through the incorporation of self-care in daily practice.

In our rapidly evolving world, where mental health challenges burgeon at the seams of our bustling lives, the need for self-directed health practices has never been more critical. Self-Care 2030: Revolutionising Wellbeing through Self-Care for Mental Health is designed to serve as an accessible guide that not only illuminates the pressing mental health issues facing our global community but also provides actionable strategies to empower individuals and communities to take charge of their mental wellbeing. This document, rooted in the latest research and professional experiences, aims to bridge the gap between traditional mental health interventions and accessible, everyday practices that bolster mental resilience. Through a detailed exploration of the seven pillars of self-care, it offers a roadmap for anyone – from policy makers to individuals struggling in silence – to foster a healthier, happier, and more balanced life. Let this report be your catalyst for change, inspiring a shift towards a more proactive and preventive approach to mental health that is both a personal right and a collective responsibility.

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In an era marked by unprecedented challenges to mental health and wellbeing, the imperative for self-care has never been more pronounced. This report considers the global impact of mental disorders and the vital role that self-care plays in optimising mental wellness, emphasising the importance of psychological, social and technological approaches to self-care, urging individuals, communities and policymakers to prioritise mental health. As a call to action, this second in-the-series Self-Care 2030 Insights Report advocates for integrating self-care into daily life as an essential step towards building a happier, healthier and more resilient society. We hope this report will be a helpful guide to embracing self-care as a cornerstone of mental wellness in our collective journey towards a better future.

Contents

4 The Global Burden of Poor Mental Health

Mental disorders represent a significant facet of the global health landscape, exerting a substantial impact on the burden of disease worldwide. They stand as a principal contributor to disability on a global scale, constituting a noteworthy proportion of years lived with disability [1]. In addition to imposing pronounced functional impairments, mental disorders also markedly diminish the overall quality of life for affected individuals. Notably, these conditions consistently maintain high prevalence rates, regularly securing positions within the top 10 diseases globally [2]. Moreover, individuals with severe mental illness confront elevated mortality risks, leading to a discernibly shortened life expectancy compared to the general population [3]. Consequently, mental disorders have garnered heightened attention as a critical public health concern. This is underscored by the World Health Organization's report of approximately 1 billion individuals worldwide affected by mental illness (**Figure 1**), coupled with the distressing occurrence of one suicide every 40 seconds [4].

In addition, among its many impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis for mental health, fuelling short- and long-term stresses and undermining the mental health of millions. For instance, estimates put the rise in both anxiety and depressive disorders at more than 25% during the first year of the pandemic. At the same time, mental health services have been severely disrupted and the treatment gap for mental health conditions has widened [5].

Individuals with mental disorders frequently encounter a myriad of human rights violations, discriminatory practices and social stigma, which further compound their already significant challenges [6]. These adversities are often compounded by various health complications that exacerbate the prognosis. Among individuals afflicted with severe mental disorders, rates of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality are notably elevated, ranging from 1.5 to 3.0 times higher compared to the general population [7]. Moreover, the incidence of diabetes and the prevalence of overweight and obesity are substantially amplified, reaching levels 2 to 3 times higher [8]. Research underscores that offspring born to parents with severe mental illness confront heightened risks of mortality and specific physical ailments, thereby extending the repercussions beyond the directly affected individuals to encompass their families and society at large, consequently imposing a significant societal burden [9].

