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Expanding our vision for mental health

Listening to young people and learning from Covid-19



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Summary

Covid-19 highlights mental health as an urgent global health challenge requiring international cooperation. This document lays out a commitment by Wellcome, UNICEF, WHO, the World Economic Forum and the Office of the UN Secretary General to embark on a learning journey on how best to embed the following three principles across all our mental health work:

- Putting lived experience at the heart of policy and practice
- Positioning local innovation as a focus for learning and funding
- Envisioning mental health as larger than healthcare

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it... ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Arundhati Roy, Financial Times, 3 April 2020

“Good mental health is critical to the functioning of society at the best of times. It must be front and centre of every country’s response to and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.”

UN Policy Brief ‘Covid-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health’, May 2020

A chance for new thinking

Covid-19 is not creating a new mental health crisis. It is expanding and pulling into the spotlight the existing mental health crisis and highlighting that we don't have the resources and breadth of effective treatments we need to deal with it.

Yet Covid-19 is an opportunity to learn about mental health. There is an opportunity to understand how young people are coping in a world where normality has been abruptly stopped. There is an opportunity to step back and shift towards an approach to mental health that looks both at states of mind and at the state of the world, that looks both at individuals and at the collective of which we are part, and that recognises both medical and community approaches as valuable.

Wellcome has been reflecting on what this could mean for mental health with four global partners: the WHO, who have steered the world's response to the pandemic, UNICEF, who seek to ensure that its impacts on children and young people are recognised and responded to, the World Economic Forum, who have encouraged businesses towards global cooperation.

Together, we want to use this moment to catalyse the much-needed progress on mental health that the world has been waiting for.

The scale of the challenge

Every day, millions of young people across the world are being held back in life by anxiety and depression. Wellcome has been at the forefront of funding developments and innovations in this area, including talking therapies and medication. These are clearly crucial for some, but we know that they don't work for everyone and they do not scale to meet the extent of the need. We urgently require the next generation of approaches.

In response to this challenge, Wellcome launched its [Mental Health Priority Area](#), with a vision of a world in which no one is held back by mental health problems. Work began in January 2020 with a commitment of £200 million for the first five years in order to help transform the science of how we prevent and treat anxiety and depression in young people.

Those who have been affected by mental health problems play a crucial role in shaping and delivering [our strategy](#) so that we can achieve this vision.

This means that young people with lived experience of anxiety and depression are represented within the team itself, and on our Advisory Groups. Their experience and expertise shape the questions we ask and the decisions we make every day.

At the heart of our strategy is work focused on identifying the 'active ingredients' that really make a difference in preventing or tackling youth anxiety and depression worldwide. These active ingredients exist within and beyond current treatments provided by professionals. There is evidence that they may include changing how people behave and think, but also changing their economic conditions and biological functioning. We have initially commissioned reviews of 26 active ingredients identified by the mental health science community as the most likely to be most effective worldwide.

Currently identified active ingredients are diverse, including: challenging negative thoughts, receiving cash transfers, expanding access to green spaces for those in urban areas, increasing social connection, use of antidepressants and enhanced problem solving. Understanding what constitutes an active ingredient for whom and in what context underpins Wellcome's funding agenda in this area.



Covid-19 amplifies the need and makes this agenda ever more urgent. The impact of the pandemic may have far-reaching mental health consequences both directly and indirectly, including through economic hardship, and is likely to hit hardest those who are already the most disadvantaged. We support the call for more research into both direct and indirect impacts¹. This paper, however, focuses on learning from the crisis in the sense that Arundhati Roy's quote exhorts us to – that is, what do we want to take from this crisis into the new world we are all going to be in?

To ensure our thinking was informed by the experience of young people themselves, we commissioned two projects that sought to capture individual and collective responses to Covid-19. These resulted in the following two reports:

1. The *Collective Resilience* project explored how people have protected their mental health during Covid-19. This report examined how people have coped and found meaning and connection – from individual self-care practices like meditation or time in nature to WhatsApp groups and Zoom calls for family and friends, and from neighbourhood mutual aid groups to worldwide protest movements. Young people's views were collected through UNICEF's global network of youth leaders, Company Three's Coronavirus Time Capsule, and other groups.

