

Mental health for all, greater investment, greater access

This year's World Mental Health Day theme, "Mental health for all – greater investment, greater access" is befitting considering the lack of attention and poor resourcing towards mental health. The consequences of the failure to prioritize mental health were exposed by the impact of COVID-19 which has adversely affected the mental and psychosocial wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. The impact we are currently witnessing is just the beginning of more serious mental health related problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has made mental health an important issue which we can no longer afford to ignore. Governments and the private sector should make serious commitments to rapidly increase investment in mental health. The call is very loud and clear, **GREATER INVESTMENT AND ACCESS!** The time to act is now.

Mental health services are not readily accessible to those who require them in the East and Southern Africa region. This mirrors the general trend in low- and middle-income countries, where according to WHO, 75% of people with mental, neurological and substance use disorders have no access to treatment services. Some of the available services do not meet minimum quality standards.

Mental health issues are a major global health concern during adolescence. Figures show that up to one in five adolescents will experience a mental disorder in a given year. Adolescents go through rapid physical, mental, emotional and social changes as they develop from childhood to adulthood. These changes may be accompanied by psychological and behavioral challenges such as depression, anxiety and poor self-esteem. These can lead to unsafe sexual practices, early and unintended pregnancies. This introduces another layer of challenges as adolescent mothers often drop out of school and social networks, are rejected by family, religious networks and fathers of their babies, are less informed on nurturing care, and struggle with stigma and exclusion. Adolescent mothers widely report unfriendly or abusive treatment from staff at local health services. This will ultimately affect how well their babies grow and develop. Unfortunately, adolescents face these challenges without receiving adequate psychosocial support and access to mental health services. Stakeholders should invest in psychosocial interventions to promote the mental health of adolescents.

According to WHO, countries expend on average 2% of their health budgets on mental health with international development support for mental health not exceeding 1% of all development assistance for health. The World Bank estimates that for every US\$ 1 invested in service and treatment for mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, there is a return of US\$ 5 in improved health and productivity.

In spite of the increase in mental health awareness, both investment in and access to mental health services remains very low. Mental health investment is everyone's responsibility, Governments and private sector can provide the much needed financial resources while communities can use their own resources to provide psychosocial support to those who require it. Additionally, communities should address mental health stigma, this will go a long way to improve health seeking behavior.

Investing in and improving access to mental health is the right thing to do!