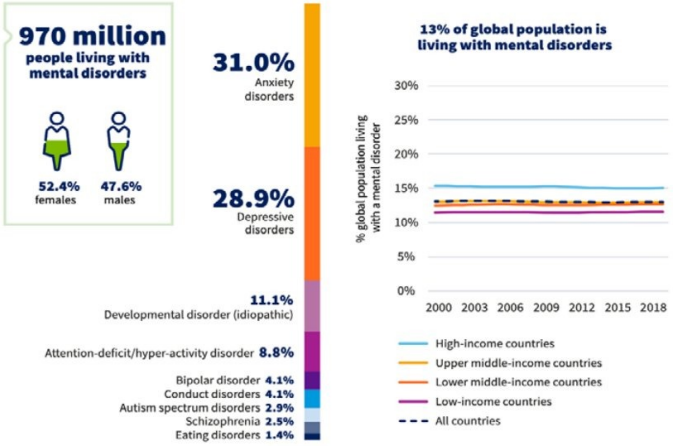

Figure 1: Prevalence of mental health disorders

The Seven Pillars of Self-Care Framework
Each pillar supports action to improve key aspects of mental & physical health & wellbeing. Pillar 1: Gaining health knowledge through self-care literacy; Pillar 2: Improving & maintaining good mental health; Pillar 3: Undertaking adequate physical activity to support overall health; Pillar 4: Good nutrition supporting healthy body & mind; Pillar 5: Avoiding risk behaviours like smoking & excessive alcohol use; Pillar 6: Good hygiene practices to avoid infections & toxicity; Pillar 7: Responsible use of medicines, devices & medical support systems.

The Concept of Mental Health & Mental Wellbeing

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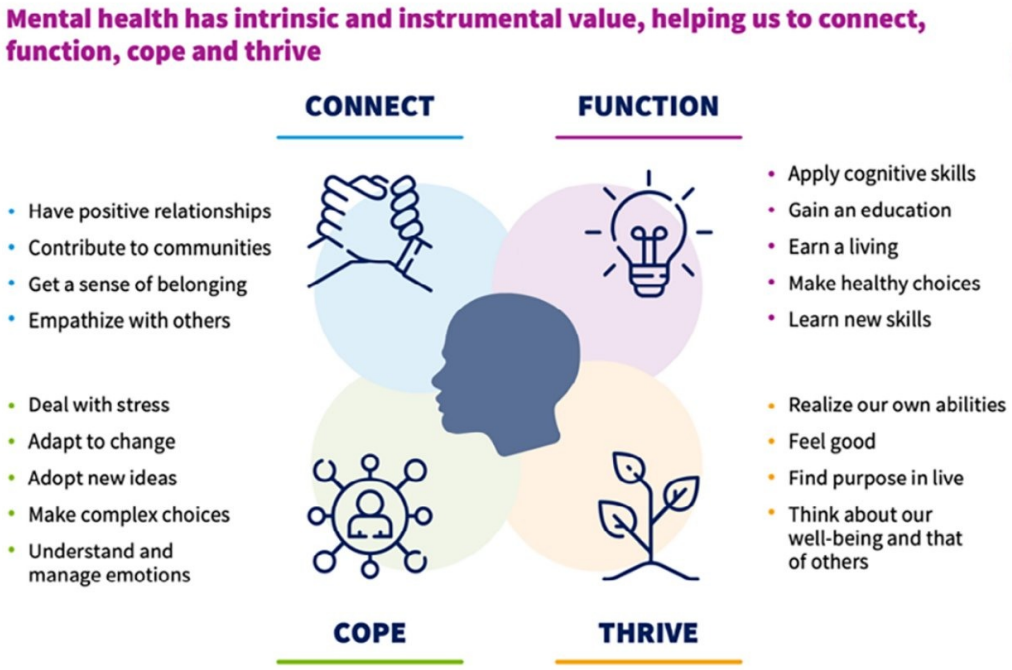

