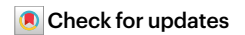


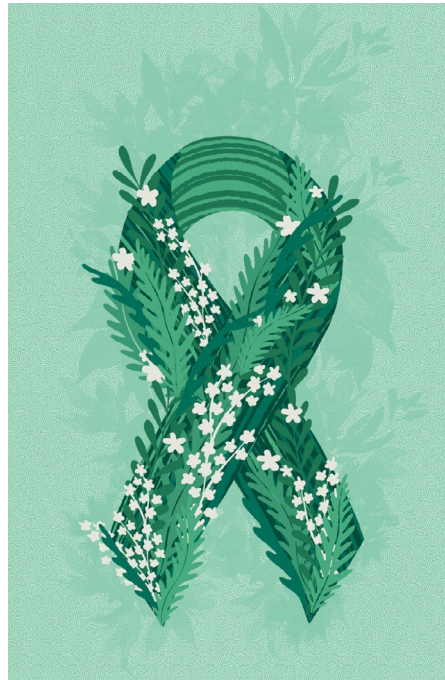
Mental health awareness: uniting advocacy and research



Mental Health Month has been observed to reduce the stigma that is associated with mental illness and to educate the public and encourage individuals to make their mental health and wellbeing a priority. It is an important moment to bring the strengths of advocacy groups and researchers together to promote mental health awareness and to improve equity.

Observances have become a popular tool to garner media and notice for topics deserving attention, from medical conditions to public health concerns, commemoration of notable events, or celebration of cultural groups. Codifying the scope and needs connected to an issue or illness through awareness campaigns can provide opportunities for imparting useful information, reducing stigma and marshalling support for policy change. The impact of awareness campaigns can be difficult to measure beyond tallying social media mentions or news stories. Effective advocacy, however, extends beyond traffic and paves the way for the creation of knowledge and partnerships among allies and with those whose interests are being represented. When the magnitude of an issue and the potential for improvement are great and are matched by broad involvement and recognition by stakeholders, the possibility for impact is also great.

Held annually in May, [Mental Health Month](#), also called [Mental Health Awareness Month](#), is an observance with such reach, resonating with many people. Nearly everyone has experience with the challenges that are associated with mental health, either first-hand or through loved ones or in their community. There is a need for education, support and initiative to improve our understanding of the causes of mental health disorders and to increase the availability of resources for prevention and treatment. [Mental Health Month](#) also offers the possibility of bringing together



groups who often work in parallel, such as mental health advocates and mental health research organizations, that can mutually benefit from each other's functions and expertise.

Mental Health Month was first established in the US in 1949 by the National Mental Health Association, now known as [Mental Health America](#). At a time more often associated with the outset of the Cold War and Marshall Plan than setting an agenda for domestic mental health and wellbeing advocacy, in the more than 70 years since, [Mental Health Month](#) has grown into an international event designed to reduce exclusion, stigma and discrimination against people with mental health conditions or disorders. [Mental Health America](#) are joined by other prominent mental health advocacy groups to sponsor related observances: [Mental Health Awareness Week Canada](#) (1–7 May, 2023) and [Europe](#) (22–28 May, 2023); and federal agencies such as the Substance Use Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMSHA](#)) in the US, promoting related public education platforms, including [National Prevention Week](#) (7–13 May, 2023).

Observances and awareness campaigns also provide occasions to put mental health in context. Increasing acknowledgment of the role of social determinants, for example, as mechanisms that can increase vulnerability for developing disorders and that drive disparities in mental health are an important framework to underscore as part of promoting mental health awareness. Given the complex and broad scope of people, disorders, conditions and issues under the umbrella of mental health, observances also give us the chance to focus more closely on specific problems or experiences. The theme for [Mental Health Month](#) in 2023 is 'Look Around, Look Within', which emphasizes the interdependence of mental health and wellness with an individual's internal and external experiences and environments.

"The 'Look Around, Look Within' theme builds on the growing recognition that all humans have mental health needs and that our available resources to build resilience and heal come in many forms – including in the natural world," explains Jennifer Bright, [Mental Health America](#) Board Chair and President of [Momentum Health Strategies](#). "[Mental Health America's](#) strategic plan, focused on [NextGen Prevention](#), carries a similar theme – that the social factors supporting mental health are essential building blocks. These encompass basic needs like healthy food, stable housing, and access to treatment and supports, but they also include spirituality, connection with peers with lived experience, and safe and natural spaces."

Overlapping with [Mental Health Month](#), [Mental Health Foundation](#) sponsors [Mental Health Week](#) in the [UK](#) (15–21 May, 2023), dedicating this year to raising awareness around anxiety. It shares an individual-centered approach to advocacy. In addition to providing toolkits and resources that point to how prevalent stress and anxiety can be to reduce stigma, it also promotes the accessibility of coping strategies for managing anxiety. As part of the [Mental Health Awareness Week](#) campaign, [Mental Health Foundation](#) and others use the international symbol of wearing a green ribbon or clothing to physically

raise awareness around mental health. *Nature Mental Health* also incorporates the symbol of the green ribbon on the cover of this month's issue and as our journal theme color. Green evokes the ideas of vitality, growth, new beginnings and hope – powerful imagery in mental health awareness.

Alongside stories, sponsorships and social media resources, mental health advocacy toolkits and strategy documents include fact sheets and messaging that are shaped and informed by research. Yet, there is often a perception that a divide exists between the mental health advocacy and research spaces, but observances such as Mental Health Month can bridge the two.

According to Lea Milligan, Chief Executive Officer of [MQ: Transforming Mental Health](#), an international mental health research organization, there are complementary approaches and priorities in advocacy and research:

“Mental health research can be used to bolster awareness by providing evidence-based information and resources that can help individuals and communities better understand mental health and the factors that contribute to mental health problems. This can include information on risk factors, prevention strategies, and available treatments.”

In addition, increased efforts to involve people with lived experience of mental illness in the research enterprise is a goal that is well-served through connection with advocacy. “While MQ is primarily focused on promoting mental health research, it also recognizes the importance of advocacy in advancing the mental health agenda” suggests Milligan. “MQ advocates for increased funding and support for mental health research, as well as policies that promote mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, MQ seeks to empower individuals with lived experience

of mental health conditions to be involved in research and advocacy efforts, and to have their voices heard in the development of policies and programs that affect their lives. MQ provides resources and support for individuals with lived experience who wish to be involved in research or advocacy efforts, including training programs, research grants, and opportunities to [participate](#) in research studies.”

Involvement or engagement is certainly one of the most important metrics of advocacy. By strengthening collaboration between advocacy and research organizations and identifying the mutual areas of benefit, such as engagement and increased funding, we may find new ways to green light mental health awareness and action toward mental health equity.

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