

A Review Study of the Concept of Mental Health

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ABSTRACT Mental health as a concept is used widely without attempts to specify its idiosyncratic meaning. The objective of the review was to systematically examine existing research to answer the question: *What is mental health?* The data and method included academic databases, websites, and archives. A search was conducted for strings describing “mental health OR “mental illness” OR “mental disorder” OR “psychosocial wellbeing” OR “psychosocial functioning” and the resulting literature reviewed for the definition, description or explanation of the concept mental health. The review found that the definition of mental health in the relevant literature varies from theoretical prescriptions to descriptive and simple phrases that viewed mental health through the lens of the medical and psychosocial models of health and disease. The lack of consensus on the definition of mental health in the extant literature, makes understanding the concept of mental health very challenging. Recommendations for a standardised definition of mental health that would inform policy and legislation are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health experts and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have identified a serious global mental health crisis due to the large treatment gap. In some countries up to 9 out of 10 people with mental problems do not receive even basic mental care (Patel et al. 2015). According to WHO (2019), there is an increasing gap between the need for treatment of mental disorders and its provision globally, particularly in Low- and Middle-Income Country (LMIC) contexts where seventy-six to eighty-five percent of individuals with severe mental disorders receive no treatment for their mental health problems. Notwithstanding the plethora of evidence showing that mental disorders affect, and are affected by, other chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and HIV/AIDS, there are concerns about societal understanding of mental health and mental disorders and consensus about what they actually mean. Although Mechanic (2006) argues that the term mental

health lacks clarity of definition and consistency in meaning, however as far back as the 1950s, Jahoda (1958) had claimed that there is “hardly a term in current psychological thought as vague, elusive, and ambiguous as the term “mental health”. That it means many things to many people is bad enough. That many people use it without attempting to specify the idiosyncratic meaning the term has for them makes the situation even worse, both for those who wish to promote mental health and for those who wish to introduce mental health into systemic psychological theory and research” (Jahoda 1958: 3). In the early twentieth century, Kraepelin (1917) had argued that the “standard we use in recognising the morbid features of a man’s life is his departure from the average in the direction of inefficiency” (Kraepelin 1917: 295). Freud (1963) on the other hand considered mental health to be an ideal notion that no person can achieve. He viewed the idea of a normal ego or normality as an ideal fiction. According to him every normal person is only approximately normal (Freud 1963: 253). Menninger (1947) also defined mental health in terms of an individual’s effectiveness and happiness in relating successfully to the world around them. Fundamental elements of Menninger’s definition are also reflected in the WHO (2010) definition of mental health which asserts that mental health is a state of well-being that allows people to realise their abilities, cope

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with stress, work productively and contribute to their community.

More recent definitions of mental illness have incorporated psychosocial factors that affect the state of being. For example, according to Epp (1988) mental illness is a recognized, medically diagnosable illness that results in the significant impairment of an individual's cognitive, affective or relational abilities. Mental disorders result from biological, developmental and/or psychosocial factors and can be managed using approaches comparable to those applied to physical disease (that is, prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation). The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (1996) defines mental illness as a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Just as diabetes is a disorder of the pancreas, mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. Serious mental illnesses include major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and borderline personality disorder.

Mental illnesses can affect persons of any age, race, religion, or income and recovery is possible. Mental illnesses are treatable and are not the result of personal weakness, lack of character or poor upbringing (NAMI 1996). Most people diagnosed with a serious mental illness can experience relief from their symptoms by actively participating in an individual treatment plan such as medication treatment and/or psychosocial treatment including cognitive behavioural therapy, interpersonal therapy, peer support groups and other community services can also be components of a treatment plan and that assist with recovery (NAMI 1996). As such, dealing with mental illnesses requires addressing an individual's mental wellbeing that is, their mental health.

Various schools of thought have argued that mental health and mental illness are not solely the result of social deviance or conflicts with society. For instance, the American Psychiatric Association's task group, as cited in Stein et al. (2013) contends that any new definition of mental illness should reflect an underlying psychobiological dysfunction and not merely an expectable response to common stressors and losses