Figure 2: WHO: Mental health's intrinsic and instrumental value

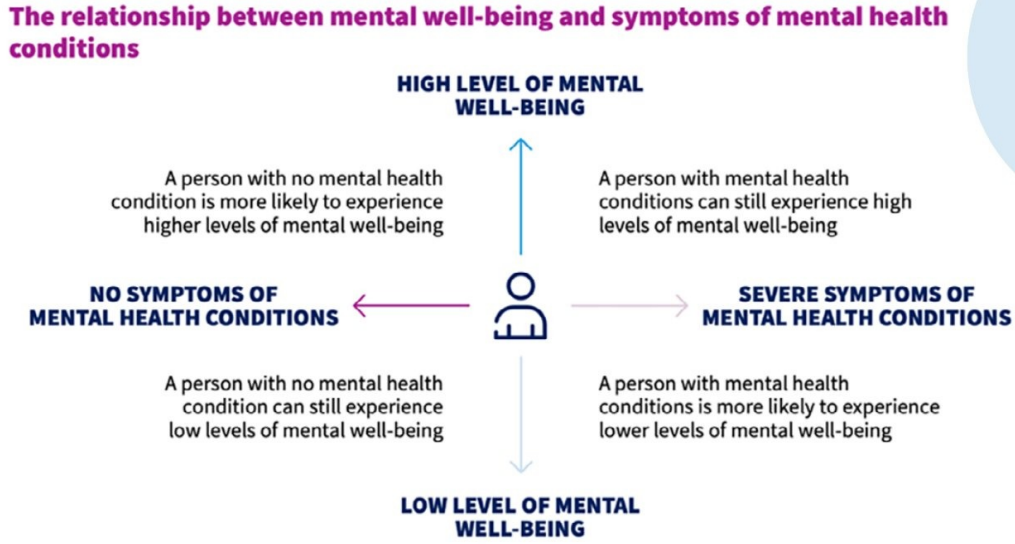

Figure 3: The relationship between mental wellbeing and symptoms of mental health conditions

Mental health is an integral part of our general health and wellbeing and a basic human right. Having good mental health means we are better able to connect, function, cope and thrive (**Figure 2**). On the contrary, when our mental health is compromised and access to suitable support is lacking, our overall wellbeing is at risk of deterioration. An array of mental health conditions has the potential to disrupt our cognitive processes, alter our emotional states, influence our behaviours, compromise our physical health and interfere with our interpersonal relationships, educational pursuits, or occupational endeavours [10].

Mental health is not a binary state, it exists on a complex continuum, with experiences ranging from an optimal state of wellbeing to debilitating states of great suffering and emotional pain (**Figure 3**) [11]. Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. WHO defines mental health as a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well and contribute to their community [12]. It is an integral component of health and wellbeing that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development [12].

6 Key Social Determinants of Mental Health

Key social determinants of mental health play a crucial role in shaping psychological wellbeing and outcomes. Although most people are remarkably resilient, people who are exposed to unfavourable circumstances – including poverty, violence and inequality – are at higher risk of experiencing mental health conditions. Risks can manifest themselves at all stages of life, but those that occur during developmentally sensitive periods, especially early childhood, are particularly detrimental.

Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Socioeconomic disadvantage significantly influences mental health outcomes across the lifespan [13]. It may impact mental health through various pathways, including biological, psychological and social factors [14]. Various dimensions of socioeconomic disadvantage, including education, finance, occupation and living standards, are associated with mental health disparities [15–17]. Structural explanations suggest that unequal access to resources exacerbates stressors, impacting mental health [18]. Financial stressors, such as income volatility and perceived job insecurity, exacerbate mental health issues [16]. The relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and mental health is bi-directional [19]. Early-life exposure to socioeconomic disadvantage increases the risk of mental health problems in children and adolescents [20]. Adverse childhood experiences, including poverty, contribute to long-term mental health inequalities [21].

Childhood Adversity

Childhood adversity encompasses a range of experiences that deviate from the expectable environment, including maltreatment and household dysfunction. These adversities, such as abuse and exposure to violence, significantly increase the risk of mental health issues like depression and substance abuse [22]. They are prevalent, with around two in five individuals experiencing at least one form [23]. Certain demographic groups, including women and ethnoracial minorities, are disproportionately affected [24].

