

High level Webinar on MH and COVID

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OPENING REMARKS

Welcome and good morning, good evening or good night to you, from wherever you are joining us today. My name is Anselm Hennis, and I am the Director of the Department of Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health at PAHO. This webinar will focus on the effects of Covid-19 on the mental health of persons within the Region of the Americas, but we will also consider a global wider perspective on the challenges resulting from the pandemic. The goal of this webinar is to share and discuss the devastating effects of Covid-19 on mental health. But we also recognize that the pandemic has created a pivotal inflection point with recognition of the importance of mental health to overall health, as a result of the unprecedented and untold suffering caused by the pandemic.

Mental health prior to Covid-19

One in four persons will experience a mental health condition during their lifetime. As such, the inclusion of mental health in the Sustainable Development Goals (although delayed in the context of not being included in the Millennium Development Goals), was an appropriate recognition of its critical importance to overall health and wellbeing. By recognizing mental health among other non-communicable diseases, the UN signalled to the world that mental health is an important component in our approach to development going forward. Nevertheless, the burden of mental health

conditions continues to climb, with the vast majority of those affected lacking access to quality treatment and care. There remains a large gap between the global mental health burden and investment, with countries setting aside an average of only 2% of their health budget for mental health conditions. Despite the acknowledgement of the impact of mental health, scaling-up proven mental health strategies and interventions remains a challenge, and the stigmatization, discrimination, and human rights abuses of persons with mental health conditions continues.

Impact of Covid-19 on populations, mental health systems and services.

The Americas has been the region which has experienced the highest rates of Covid-19 and related mortality in the world, and these are associated with high rates of psychological distress. Measures to limit disease spread coupled with the high Covid disease-related burden and job losses, have increased the likelihood of individuals developing mental health conditions for the first time or the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions. There has also been restricted access to services - the PAHO/WHO Rapid Assessment Survey recorded important disruptions in mental health services across the Americas. Populations in vulnerable circumstances - particularly women, young people, groups with lower-income or socioeconomic status, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions, have been significantly affected by the pandemic, and report high levels of anxiety and depression.

Today we look forward to learning from the experiences and insights from within our Region and the wider world. We are joined by The Honorable Minister of Health of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Terrence Deyalsingh, Dra. Juana Herrera, Coordinator of the Mental Health Section at the Ministry of Health of Panama and Devora Kestel, Director of Mental Health and Substance Use at the World Health Organization. Please let me introduce you to Dr Renato Oliveira, PAHO MH and substance use Unit Chief, who will introduce our guests and moderate the discussion.

FINAL REMARKS

Way Forward

In May of 2020, the UN Secretary General issued a policy brief titled, 'Covid-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health' which indicated 3 actions to minimize the mental health consequences of the pandemic.

The first is to apply a whole-of-society approach to promote, protect and care for the mental health of all. The policy brief highlighted mental health as an essential component of the national preparedness and response to Covid-19. The pandemic has revealed widespread acceptance and enthusiasm for the incorporation of MHPSS in the Covid-19 plans. Nevertheless, governments are not committing sufficient funding for MHPSS to be appropriately implemented.

The second action recommends that we must ensure the widespread availability of emergency MHPSS. The pandemic has unequivocally reiterated the key relevance of mental health as a human right, and all should have full access. This will require comprehensive communication to ensure that MHPSS is widely available and accessible. The world has also seen how digital technology has delivered remote-MHPSS interventions through tele-health.

The pandemic has brought mental health into focus, and we as a Region must harness this moment to “building back better”. Building back better must address the need for investment in mental health, the incorporation of innovations in service provision, the importance of multisectoral and whole-of-society approaches, and critically the need for political engagement at the highest levels if there is to be sustainable change. Addressing mental health is central to achieving Universal Health Coverage, and we must commit to this ideal.

Covid has highlighted the importance of reorganizing mental health services in the Region of the Americas to advance of the model of deinstitutionalization in order to bring mental health services, meaning promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, into the 21st century. Mental health services must exist in all communities, and they must be fully available and accessible so that persons with mental health conditions can fully exercise their human rights.

Thank you again for your participation.