Press Release

As new UN guidance on tackling the mental health challenges of COVID-19 is issued, an Open Letter calls for leaders to protect the most vulnerable and integrate mental health into all response plans to end the pandemic, build back better and avoid a mental health crisis

EMBARGOED 03:00 GMT 14 May 2020

14 MAY 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging the world’s mental health as never before. Those with existing poor mental health are even more vulnerable as a result of the pandemic, whilst large groups across societies, including frontline health workers, are experiencing mental health stresses they have never before faced. In response, today more than 200 experts, business leaders, renowned scientists and those working on the frontline from over 40 countries are calling on world leaders to protect and scale up mental health support in all COVID-19 responses both now, and for the future.

The Open Letter has been developed by civil society mental health leaders and advocates from around the world, powered by the Speak Your Mind campaign. “Across most countries governments weren’t set up to respond to the growing mental health crisis before COVID-19 and they certainly aren’t now. That’s why we, as part of the Speak Your Mind campaign, have joined with others around the world to call on leaders to ensure quality mental health support is accessible to everyone, everywhere both now during this pandemic, and in the future. There is no health without mental health. Now more than ever is the time to invest in mental health,” said Eisha London, Founder and CEO of United for Global Mental Health.

Emerging studies and surveys show the impact COVID-19 is already having on mental health globally. Increases in symptoms of depression and anxiety have been recorded in a number of countries, health workers are reporting an increased need for psychological support, and those with a history of mental health needs are finding the pandemic has made their mental health much worse and their access to medication and treatment more difficult. This evidence, combined with lessons from past outbreaks such as 2003 SARS, indicate that the pandemic could have both profound and potentially long-term impacts on mental health globally.

Healthcare workers are under exceptional stress and while deaths of health workers are rising, the mental ill health rates are rising faster still. They are at particularly high risk of mental ill health, including suicide, the risk of burnout and stigmatisation. Without support they will be unable to fulfil their vital role in stopping the outbreak. "At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak the unpredictability and fear around this new virus meant I felt a great deal of anxiety, stress and loneliness as I also had to distance from my family and friends. But as a health worker I need to be strong both mentally and physically to support my patients and helping them talk through their own anxiety and worries has helped me. Mental health cannot be an afterthought in the COVID-19 response and governments must make sure they build mental health into all recovery plans," said Umair Bachlani a ICU nurse working in the Aga Khan University Hospital in Karachi, Pakistan. “ We want our governments and healthcare institutions to provide hotlines and professional psychological support to frontline healthcare workers.”

Those with poor mental health are among the groups most at risk of the spread of COVID-19, including people living in psychiatric institutions, the homeless and those with long-term addictions. Studies also show COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate existing mental health symptoms or trigger relapse among people with pre-existing mental health illness. There has been disruption to mental health care and services with cuts in the provision of support in order to increase capacity to treat the physical impact of pandemic with some hospitals having to convert psychiatric wards into COVID-19 wards, and community face-to-face services have had to move online. For some who have
to pay for their medication and treatment out of pocket, loss of livelihood and increased prices are also having an impact. Klubo Mulbah, Supervisor of the Outpatient Department at the E.S. Grant Memorial Mental Health Hospital, Monrovia in Liberia, said “As a mental health clinician I feel deeply for my patients during the lockdown as almost all of them are finding it very difficult to get their medication. They live far away from the hospital, we are facing medication shortages and other clinics and hospitals that provide mental health services are not functioning now. This means that already vulnerable patients are at greater risk and the impact will be felt for some time.”

COVID-19 patients and their families are also facing huge anxiety, uncertainty and separation, as well as in some cases face stigma and discrimination. The elderly are at high risk of mental ill health - especially those with dementia - due to the anticipated long periods of social distancing and the accompanying isolation and loneliness. Children’s emotional state and behaviours are being impacted according to studies, and women at risk of inter-personal violence face an escalation in abuse as a result of lockdowns.

Funding for mental health is only included in a limited number of the COVID-19 financing packages already announced, including within an emergency package announced by the World Bank for India last month. The Open Letter stresses it is critically important that funding rises now.

“Whilst there are many uncertainties about how the COVID-19 pandemic will progress, what is clear is that the impact on mental health will be felt at every level - locally, nationally and globally. Only by investing in mental health now, and ensuring it is an integral part of the COVID-19 response will we end the pandemic, avert a mental health crisis and build back better for society as a whole, and mental health in particular, “ said Prof Shekhar Saxena, former WHO Director of Mental Health and currently Professor of the Practice of Global Mental Health, Global Health and Population, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health.

Ends

More info at www.gospeakyourmind.org/open-letter #COVID19 #MentalHealth #TimeToInvest

Media contacts:
Claire Hoffman, Communications, United for Global Mental Health
+44 (0) 7977 440 353 claire@unitedgmh.org

Notes for Editors:
● Interviews can be arranged with those who have lived experience of the impacts of COVID-19 on their mental health and global experts
● ‘Speak Your Mind’ is a nationally driven and globally united campaign working to achieve mental health for all that brings together people with first-hand experience of mental health conditions, experts and civil society organisations to call on leaders to end the neglect of mental health by increasing investment, empowerment and education. The Speak Your Mind campaign is powered by United for Global Mental Health, an organisation working to amplify the voices of people affected by mental health conditions, increase financing and ensure quality mental health support is accessible to everyone, everywhere, worldwide.