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Interest in loneliness and social isolation as social determinants of mental health has grown significantly [25]. Loneliness, the subjective feeling of lacking desired social connections, can persist despite a large social network, while social isolation measures the objective quantity of connections. Longitudinal studies link loneliness to depression, anxiety and even suicide attempts [26]. Addressing loneliness is seen as crucial in preventing mental health issues. The UK government has highlighted the need for research to understand mechanisms, especially in marginalized groups and to develop interventions [27].

Sex-Based Inequalities

Sex-based inequalities in mental health are multifaceted and complex [28]. Common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety exhibit a higher prevalence in women, while non-affective psychotic disorders are more pronounced in men [28]. Contributing factors include social norms, family environment and hormonal influences [29]. Interestingly, the magnitude of these differences varies across countries, suggesting a role for societal factors [30]. Gendered social risk factors like intimate partner violence also play a significant role [31]. Moreover, societal structures that privilege cisgender men contribute to these disparities [32]. Paradoxically, countries with higher gender equality may exhibit wider gender gaps in depression, possibly due to mismatches between expectations and reality [30].

The Link Between Mental Health & Self-Care

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Mental Wellbeing, Self-Awareness and Agency in Self-Care

Self-care is the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider [33]. The seven pillars of self-care (**Section 4**) are a comprehensive framework encompassing health literacy, mental and physical wellbeing, proper nutrition, physical activity, risk avoidance, hygiene practices, and responsible use of medications, all aimed at empowering individuals to proactively manage their health and enhance their quality of life. One of seven pillars of self-care is mental health wellbeing, which generally include areas such as life satisfaction, optimism, self-esteem, mastery, feeling in control, having a purpose in life and a sense of belonging and support [34].

Self-awareness entails applying one's health knowledge to their own wellbeing, essentially merging health literacy with internalised mindful understanding. This process may encompass personal evaluations (self-awareness of thoughts, emotions and behaviours patterns), consultations of records and medical tests, culminating in a fundamental assessment of one's mental and physical condition, often referred to as a personal health scorecard. Agency, on the other hand, refers to an individual's ability and determination to act upon their understanding and awareness of their unique physical and mental state [34].

Self-Care in Maintaining Mental Health

Self-care plays a crucial role in maintaining mental health, especially in contexts where accessing formal mental health services is challenging due to various barriers such as poor service quality, low mental health literacy, stigma, and an inadequate social support. Many individuals may refrain from seeking professional help due to the unavailability, inaccessibility, or unaffordability of services, opting instead to endure mental distress silently to avoid the discrimination and social exclusion associated with seeking help.

The WHO model highlights the active role individuals with mental disorders can play in caring for themselves with the support of family and community [33]. Self-care strategies can improve mental health and wellbeing. Such studies show that people with mild depression symptoms find informal self-care (without professional guidance) helpful and that such approaches (for instance, improved mental health literacy, regular low-intense physical activity, mindfulness training, peer-support) can be cost-effective in reducing symptoms of depression and other mental disorders [35, 36].

8 Influencing Factors

Research identified factors influencing the self-management of mental health [37–40]. They encompass a multitude of personal, health-related, resource-based, environmental and healthcare system factors. Personal and lifestyle characteristics play a pivotal role, including an individual's knowledge about their condition, symptoms and medication management, as well as beliefs about health and culture. Perception of stigma surrounding mental health, along with the level of self-efficacy and hope for self-management, significantly impact one's ability to engage in effective self-care practices. Moreover, the availability of time to utilise self-management skills and prior experiences with self-management shape an individual's approach to maintaining mental wellness. Health status, including comorbid conditions such as anxiety or substance use, severity of depression, and cognitive abilities for problem-solving further influence self-management efforts.

Resources also play a crucial role, with psychosocial factors like perceived support from family, friends, or peers, as well as access to support groups or online resources, significantly impacting an individual's ability to cope with mental health challenges. Environmental characteristics, encompassing conditions at home, work, and within the community, add another layer of complexity. Factors such as familial perceptions of mental illness, support from employers and co-workers, transportation availability, and access to facilities like gyms and community sports squares for self-management activities all contribute to the overall context in which self-management occurs.

