This is a pivotal moment in the history of mental health. How we and the world tackle the mental health challenges COVID-19 brings will determine the well-being of a generation, and also our success in building back societies stronger for the future.

**What is the impact of COVID-19 on mental health?**

Globally, mental health is challenged like never before by COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic on mental health is complicated, diverse and wide ranging. Many people are distressed by the immediate health impacts and fears of infection, dying and losing family members, as well as increased anxiety, depression and loneliness as a result of physical isolation and the economic turmoil we face.

All of this takes its toll on already overwhelmed mental health services that are under-funded and under-resourced in many countries on every continent affected by COVID-19. The pandemic highlights the need to urgently increase investment in services for mental health or risk a massive increase in mental health conditions in the coming months and years. Now more than ever is the #TimeToInvest in our mental health.

**Who is being most affected by the mental health challenges posed by COVID-19?**

The mental health impacts of COVID-19 are felt around the world. However some groups are more vulnerable.

Those with existing poor mental health face risks including disruption to their treatment, medications and the lifeline of support services. Studies show that COVID-19 is likely to make existing mental health symptoms worse or trigger relapse among people with pre-existing mental ill health. In addition, those living with - or perceived to be living with - mental health conditions in institutions and traditional healing centres are often chained. They are at much greater risk of infection due to their often cramped and unsanitary conditions, with little opportunity to physically distance or maintain personal hygiene.

Health workers who are under great stress are at particularly high risk of mental ill health, including suicide attempts, the risk of burnout and stigmatisation. Without support they will be unable to fulfil their vital role in stopping the outbreak.

People who test positive for COVID-19 and their families must cope with fear, anxiety and uncertainty about their condition, as well as physical pain and separation from loved ones. They need mental health support now and in the future.

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 isolation and loneliness this can bring with it. Social isolation, reduced physical activity and reduced cognitive stimulation all
increase the risk of cognitive decline and dementia; and some older people find it hard to understand and follow public health advice.

Children’s chances to interact and access education have been affected by COVID-19 which can affect their mental health. Children who are spending more time with families during lockdown when there is already abuse in the family - or risk of it - are even more vulnerable.

Women experience greater levels of increased anxiety and depression than men, given the triple burden of care their families, homeschooling and the demands of paid employment. Lockdown has also increased the risk of violence against women. Globally it is estimated that 31 million additional cases of gender-based violence can be expected to occur if lockdown continues for at least six months. Such domestic violence has mental health consequences including depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In humanitarian settings affected by conflict and natural disaster, the mental health challenges are huge but often overlooked and the current pandemic adds an extraordinary level of stress to already vulnerable populations. COVID-19, combined with insecurity of housing and food, and feelings of helplessness and despair, may further worsen existing mental health conditions, trigger new conditions, and limit the access of those with pre-existing conditions to the already limited mental health services they had.

How is COVID-19 affecting mental health services?

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on mental health services and disrupted care and treatment. Some specialised mental health services have been cut in order to increase the budget for, and capacity to, treat the physical impacts of COVID-19. For example, a number of general hospital psychiatric wards have been converted into COVID-19 wards, meaning large numbers of severely ill people are moved out. Many mental health services have switched to remote care, providing consultations through digital platforms or by phone, with mixed success. The rise in remote or digital mental health services may lead to inequalities for those without access to the technologies necessary for these services. At the same time the demand for face-to-face mental health services has decreased due to fear of infection, meaning those who may need support are not seeking it.

How are governments responding to the mental health demands of COVID-19?

The UN Secretary General has stressed that mental health services are an essential part of all government responses to COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued guidelines encouraging all governments to invest in mental health at this time. Some governments have started to tackle the mental health impacts of the pandemic, from developing national mental health pandemic and wellbeing response plans, to running public information campaigns. Others have expanded or transformed services, from setting up new
helplines (Kenya, UK), to doubling down on mental health services in community settings (Ireland) and investing more in peer to peer support. However, many governments have not yet adequately addressed mental health in their response to COVID-19, nor in their recovery plans - and the needs of the most vulnerable are not being met. This needs to change now.

What needs to be done to address the mental health impacts of COVID-19?

Now, more than ever, it is #TimeToInvest in mental health and prioritise it as an essential right alongside good physical health. Leaders need to protect and scale up mental health support in all COVID-19 responses, and commit to building back better a stronger mental health system for the future.

This includes:

• Keep supporting those with pre-existing mental health conditions. Providing, without discrimination, infection prevention and control measures for those in psychiatric institutions and care homes, making sure that physical distancing does not prevent all social interaction (since this is essential for good mental health).
• Making sure that emergency mental health and psychosocial support is available to all, especially for those most at risk of mental ill health during the pandemic, including health care workers and other first responders; those economically impacted; COVID-19 survivors; and society’s most vulnerable.
• Supporting recovery from COVID-19 by building better mental health services for the future.
• Increasing funding for improved mental health services as part of COVID-19 response to prevent, respond and recover from the pandemic. Investing in mental health now is an opportunity to build back better for our societies as a whole, and our mental health in the future.

What is Speak Your Mind doing around COVID-19?

Speak Your Mind (SYM) campaign launched an Open Letter calling on world leaders to protect the vulnerable by integrating mental health into all COVID-19 response and recovery plans. The Open Letter was signed by more than 1000 experts, business leaders, renowned scientists and those working on the frontline from over 40 countries. It launched to coincide with new guidance and a public call by the UN Secretary General and UN agencies for greater action on mental health: insisting countries must integrate mental health in their COVID-19 plans.

In SYM partner campaign countries, partners are providing and adapting mental health support services and training additional personnel, working with local media to provide mental health information, and raising awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on mental health within communities. We also work with national governments and local authorities to ensure mental health support is protected and scaled up for those who need it.
What is United for Global Mental Health doing on COVID-19?

We support the international community and our national partners to end the COVID-19 outbreak and build a stronger mental health system now, and for the future. Together, we raise the profile of mental health and call on world leaders, national and global funders to invest now, integrating mental health to ‘Build Back Better’. We contributed to the UNSG Policy Briefing on COVID-19 and the need for action on mental health.

We run a weekly COVID-19 Webinar series in partnership with Lancet Psychiatry, Mental Health Innovation Network and MHPSS.net that puts the spotlight on tackling the impact coronavirus is having - and will continue to have - on mental health. The series focuses on the work of people all over the world who are finding new and innovative ways to improve the support for mental health during the pandemic and to build back better. Thousands of people have taken part.

We have also produced a briefing on financing for mental health and COVID-19 which is regularly updated to help identify sources of funding for mental health activities at international, national and local level.

The BluePrintGroup for Global Mental Health (BPG), which we coordinate, has responded to the needs of its 800+ membership and shared lessons learned about COVID-19 and mental health. This includes regular updates on WHO and BPG member COVID-19 and a list of mental health resources that is available online.

To find out more about this work and tell us what you are doing contact us.