or a culturally sanctioned response to a particular event. They proposed that any new definition of mental illness must include a behavioural or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual, consequences of which are clinically significant distress or disability such as impairment in one or more important areas of functioning. Additionally, traditional Western perspectives which locate health concerns in body or mind result in profoundly different approaches to addressing and understanding mental health and mental disorders from those of non-Western perspectives where the distinction of body and mind may not necessarily be as important (Pierson and Thomas 2010). Furthermore, theoretical approaches that underpin psychiatry, psychology, social work and other disciplines that deal with mental health concerns influence the perspective from which mental health is primarily defined as either the absence of mental illness (medical model) or as mental well-being (positive mental health model, anti-oppressive social work, social or psychological model). Culture has also been identified as a contextual factor that influences the variability of outcomes for mental health and mental illness and conceptualisation of the meaning and understanding of both terms (Scheid and Brown 2010). It is therefore against the backdrop of the concerns and contestations of the meaning and understanding of the concept of mental health that this review is undertaken.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to systematically review the existing literature for definitions, descriptions, and explanations of the concept of mental health to clarify its meaning and understanding for policy and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The main question that the review attempts to answer is "What is mental health?" This review systematically synthesises, evaluates definitions of mental health in the available published literature, and assesses the status of the evidence of the meaning and understanding of the concept of mental health in the extant literature. For inclusion in the review, studies, reports

and papers had to include an explanation of the meaning of mental health or definition of mental health and/or mental illness.

The search strategy included academic databases, websites and hand searches in libraries and archives. These included Web of science, Psychiatry online, Semantic Scholar, WHO website and publication database, WebMed Central, Scopus, Medline, Psych INFO, Social science citation index, International bibliography of social sciences (IBSS), SciELO, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, African Index Medicus, AccessMedicine, BioMed Central, PubMed, Biomedical and life science collection, PsycNET, Sociological abstracts, Science Direct, Science online, SciFinder Scholar, Lexis Nexis, Psychodyssey, Researchgate, and Google scholar. Searches were performed in English only. The search used internationally accepted and recognized terminology to create search strings describing “mental health OR “mental illness” OR “mental disorder” OR “psychosocial wellbeing” OR “psychosocial functioning”. The inclusion criteria were “definition * or understanding or literacy * or meaning of * or *clarification*.”

Reference lists of journal articles and one article from the Lancet Mental Health Commission were also searched. Finally, a number of local and international experts were consulted for their expert advice on the conceptualisation of mental health. Review documents were critically evaluated based on their ability to answer the review question. The strengths and limitations of every included study were integrated into the summaries of findings.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The review identified over 6500 articles which were then screened using the inclusion criteria. Full texts of 450 articles were obtained after screening and of these, 26 papers were retained for inclusion in the review. The review incorporated 26 studies focusing primarily on theoretical arguments on or literature reviews of the concept of mental health and/or mental illness as well as other research methods used to conduct studies including random sampling from surveillance systems; interviews; focus group discussions and surveys. Although the primary topic for all the studies was mental health, the degree

to which the authors engaged with the definition varied.

The definition of mental health varied from detailed prescriptions to descriptive ones and to simple phrases. Other studies used a negative approach by offering a definition or description of what mental health was not. Various studies provided suggestions of a definition of mental health versus mental illness; other studies equated mental health to mental illness; while others presented the limitations of an absence of a universally agreed upon definition of mental health and the resultant implications for policy and implementation thereon.

The context within which the arguments occurred influenced the conclusions of the understanding of mental health. Those from the sociological field emphasised the influences of social factors on mental health as a concept, while those from the medical field including psychiatry and the legal field focused on the mental health as indicated by the International Classification of Diseases 10th revision (ICD-10) codes or diagnoses of a mental disorder.

The review also noted the use of relatively new terms either in relation to or in place of mental health such as positive mental health, wellbeing and resilience without a clear definition of what these terms or concepts mean. The geographical context of the studies appeared to have a bearing on the conclusion of the studies. The earliest studies emanating from the 1950s through to the 1970s that pitted the medical model against the broader approach to mental health emanated primarily from the United States. The positive mental health approach is seemingly embraced primarily by Canada and Australia. The global approach rests largely on the WHO definition of mental health. Table 1 shows the definitions and appraisals of the included studies.

The Universal Definition of Mental Health

According to the WHO (2014), mental health is an integral and essential component of health. The WHO constitution states that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”(WHO 2014: 7). An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorder.

