

Cultivating mental health equity, one page at a time



Despite the many modern challenges to mental health, opportunities for improving outcomes abound. Multidisciplinary and structural approaches to mental health research provide promise and a call to work toward mental health equity. *Nature Mental Health* hopes to be part of that progress.

The past few years have been marked by profound events that have contributed to what may be considered the most challenging period for mental health in generations.

The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic has been a powerful magnifier of inequities – disrupting economic stability, education, health-care and social contexts – while serving to further widen the chasm between low-income and high-income countries. The turmoil of the pandemic has been accompanied by powerful cultural and social shifts in attention, such as the invigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement that addresses the continued violence and discrimination against people of color, the increased focus on the role of mental health in schools and the workplace, and a renewed interest in improving access and financing of universal healthcare.

The momentum of this unique time has bolstered the growing ecosystem of scholarly work that targets the fundamental questions around how lives and health can be improved. A resounding response is that striving for equity – whether in income, race/ethnic/gender, or opportunity – is imperative to better physical and mental health outcomes. Appreciating the importance of mental health has not been confined to researchers and clinicians. Mental health has become a ubiquitous, albeit wide-ranging, issue. From inspirational quotes and motivational memes to educational resources and advertising for online therapy, we are culturally awash with a curiosity about and a demand for understanding and improving our mental health. It is not coincidental that mental health now figures so prominently in our modern consciousness. It is the culmination of



decades of concerted efforts by public mental health campaigns, community-based initiatives focusing on specific groups of individuals who may be at risk of developing mental illness, and elevating the voices of people with lived experience with mental illness who give us insight by dispelling misconceptions and reducing stigma.

Despite the growing emergence of awareness about mental health, the multidisciplinary science and research of mental health and mental health disorders, joining strands of psychology, psychiatry and public health, is still coalescing. In 1950, ‘mental health’, referring to a fluctuating state or condition, was codified by the nascent World Health Organization (WHO). This phrasing supplanted the earlier ‘mental hygiene’ movement, which revolved around the notion that the integrity of an individual’s mental state is an entity that needs to be preserved. Mental hygiene called for a structural approach in which the systems that an individual and society interact with are designed to support them. That is, physical and built environments, education, industry and social institutions would harmoniously function together to promote and protect mental health.

Although a simplistic model by present standards, and one that does not account

for the substantial contributions of a more than a century of biological and psychiatric advancements in understanding mental disorders, there is wisdom in revisiting broader conceptualizations of how mental health can be affected, whether positively or negatively. Arguably, some of the most important recent developments in mental health research have occurred by incorporating frameworks that consider contexts and environments, such as social determinants of health, or the forces and systems that impinge on our physical and mental wellbeing. Broader and multidisciplinary approaches that consider an individual’s context also markedly underscore the central role of equity in mental health. Myriad aspects of our lives can influence our mental health, including childhood stress and adversity, green spaces and the safety of communities in which we live, food and climate insecurity, economic opportunities, and gender equality. It is crucial to identify and describe inequities and inequality that negatively affect mental health, yet it is not enough. Instead, we must actively cultivate mental health equity or a state in which everyone is afforded the fair and just opportunity for their best mental health.

In keeping with this theme, we introduce *Nature Mental Health*, a new multidisciplinary research journal at the intersection of

the breadth of sciences that explore mental health and disorders of mental health. *Nature Mental Health* was conceived as a journal to bring together lines of mental health research that may not have traditionally been published within the same outlet. That includes investigations of neurobiological function and psychopharmacology, brain imaging techniques, epidemiology, interventional clinical trials, behavioral and cognitive therapies, and policy and economics, to name a few. The research we seek to publish will

not only be high-quality and high-impact, with the editorial rigor and independence of the Nature Portfolio, but will bring together diverse readerships and contributors of commentary, reviews and points of view from the mental health community.

It is central to our mission to embed elements of mental health equity throughout the *Nature Mental Health* journal. To do this, we plan to bring diversity, equity and inclusion principles to our publishing practices and outreach, from collaborating with researchers

from underrepresented backgrounds and the Global South; providing training opportunities for reviewers and early-career researchers; consulting with lived experience experts, advocacy groups, and mental health research funders; and showcasing initiatives, programs and meetings around the world that actively promote mental health equity. Our hope is that *Nature Mental Health* will remain a work in progress and a work toward progress.

Published online: 19 January 2023