Challenges and Opportunities for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in the COVID-19 Response in Africa: A Mixed-Methods Study

Authors: Alice Walker, Muhammad Alkasaby, Florence Baingana, William K. Bosu, Mohammed Abdulaziz, Rosie Westerveld, Adelard Kakunze, Rosemary Mwaisaka, Khalid Saeed, Namoudou Keita, Ian F. Walker, Julian Eaton
Background: The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health Services

93% of the countries reported disruption in their mental health services*

17% ensured that full additional funding is available for MHPSS activities*

89% reported that MHPSS was part of their national COVID-19 response plans*

* % of the total countries responded to the WHO survey

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental, Neurological and Substance Use Services: Results of a Rapid Assessment, World Health Organization (2020)
To what extent were MHPSS activities included in the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic in African countries?

What are the challenges and opportunities for MHPSS integration into the COVID-19 response?

Methods

A web-based survey was sent to Ministries of Health (MoH) and WHO Regional and Country Offices in the African Union member states (55 countries).

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders from MoH, WHO, and civil society (17 interviews).
Results

Responses received from 28 out of the 55 African Union member states

68% of the countries implemented less than 50% of the recommended MHPSS activities*

* Based on recommendations from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group on MHPSS in Emergency Settings
### Most implemented MHPSS Activities*  
1. Establishing MHPSS coordination group  
   - 57%  
2. Developing an MHPSS strategy  
   - 45%  
3. Developing protocols for funerals  
   - 45%  

### Least implemented MHPSS Activities*  
1. Establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms  
   - 21%  
2. Developing activities for children  
   - 28%  
3. Implementing the developed MHPSS strategies  
   - 32%  

* Based on recommendations from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Reference Group on MHPSS in Emergency Settings.  
Interim Briefing Note Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak, IASC (2020)
**Challenges**

- The lack of political commitment and engagement
- Low prioritisation of mental health within emergency response structures
- The lack of available and sustainable funding
- The lack of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms

**Human resources challenges** (e.g. Availability, training, and underpayment)

- Failure to apply lessons learned from previous emergencies
- Communication challenges (e.g. poor telecommunication infrastructure)

**Competing priorities in emergency situations**
Opportunities

- Capitalising on the increased attention to mental health during COVID-19
- Promoting MHPSS integration in emergency response
- Integration of mental health in routine services and strengthening mental health systems in the longer term
- Sustaining multi-stakeholder coordination of MHPSS activities beyond emergencies

- Drawing from lessons learned in previous crises to inform the preparedness and response to future emergencies
- Engaging communities and people with lived experience to improve the MHPSS services provided and address the stigma
- Building regional networks to facilitate sharing experiences and learning between countries in the region
- Better public understanding of mental health following the pandemic
Establish an MHPSS pillar as part of future responses to emergencies

Sensitise national leaders to the importance of MHPSS in emergency preparedness and response

Undertake an in-depth review of MHPSS components of the national response to COVID-19 and identify lessons learnt

Improve data and information systems in routine national mental health systems to improve this function during emergencies

Ensure that MHPSS components of the national emergency preparedness and response plan include:

- Specific support for children and families
- Feasible monitoring, evaluation, and reporting framework
- Multi-sectoral collaboration
- Allocated resources to implement MHPSS components
- Community engagement during response
Acknowledgement

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References

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- The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Interim Briefing Note Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak, IASC Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. 2020.

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