Table 1: List of studies included in the systematic literature review

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Country/ context</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Data source</i>	<i>Mental health definition</i>
Albee G (1970)	USA	Manpower needs and resources in mental health	Literature review	“Emphasises a shift from medical model of understanding medical illness as another illness to a broader contextualisation of mental disturbances”
Breslow L (1972)	Global	Definition of mental health	Literature review	“a state of well being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”
Busfield J (2000)	UK	Understanding context of mental health	Literature review	Discusses the “sociological influences of mental health concludes that there is need for consensus on the definition of mental health and related concepts”
Dawson JB (2017)	Australasia	Definition of mental disorder	Literature review	Legal definition of mental disorder
Dey AN, Gould D, Adekoya N, et al. (2018)	USA	Definition of mental health syndrome	Random sample from a surveillance system	Used ICD-10 codes to determine “mental health related visits to hospital emergency departments”.
Fuller J, Edwards J Procter N, Moss J (2000)	Australia/ Rural and remote communities	Mental health problems	Interviews	Mental health problems “equated with severe psychiatric disorders that, in the individual’s opinion, required detention”.
Galderisi S, Heinz A, Kastrup M et al. (Committee on Ethical Issues of the European Psychiatric Association) (2015)	Europe	Definition of mental health	Literature review	“A dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one’s own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium”
Goldstein MS (1979)	USA	Definition of mental health and mental illness	Literature review	A critique of the “medical model approach to mental health which views mental health and illness from a disease perspective”
Jahoda M (1958)	USA	Definition of mental health	Literature review	“A relatively constant and enduring function of personality, leading to predictable differences in behaviour and feelings depending on the stresses and strains of the situation in which a person finds himself; or as a momentary function of personality and situation”
Kvalsvig A, O’Connor M, Redmond G, Goldfeld S (2014)	Australia	Child mental health	Literature review	“Children and adolescents with good mental health are able to achieve and maintain optimal psychological and social functioning and well-being. They have a sense of identity and sound family and peer relationships, an ability to be mental circumstances. productive and to learn, and a capacity to tackle developmental challenges and use cultural resources to maximize growthMental health in childhood and adolescence is defined by the achievement of expected developmental cognitive, social and emotional milestones and by secure attachments, satisfying social relationships

Table 1: Contd...

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Country/ context</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Data source</i>	<i>Mental health definition</i>
Ko Y-h (1982)	Taiwan	Definition of mental health	Literature review	and effective coping skills. Mentally healthy children and adolescents enjoy a positive quality of life; function well at home, in school, and in their communities; and are free from disabling symptoms of psychopathology." At its core, mental health or psychological wellbeing rests on the capacity of individuals to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, as well as their interactions with others. It is essential that these core attributes of self-control, resilience and confidence be allowed to develop and solidify in the formative stages in life".
Lakaski C, Trottier M (2009)	Canada	Definition of positive mental health	Literature review	"A mentally healthy person has many self-promoting (SP) and few self-defeating (SD) habits"
Levin BL, Hennessy KD, Petrila J (2010)	USA	Mental health as a public health concern	Literature review	"The capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity"
Macklin R (1972)	USA	Defining mental illness and mental health	Literature review theories and practice	Mental disorder is used where reference is made to mental health
Manwell LA, Barbic SP, Roberts K et al. (2015)	Global	Mental health definition	Survey of mental health experts	Acknowledges that "there is no consensus on the definition of mental health and mental illness. Presents a critique of theories of what constitutes mental illness versus mental health"
				"The capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity- Public Health Agency of Canada" Mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community"
				A mentally healthy community "offers people the ability to thrive. It is one in which people feel a sense of connectedness and there are also networks which link people from all walks of life to each other. There is a strong community identity but despite this the community is welcoming of diversity. People participate in their community, organize to combat common threats, and offer support and aid for those in need". Mental health is the ability to adapt and self-manage. Proposes: "a trans-domain model of health to inform

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<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Country/ context</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Data source</i>	<i>Mental health definition</i>
May R (1956)	USA	Psychological therapists		the development of a comprehensive definition capturing all subcomponents of health: physical, mental, and social health.” [Mental] “Health” “refers to dynamic processes; a person is healthy psychologically and emotionally to the extent that he can use all his capacities in day-to-day living” Supports an “understanding of mental health as being something different from or over and above the mere absence of illness or disease”
Mehta N (Ed.) (2013)	UK	Mental health as a public health concern	Literature review	WHO definition-” A state of well-being in which the individual-realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”
Sainsbury P (2000)	Australia	Mental health promotion	Literature review	“The capacity of the individual, the group, and the environment to interact with one another in ways to promote subjective well-being, the optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective, and relational), the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice and the attainment and preservation of conditions of fundamental equality”Not just the “physical wellbeing of an individual, but. . . the social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of the whole community in which everyone is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their community. It is a whole of life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life”.
Scott W (1958)	USA	Definitions of mental health and mental illness	Literature review on theories	No definition offered but presents a critique of theories on what constitutes mental illness versus mental health. Categories for definition of mental illness: exposure to psychiatric treatment; social maladjustment; subjective unhappiness; objective psychological symptoms; psychiatric diagnosis; and failure of positive adaptation.
Sells SB (1968)	USA	Definitions of mental health and illness; measurement of mental health	Compilation of symposium discussion papers based on cases, clinical reports, statistics and interviews	Sound mental health is “satisfaction with oneself, to the satisfaction of others.” Personal essentials of productive social interactions, in the lack of which a person is likely to be mired in ineffectiveness. Thus, personal, and social competence and lack thereof. These qualities involve the person in an active, productive orientation to his environment; in their lack the person is likely to be at its mercy” Phenomena defining mental illness are in fact manifestations of social ineffectiveness and not sickness in the medical sense”. “Mental illness should be a term reserved for conditions described by psychiatric diagnosis”