Collective Resilience was produced by Alex Evans and Jules Evans of the [Collective Psychology Project](#), an exploration of the places where our inner and outer worlds collide and whose most recent report, [This Too Shall Pass](#), examined how we can navigate the collective grief that Covid-19 is creating.

2. The *Covid Living* project aimed to capture how young people around the world managed their mental health during lockdown and then the transition out. It experimented with different methods and activities that enabled 14-to-24-year-olds to share their experiences, including a series of creative challenges sent via WhatsApp, participating in Zoom chats, and writing letters to their future selves. With contributors drawn from Wellcome's global networks, participants from 17 countries took part, and shared a wide variety of practices and activities they discovered had helped during this difficult time.

Covid Living was developed by creative studio Flying Object in collaboration with film producer Jack Arbuthnott, building on their expertise in designing participatory initiatives that use technology to gather and tell stories. The material captured during this process will form the basis of a creative project intended to stimulate further discussion, to be developed later this year.

We are not claiming either report is a scientific study. We are using them as tools to reflect and refine our positions, which are built on our understanding of the evidence and existing organisational strategies. They illustrate the multiple ways young people and communities are driving innovation at local and national level. The solutions they are reaching for are wider than solutions currently found in healthcare settings. They sit alongside the fascinating [#CopingwithCOVID webinar series](#), from the Office of the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, UNICEF and WHO, which provided young people with a platform for genuine connection amid uncertainty, encouraging them to field their questions to the experts from UNICEF and WHO.

Together, we want to use this moment to catalyse the much-needed progress on mental health that the world has been waiting for.



A commitment to action

Wellcome, UNICEF, WHO, and the World Economic Forum are all committed to learning from the pandemic and embedding the following three principles into our practice. Each year, for the next five years, a group of young people with lived experience will ask us to demonstrate that we are:

1. Putting lived experience at the heart of policy and practice

The approaches mapped out in the reports are rooted in people's real-world lived experience and rooted in specific communities and contexts driven by their perceptions, needs, emotions, aspirations and values. This is what makes them relevant, resonant and responsive. There is so much we can learn from those with lived experience. It is time to move on from asking those with lived experience to share (often traumatic) stories from their past, and instead make room for them to use their experience and expertise to help improve the lives of those currently struggling.

All our outputs on the topic of mental health will outline how those with lived experience have been involved, with a focus on opportunities that enable them to shape projects as opposed to simply disseminating them.

2. Positioning local innovation as a focus for learning and funding

Many approaches are rooted in particular places, communities or cultures. We need a thorough understanding of the specific contexts in which approaches to managing mental health issues are found to be effective and a way of translating that knowledge into other local contexts, with due allowance for their differences. Organisations that cross these boundaries and are able to contribute to the task of translation can play a hugely valuable cross-pollination role.

We will engage in horizon scanning to find candidates for investigation, and we will fund and promote local initiatives – whose governance and leadership sit at the local level – that have evidence of impact.

¹Holmes, E. A., O'Connor, R. C., Perry, V. H., Tracey, I., Wessely, S., Arseneault, L., ... & Ford, T. (2020). Multidisciplinary research priorities for the Covid-19 pandemic: a call for action for mental health science. *The Lancet Psychiatry*

3. Envisioning mental health as larger than healthcare

Most of the approaches illustrated in the reports involved actions and factors beyond healthcare. Mental health is bigger than healthcare. Facing the crisis and seizing the opportunity ahead of us requires much more than simply increasing access to services. We need to step back and see that mental health is a social issue, an equality issue, a scientific issue and an economic issue too. A policy to fund mental health initiatives at a community level, a policy to prioritise resource allocation to those furthest behind, a policy to increase investment in mental health research, a policy to ensure everyone receives a fair wage – these policies are all mental health policies.

We will support and develop mental health initiatives that are not solely situated in healthcare contexts and will work to ensure that mental health is fully considered across health, social, economic and business responses and recovery plans at regional, national and international levels.

Full results are available at: wellcome.ac.uk/covidmentalhealth



Working together

Jeremy Farrar, Director, Wellcome Trust

“Covid-19 has had a massive impact on all of our mental health. And like Covid-19, mental health is bigger than just a health issues, it’s too big for any one organisations to tackle alone. I’m delighted and proud that Wellcome has committed to these shared principles – lived experience, local innovation, larger than healthcare – in our mental health work.”

