

Pathways to Lifelong Mental Wellbeing October 2021

Psychological Flexibility, Mental Health, COVID-19 and Beyond

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Background

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on global mental health have been widely assessed and reported during the past two years, documenting the considerable prevalence of suffering and need. Protecting and improving mental health is challenging, even during the best of times. During the pandemic, the need to effectively meet these challenges has been made even more dramatically apparent. Examples here include the rise in rates of common mental health conditions such as symptoms of depression, anxiety and sleeping difficulties. Worth highlighting is that those whose mental health is most affected include people with a history of mental health difficulties or others in vulnerable circumstances, such as those with chronic physical health conditions. Other challenges lie in the lingering or chronic health effects following infection with the virus known as "long COVID." Results such as these call for increased knowledge, better models of health and wellbeing, and practical methods to mitigate the effects of such events. Part of the knowledge needed involves understanding the psychological capacities that afford people resilience against these impacts and that can serve as malleable public health targets during the ongoing pandemic and in similar contexts in the future.

The Workshop – approach and summary from discussions

The workshop focused on the following questions:

- i) What have we learned about mental health problems during the pandemic?
- ii) Are there psychological resilience factors in the pandemic context?
- iii) Are there currently available psychological treatment methods that could be effectively applied in the context of the pandemic, and what are the challenges that lie ahead in doing so?
- iv) How can we disseminate relevant knowledge, develop scalable approaches to world mental health, and effectively implement these?

The workshop had some 23 registered international participants, including representatives of a pharmaceutical company, a non-profitable association for mental health, a private healthcare company, and a non-profit developer of digital tools for mental health, researchers and university students. The workshop included an inspirational talk, a presentation of relevant recent empirical data from studies conducted at Uppsala University, and two break-out sessions with different themes.

Professor Lance McCracken initiated the workshop with an inspirational talk about Psychological Flexibility (PF) as a psychological resilience factor against mental health problems, the empirical evidence for this, and the potential of PF as a malleable public health target during the pandemic and when facing similar health threats in the future. The talk also included some experience-based psychological exercises focused on how we can improve PF. The essence of these exercises was to practice acting with openness, awareness, and perspective.

Professor Karin Brocki then presented published data from a survey conducted in the early phase of the pandemic in Sweden on the levels of mental health (i.e., symptoms of depression, anxiety and sleeping difficulties) and how individual differences in PF may function as a resilience factor that protects against mental health problems in the context of the pandemic.

In the first break-out session, the participants were asked to discuss what they had learned from their experiences in relation to mental health during the pandemic in their respective contexts and countries. The topic for the second break-out session discussion was how we can disseminate relevant knowledge and implement existing prevention and intervention methods for mental health.

Recommendations

During the workshop we had several interesting discussions. Several attendees mentioned, as did presenters, that young people seem to be one of the most affected groups regarding mental health effects of the pandemic.



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Being young, being a healthcare worker, and being anyone who experiences feelings of isolation are universal risk factors. Regardless of country or continent, people in these circumstances seem to have been in a vulnerable position during, and in the aftermaths of, the pandemic.

We gained exciting insights into how mobile applications in combination with collaborations with schools can provide a viable alternative for promoting PF in young people. This is a potential solution that appears to merit further study and broader application.

These topics can be seen from a wider perspective. We can also see the clear need for widely applicable solutions for promoting world health and wellbeing that can be scaled up and made accessible regardless of local resources. There are resources that some of us take for granted but that are not consistently available in other parts of the world, such as a stable internet connection.

In many countries, mental health and human behaviour are not always appreciated or prioritized. There is much work to be done to build awareness of mental health as an important issue and of the potential of behavioural science. It is perhaps not sufficiently understood or appreciated that overall health depends on mental health, as does a nation's economic health, for example.

In some ways, the question of how we should promote the value of behavioural science is problem number one, and it must be resolved before behavioural science can better address mental health and other problems. To summarize, we have learned that the world is fragile in many respects. It is important to take an account of how people have been affected. We will want to know how this came about, what lessons can be learned, how we should spread the word, and what measures should be taken to make things better. Whatever solutions we develop, they will not be one-size-fits-all, as they will need to reflect the diversity of people and circumstances that need them.

Even if we can identify some global trends in how the pandemic has affected us, we can use this knowledge to adopt an international, and contextual, perspective that will enable us to successfully implement and disseminate existing, and future, intervention and prevention methods.

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