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Mental health problems trigger strongest prejudice, WHO report finds

Although one in four people will experience some sort of mental health problems during the course of their lives, users or ex-users of mental health services were found to be the most discriminated and stigmatized of all disabled people, often with deadly consequences.

The World Health Organization (WHO) World Report on Disability, the first major publication of its kind, gave an important account of the plight of people with mental health problems all over the world. Two major areas of discrimination were particularly salient.

Discrimination in healthcare

Shockingly, people with mental health problems were found to face discrimination even in health care settings. The WHO found (ex-) users of mental health services to have a lower life expectancy and more chronic health conditions than the general population. People with long term mental health problems were more likely to be obese and have heart disease, high blood pressure, respiratory disease, diabetes, strokes, or breast cancer. They were also more prone to developing chronic health conditions at a younger age, and to dying sooner after diagnosis. Moreover, the report pointed out that many people with mental health conditions did not receive mental health care despite the availability of effective treatments. Between a third and half of people with serious mental health problems in developed countries, and 76% to 85% of those in developing countries had received no care during the year before the study was conducted. Health inequalities mostly stemmed from social deprivation, people with mental health problems being at a high risk of poverty. Other significant barriers included the lack of health promotion, service access, and equal treatment as well as fear and mistrust on both the side of the medical service providers and the service users.

Low or no chance of a meaningful career

The WHO report also discovered that individuals with mental health difficulties or intellectual impairments experienced the lowest employment rates. People with mental difficulties suffered greater problems in entering the labor market and, if employed, in getting opportunities for advancement. This was largely due to misconceptions about the ability of people with disabilities to perform jobs, and to either the lack of knowledge or the unwillingness of managers to create work arrangements that can facilitate employment for disadvantaged groups.

With mental health problems becoming an even greater concern in the coming years due to their increased prevalence, Mental Health Europe urges policy makers to take an active stance in mainstreaming mental health and raising awareness of this important issue. Mental health should be included as a key priority in a European strategy on health inequalities, as it is central to understanding wider health and social issues. Moreover, people with mental health problems should have access to both employment and to adequate social protection systems, in order to live a full and dignified life.

For more information, please contact Mental Health Europe, at info@mhe-sme.org or +32 2 280 04 68

About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is an organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health, the prevention of mental distress, the improvement of care, advocacy for social inclusion and the protection of human rights for people with mental health problems, their families and carers. MHE vision is of a Europe where mental health and well-being is given high priority in the political spectrum and on the European health and social agenda, where people with mental health problems live as full citizens with access to appropriate services and support when needed, and where meaningful participation is guaranteed at all levels of decision-making and administration. MHE's values are based on dignity and respect, equal opportunities, freedom of choice, anti-discrimination, social inclusion, democracy and participation.