The healthcare system itself also shapes the landscape of self-management. Access to a healthcare system that prioritises and facilitates self-management, along with time constraints for providers to utilise self-management tools and availability of trained staff to run programs, are critical components. Additionally, the ease of navigating the healthcare system and the nature of the relationship with healthcare providers, including collaborative approaches with shared decision-making, significantly impact the efficacy of self-management efforts.

Mental Health Self-Care Strategies

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The role of self-care in mental health spans a spectrum of strategies aimed at sustaining and enhancing psychological wellbeing. Incorporating a combination of these self-care strategies into one's daily routine can promote resilience, enhance coping skills, and contribute to overall mental wellness. It is important for individuals to explore and identify which strategies resonate most with them and to prioritise self-care as an essential aspect of maintaining good mental health. These strategies encompass a range of approaches, including:

Social Strategies

These strategies encompass establishing connections within social networks, whether it be with friends, family members, or participation in support groups. Social support assumes a pivotal role in fostering mental wellbeing through the provision of emotional validation, companionship, and a sense of inclusion. Participation in shared activities with others serves as a means to mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation, both of which frequently contribute to mental health challenges.

Psychological Strategies

Cognitive and Behavioural Strategies involve utilising inner resources to positively reframe negative situations and improve mental resilience and capabilities. This may include practicing mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, or cognitive-behavioural techniques to challenge negative thought patterns and develop more adaptive ways of thinking. By engaging in these strategies, individuals can cultivate a more positive mindset and enhance their ability to cope with life's challenges.

Behavioural Strategies encompass taking action to address daily life stressors. This can involve problem-solving skills, time management techniques, or relaxation exercises to manage stress and build resilience. By proactively addressing stressors through these behavioural strategies, individuals can enhance their ability to effectively navigate life's demands and maintain psychological wellbeing. Combining cognitive and behavioural strategies can provide a comprehensive approach to promote mental health and resilience.

Religious/Spiritual Strategies

For individuals who embrace religious or spiritual convictions, these coping mechanisms often entail turning to faith or a deeper connection with own life values and purposes as a source of solace and guidance in navigating life's adversities. Participation in religious rituals, prayer, meditation, or seeking counsel from spiritual mentors serves as a means to garner comfort, foster hope, and cultivate a sense of purpose amidst challenging circumstances.

Other Strategies

Physical activity plays a pivotal role in promoting mental health, with regular exercise offering a multitude of benefits. These include alleviating symptoms associated with depression and anxiety, fostering an improved mood and bolstering overall wellbeing. Furthermore, participating in hobbies or activities that evoke joy and fulfilment can function as a means of self-expression and stress alleviation.

10 Where Will the Future Take Us?

Self-care plays a crucial role in maintaining mental health, fostering resilience and empowering individuals to navigate life's challenges while preserving wellbeing. By actively engaging in self-care activities, individuals cultivate a sense of agency and better cope with stressors and adversity. It extends beyond relaxation techniques to include healthy habits, meaningful connections, and activities nurturing the mind, body, and soul. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of self-care amidst heightened stress and mental health concerns. Moving forward, research and policy initiatives are needed to understand and address barriers to effective self-care, ensuring inclusive support systems. Integrating self-care education into various settings can empower individuals to prioritise mental health. Ultimately, self-care is a fundamental human necessity, fostering resilience and empowerment in the face of adversity, paving the way for a brighter future.

In the future, self-care will continue to play a pivotal role in improving health access, equity and enhancing wellbeing (18, 19). Self-care, self-awareness and optimal mental health have the potential to empower individuals to take control of their health, make informed decisions about their care, and ease the pressure on scarce health and social care resources.

Self-care and promoting mental health will provide tremendous benefits and value to individuals, healthcare providers, and health systems in the form of the improvement of population health and a significant reduction in the costs of delivery of health. Raising awareness about the Seven Pillars of Self-Care offers a solid foundation for achieving this goal.

Resources

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