Table 1: Contd...

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Country/ context</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Data source</i>	<i>Mental health definition</i>
Piko B (1999)	Eastern Europe	definition of health	Literature review	WHO definition- "A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"
Prince M, Patel V, Saxena S et al. (2007).	Global	Mental health	Literature review	Assumes WHO definition- "A state of well-being in which the individual-al realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"
Valliant GE (2012)	USA	Definition of mental health	Literature review	"Mental health as above normal, epitomized by a GAF score of over 80; Mental health as the Presence of Multiple human strengths; Mental health as maturity; Mental health as positive emotion; Mental health as socio-emotional intelligence; Mental health as subjective well-being; Mental health as resilience"
Vasquez-Guzman CE (2012)	USA	Definition of child mental health	Focus group discussions with mothers	"A process that captures a wide range of human life experiences and behaviors interdependent with social life and social structures. It is a concept that is not merely defined as the absence of mental illness, but captures ideas and concepts, which are part of mental illness".
Vega WA, Rumbaut RG (1991)	USA	Minority mental health	Literature review	Descriptive: "mental health was originally intended to reflect psychological wellbeing and resilience; in essence, a satisfactory if not optimal state of being. Now focuses narrowly on mental disorders".
WHO (2004)	Global	Mental health definition	Literature review	"A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community"

ders or disabilities. Mental health is a "state of well-being in which an individual realizes 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" (WHO 2014: 38).

Mental Health as Psychosocial Functioning and Wellbeing

Various factors, including social, psychological and biological factors, determine an individual's level of mental health at any given point in time. For instance, WHO (2004) determined that persistent socio-economic stresses especially

those associated with poverty and low levels of education are risk factors for poor mental health outcomes for individuals and communities. Certain other social factors that contribute to poor mental health include gender discrimination, human rights violations, social exclusion, poor lifestyle choices, and risk and exposure to violence. In addition, there are specific biological, psychological and personality factors that predispose some individuals to mental ill-health including mental disorders (WHO 2018).

In a study by Keyes (2003), despite poor mental health not being defined as an illness, having poor mental health is associated with emotional distress and psychosocial impairment

comparable to that of a major depressive episode. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA 2017) found that the effects of poor mental health are both severe and prevalent, with poor mental health reportedly more common than depression. Poor mental health and poor mental illness are not mutually exclusive but a continuum of no symptoms of mental illness and severe mental illness with periods of good mental health or poor mental health. In other words, a person can be mentally healthy and have a mental illness and a person can also have poor mental health without having a mental illness (Epp 1988).

Mental Health as Disease

The medical model on the other hand views mental health as the presence or absence of a disease (May 1956; Sells 1968; Albee 1970; Macklin 1972; Goldstein 1979) and remains one of the dominant approaches to understanding mental health. In this approach, mental health is largely equated to mental illness and dealt with as a disease. This approach is widely supported in the field of psychiatry. While the term mental health is stated as the topic of the studies reviewed, the studies only referred to mental illness or mental disorders in the findings section. For instance, Levin et al. (2010) in their study of mental health as a public health concern used the term “mental disorders” rather than mental health whilst Dey et al. (2018) used ICD-10 codes in their study to determine mental health related visits to hospital emergency departments.

Another study by Fuller et al. (2000) found that community members perceived mental health problems as severe psychiatric disorders that required detention. Scott (1958) rather than suggesting a definition of mental health, defines what constitutes mental illness and proposes several categories for the definition of mental illness including exposure to psychiatric treatment; social maladjustment; subjective unhappiness; objective psychological symptoms; psychiatric diagnosis; and failure of positive adaptation.

