

Mental health stands as a critical pillar for human well-being: WHO

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Online Desk: World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for South-East Asia Dr Poonam Khetrupal Singh has said it is crucial to recognize that mental health intersects with various aspects of life, including education, employment, housing, and social participation. “This year’s theme of the World Mental Health Day, Mental Health is a Universal Human Right, calls for WHO, Member States and partners to accelerate efforts in mental health in a human-rights based approach,” he said in a statement, marking the World Mental Health Day.

He said the focus of human rights has historically been on needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. “However, mental health stands as a critical pillar for human well-being. Recognizing that mental health is a universal human right is acknowledging the relationship between mental health and the overall quality of life. Mental health, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to their community.

It is not merely the absence of mental disorders but a positive state of mental and emotional well-being. This definition aligns with the broader conception of human rights as not only freedoms from harm but freedoms to lead a fulfilling life. Hence, every individual, regardless of their location, occupation, or identity, is entitled to achieve the highest attainable level of mental well-being. This encompasses the entitlement to safeguard oneself from mental health risks, access to mental health care that is readily available, easily accessed, and of high quality, as well as the entitlement to freedom and involvement within their community.

A person’s mental well-being impacts their ability to exercise other rights, such as the right to education and the right to work. When mental health is protected, individuals are better equipped to engage meaningfully in society. For mental health to be recognized as a universal human right, there must be a transformation of societal attitudes and government policies. All necessary steps should be taken to protect populations from the risks of mental health conditions that include overarching issues such as climate change, humanitarian emergencies, social factors such as inequity and poverty. There needs to be awareness and education to destigmatize mental health issues. Discrimination and stigma are major barriers that prevent individuals from seeking help and support. Also, mental health services and facilities must be accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status, location, or other circumstances.

Despite mental health being vital to our overall health and well-being, one in seven people are living with mental health conditions in countries of the WHO South-East Asia Region. Mental, neurological and substance use disorders and self-harm (MNSS) accounts for 23% of all the years lived with disability (YLD) in this Region. Anxiety and depressive disorders were the commonest conditions among both men and women, contributing to almost 50% of the total number of people living with mental disorders in the WHO South-East Asia Region. The WHO South-East Asia Regional Office has continued to work with its partners to ensure mental health is valued, promoted, and protected.

Right-oriented services are a key component of the Paro Declaration by the Health Ministers of Member States at the Seventy-fifth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia on universal access to people-centred mental health care and services adopted by WHO South-East Asia Member States in September 2022. A human rights approach and gender equity for planning and implementation of mental health programmes and service delivery is also a cross-cutting principle of the newly launched WHO Mental Health Action Plan for the WHO South-East Asia Region, 2023-2030. To strengthen the expansion of community-based mental health services that are aligned to national and international human rights

standards, WHO SEARO convened a regional workshop on: “Expanding community-based mental health services in the WHO South-East Asia Region: scaling-up care for action”, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 20-22 June 2023.

Several Member States have updated their mental health policies and laws to include the components of international human rights instruments and other Member States are in the process of incorporating these components. There has been significant progress in providing access to mental health services through strengthening primary care and community-based mental health services in several countries. WHO will continue to support countries to further strengthen such services. In 2023 WHO SEARO published an interactive dashboard containing Regional and Country epidemiological and burden data was also published in 2023 to better monitor the mental health situation in the Region. Priority is being given to accelerate and strengthen action to operationalize aspects of human rights and mental health. One approach being taken is supporting countries States in their efforts towards deinstitutionalization, moving away from psychiatric hospitals and shifting the primary focus of mental health treatment and care at community level.

The other approach being taken is providing those with lived experience of mental health conditions, their families and caregivers to a platform to come together and discuss their perspectives with mental health and social care programme planners and agree to a way forward and draft a charter on their rights.” In conclusion, Dr Singh said, mental health is undeniably a universal human right. “Just as the right to physical health is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, the right to mental health is equally indispensable.”