

“Making ‘mental health and wellbeing a global priority for all’ was the theme of 2022 World Mental Day. Discuss the challenges to this goal and the role of counselling and psychotherapy in working to achieve it.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

In post-global pandemic times, where people are facing issues such as rising unemployment, a cost-of-living crisis, the impacts of climate change, housing, health and social crises and wars in Ukraine and across other regions, makes achieving mental health and well-being very difficult. The WHO (2019) estimate that one in eight people globally were living with a mental disorder and those estimates have risen dramatically in recent year due to, among other factors, fear, stress, anxiety, sadness and loneliness caused by the COVID -19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns.

According to the WHO (2022) there are multiple challenges to making mental health a global priority, the following essay will explore three of these issues. They are an increased awareness of the importance of mental health, the stigma attached to mental health and accessibility to mental health services.

Increased Awareness of the importance of Mental Health

In 2022, the HSE launched *Sharing the Vision* implementation plan. Among the stated aims of this programme is to increase the awareness of mental health and wellbeing. The raising of mental health awareness is critical to promoting good mental health and to also make people more aware of the importance that mental health has in our daily lives. Our mental health influences how we behave towards ourselves and towards others, it also influences how we manage stress, feelings and our emotional responses. By promoting mental health awareness, we can help people recognise the signs and symptoms of mental illness and it can encourage those who are impacted to seek the necessary help and support.

Stigma Attached to Mental Health

According to an article published by the Mayo Clinic (2017), stigma can lead to discrimination towards people through hurtful comments or remarks, name calling, feeling ashamed or being ignored due to people's assumptions. Outcomes of these assumptions can be people with mental health illness are viewed as being unstable, violent and unpredictable. There are a lot of misconceptions, ignorance and negative beliefs around mental health. Unfortunately, due to lack of understanding many people who are living with mental illness can be subjected to these beliefs.

Stigma can cause many damaging effects such as self-doubt, isolation and rejection. Stigma can also lead to fewer job opportunities and possible lack of compassion from family, friends and the wider community. The stigma around mental health makes many people unwilling to seek professional help as they may be reluctant to admit there is an issue, they don't want to be stereotyped or seen as "crazy". By openly talking about mental health, society can help reduce the associated stigma. Education around mental health can dispel the myths, change attitudes and can be the key to unlocking judgments and unjust stereotyping. The stigma can also be reduced by showing compassion to those who are struggling with mental health and recognizing that physical and mental health should be viewed the same.

Accessing Mental Health Services

Those who have identified the need for professional help and support will often encounter hurdles and barriers as they seek access to mental health professionals and wider services. One of these barriers is the financial cost of treatment which can limit access to services for those who do not have the means. According to *Minding Ireland: How we can find our own pathway to mental healthcare* (Fegen, 2022) – there are three key questions regarding mental health access: what is available, how long to wait and what is the cost.

Public mental health services in Ireland are free and cover a range of services from counselling sessions to inpatient and residential treatment. However, these services are under immense pressure due to increased demand and barriers to access can include lengthy wait times. According to the Irish Medical Organisation, services are in crisis due to long-term underfunding and a decade-long battle to recruit enough consultants to meet soaring demands. This in turn leads to people trying to access private care. However, the prohibitive cost of private care prevents large numbers of those who need the help and support the most from accessing the services.

Recommendations

Counsellors and psychotherapists can use their skills to achieve the goal of making mental health and wellbeing a global priority for all by making the therapy session a safe place for clients to talk about relationship issues, family problems, trauma, addiction issues and other topics. The aim of the counsellor/psychotherapist is to make positive changes in people's lives and encourage empowerment. These goals can be achieved with the client by building a good rapport, showing compassion and empathy, effective listening and good communication skills. Counsellors and psychotherapists can also leverage multiple other skills to have success with their clients – such as acceptance, self-awareness and reflection. These skills can be paired with interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) and family therapy.

Therapy can sometimes be life changing, a classic example is *The African Violet* story by Milton Erickson. Dr Erickson changed the life of a wealthy, unmarried woman whose illness confined her to a wheelchair, and she fell into a deep depression. Erickson gave her life purpose again by suggestion that she used her gift of growing African violets to help others in her community by gifting them to mark occasions such as births and marriages.

Counsellors and psychotherapists can use social media as an online platform to raise awareness of mental health and wellbeing in the community. Online platforms have a wider reach and can be used positively to educate people in the benefits of good mental health, hold open and honest conversations, reduce stigma associated with mental health and raise the awareness of how to access services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay explored the barriers and opportunities of making mental health and wellbeing a priority for all. The issues discussed throughout the essay are increased importance of mental health awareness, stigma attached to mental health and accessibility to mental health services.

As Mel Robbins states “Your mental health is everything – prioritise it. Make the time like your life depends on it, because it does”.

I feel that mental health needs to be promoted and valued more and that counsellors and psychotherapists can play an extremely important role in achieving this.