Mental Health as a Social Construct

The concept of mental health is often understood and defined within a social constructivist framework. Several of the included studies viewed

mental health as a social construct that has to be interpreted within a specific context that includes social, economic and political factors (May 1956; Jahoda 1958; Vega and Rumbaut 1991; Valliant 2012; Manwell et al. 2015). Definitions of mental health ranged from short concepts to detailed proposals of a socially constructed definition of mental health. The widely used definition of mental health from a social constructionist perspective is that suggested by WHO (2014, 2004). Notwithstanding criticism related to the definition being overly prescriptive rather than descriptive with limited means of implementation (Manwell et al. 2015), the definition has been referenced by various studies included in this review (Breslow 1972; Piko 1999; Prince et al. 2007; Mehta 2013) as well as by various mental health organisations.

The debate that propelled this understanding of mental health began in the 1950s and continues to date as there is still not one accepted definition of mental health even within the model that rejects the medical approach. One of the early proponents of this approach was Jahoda (1958) who critiqued the tendency to equate mental health and mental illness, arguing instead that they are very distinct constructs. Jahoda argued that mental health was a broader concept that encompassed mental illness among other things noting that it “would seem to be more fruitful to concentrate on the concept of mental health in its more positive connotation, noting, however, that the absence of disease may constitute a necessary, but not a sufficient criterion for mental health” (Jahoda 1958:14). Jahoda defined mental health as “a relatively constant and enduring function of personality, leading to predictable differences in behaviour and feelings depending on the stresses and strains of the situation in which a person finds himself; or as a momentary function of personality and situation” (1958:14).

Similarly, the study by Albee (1970) related to the manpower and resource needs in mental health, emphasises a shift from the medical model of understanding mental illness as another illness to a broader contextualisation of mental disturbances. The vast majority of studies included in this review (May 1956; Jahoda 1958; Scott 1958; Sells 1968; Albee 1970; Breslow 1972; Macklin 1972; Goldstein 1979; Ko 1982; Vega and Rumbaut 1991; Piko 1999; Busfield 2000;

Sainsbury 2000; WHO 2004; Prince et al. 2007; Lakaski and Trottier 2009; Valliant 2012; Vasquez-Guzman 2012; Mehta 2013; Kvalsvig et al. 2014; Galderisi et al. 2015; Manwell et al. 2015) elaborated on a definition of mental health that reflects a broader understanding of the concept beyond disease. Furthermore, two studies (Sainsbury 2000; Manwell et al. 2015) suggest reference to positive mental health rather than just mental health. Several other studies (Singh 1984; Durham 1988; Jones and William 2008; Dawson 2017) examined pieces of legislation dealing with mental health. Despite the Acts' being titled "Mental Health Act", the definitions contained within the Acts mostly fell short of defining the concept of mental health, rather focusing on mental illness or mental disorder.

Other Considerations of Mental Health

The review also found other considerations of mental health and mental illness that are based on traditional beliefs and rituals associated with community mental health care and healing. According to Hammonde-Tooke (1989) traditional views of mental ill-health fall broadly under four distinct categories: a) Supreme Being; b) Ancestors; c) Witchcraft; and d) Pollution beliefs. These views are believed to have immediate relevance to the problems of health, illness, well-being, and the belief in life after death.

Another study on mental health literacy by Cheetham and Cheetham (1976) conducted among the rural Xhosa people in South Africa, found that although the participants recognized a variety of types of mental illnesses, only a few were believed to be caused by abnormalities in the brain. All other forms of mental illness were attributed to external factors including failure to conduct appropriate sacrifices and rituals to appease the ancestors and the ancestors' displeasure due to non-observance of taboos, bewitchment and sorcerers sending evil spirits.

Mental health literacy and conceptualizations of mental health are often influenced by background and context. Although the topics of most of the papers included in the review focused on the definition and of mental health, and inter alia, an understanding of the concept of mental health, very few papers presented a clear and measurable definition of mental health. Mental health was rarely operationalized result-

ing in confusions about the meaning of the concept itself. Twenty-seven papers were included in this review that aimed to demystify the concept of mental health.

The review identified papers that examined definitions of mental health as well as assess the status of the evidence-base related to mental health literacy. In so doing, the papers attempted to: a) define mental health; b) equate mental health to psychosocial functioning and wellbeing; c) view mental health as a disease; d) conceptualize mental health as a social construct; and e) suggest other considerations of mental health based on traditional beliefs and rituals that are related to community mental health care and healing.

The studies included in this review demonstrate the lack of consensus on the definition of mental health that makes understanding the concept of mental health problematic. For instance, mental health is often used interchangeably with mental illness and disorder (as a disease). There is a plethora of evidence that suggests that there are mental health-related terms that are not clearly defined such as psychosocial well-being, positive mental health, mental health problems, mental health disorders, mental-ill health and psychosocial support.

The social and psychological determinants of the level of mental health are associated with indicators of poverty, low levels of education, rapid social change, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, risks of violence, physical ill-health, human rights violations and biological determinants that are known to be congenital such as genetic factors that contribute to imbalances in chemicals in the brain (WHO 2014). Although poor mental health is associated with emotional distress and psychosocial impairment comparable to that of a major depressive episode (Keyes 2003), the effects of poor mental health are both severe and prevalent, with poor mental health being more common than depression (CMHA 2017).

The medical model that views mental health as the presence or absence of a disease, remains one of the most dominant approaches to understanding mental health. In contrast to the medical model, the concept of mental health is also often understood and defined within a social

constructivist framework. A number of the included studies viewed mental health as a social construct that has to be interpreted within a context that includes social, economic and political factors.

The vast majority of papers included in this review espoused definitions of mental health that reflects a broader understanding of the concept beyond mental health as a disease. Other considerations of mental health were based on traditional beliefs and rituals associated with community mental health care and healing. This is consistent with The concept of mental health remains a mystery at societal levels and is often used interchangeably with mental disorders point to the need for effective mental health promotion interventions that involve a range of activities to increase the chances of more people experiencing better mental health. The finding that mental health is used interchangeably with mental illness in policy and practice is problematic, particularly for psychiatric epidemiology. Mental health must be conceptualized from the strengths' perspective, as more than the absence of mental disorders or disabilities but a state of wellbeing that encompasses all aspects of an individual's life and their ability to engage productively within their community. More research is needed to extend societal understanding of mental health and its determinants at individual, family and community levels (Shield and Brown 2010)

CONCLUSION

This review utilised systematic literature review techniques and principles to examine the definition of mental. It evaluated existing definitions of mental health to clarify the concept and provide recommendations for policy and practice. The review found that there is a lack of consensus on the definition of mental health. This makes understanding the concept of mental health problematic primarily because the term mental health is used synonymously with mental illness or mental disorder. There is also a plethora of evidence that suggests that there are mental health-related terms that are not clearly defined such as positive mental health, mental health problems, mental health disorders, mental ill health, psychosocial wellbeing, and psy-

chosocial support. The absence of concise definitions of such important terms further compounds the understanding of the concept of mental health. While the review found that the medical model is one of the dominant approaches to understanding the concept of mental health, it also determined that there is a growing trend to understand the concept as a social construct that is beyond presence or absence of disease.

Broadly, mental health is deemed a generic term referring to the overall mental state of an individual, family or community that subsumes degrees of health and illness. Although the terms are often and unfortunately used interchangeably, mental health and mental illness are understood differently in various societal contexts and do not refer to the same thing. The concepts are described as not mutually exclusive but with one fundamental difference being that everyone has some level of mental health all of the time, just like physical health, whereas it is possible to be without mental illness. Poor mental health and poor mental illness are not mutually exclusive but a continuum of no symptoms of mental illness and severe mental illness.

This review also found a long history of theorising about what the concepts of mental health or mental illness mean in different contexts. This is attributed to the fact that mental health and mental illness are socially constructed concepts that account for a state of being that has been experienced and become particularly important when they are used to describe a person, family or community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

National mental health policies should not be solely concerned with mental disorders, but should also recognize and address the broader issues, which promote mental health. Therefore, mental health policies and legislation must include a standard definition of mental health that is relevant for both policy and practice. Thus, mental health communities of practice must agree on a standardized definition of the concept of mental health that is context specific, reflecting the socio-economic and political factors that influence mental health.

Additionally, mental health promotion should be mainstreamed into policies and programmes

in governmental and nongovernmental sectors and should be implemented using a multi-sectoral approach rather than being limited to the health sector.

LIMITATIONS

The concept of mental health is used interchangeably with mental illness or disorder in the included studies. The review only focused on definitions and understandings of mental health as a holistic concept encompassing psychosocial wellbeing and not on mental illness or disorder per se. Although studies derived from the search were from across the world, the included papers were primarily from North America as there was limited evidence from other regions of the world that focused specifically on the concept of mental health.

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