Dévora Kestel, Director, Mental Health and Substance Use, WHO

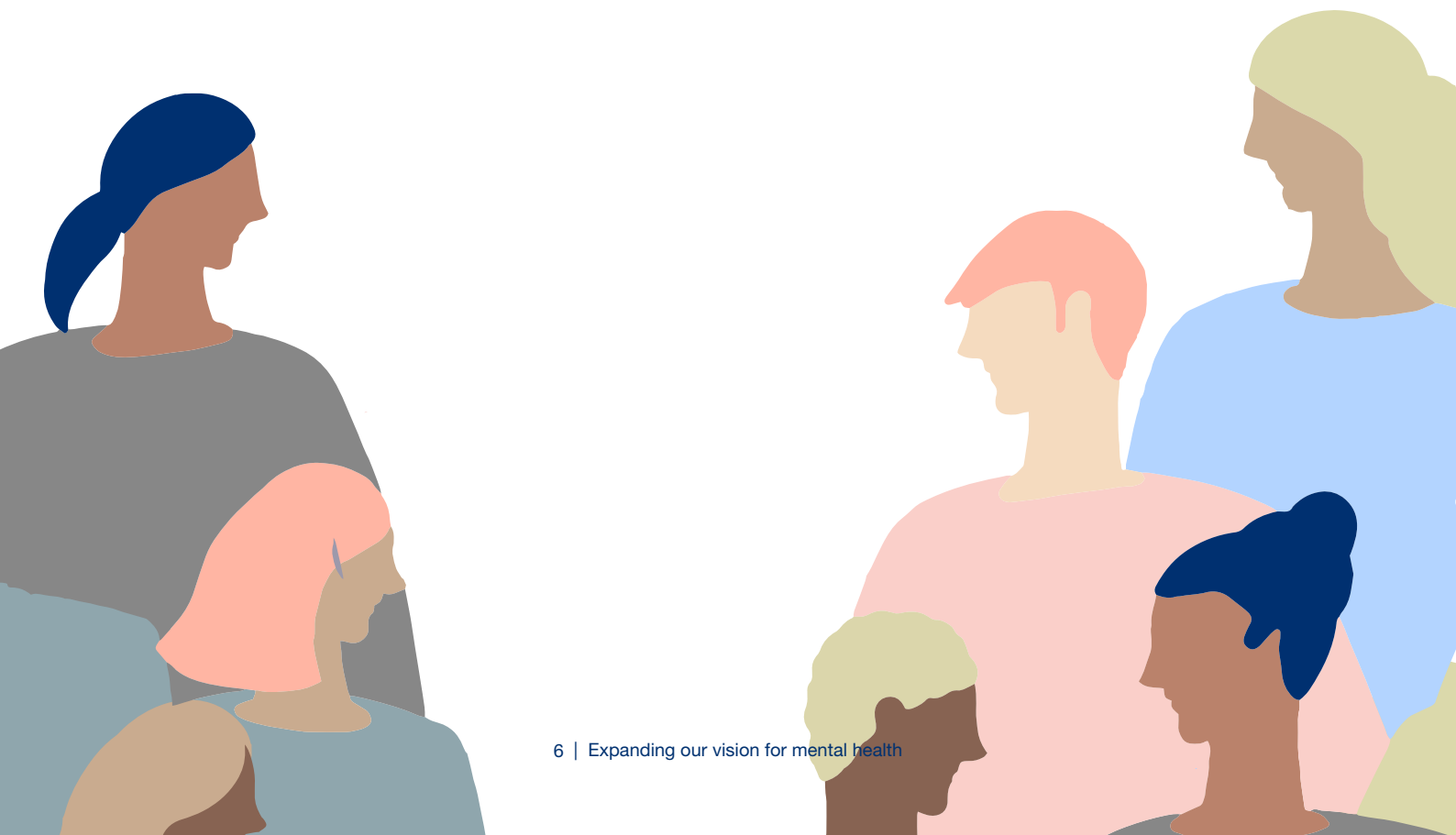
“The WHO supports these three important principles. We look forward to working together, and learning from one another, over the next five years as we strive to improve the mental health of individuals and strengthen communities to support well-being for all.”

Arnaud Bernaert, Head of Global Health and Healthcare Industries and Systems, World Economic Forum

“The World Economic Forum is committed to positive mental health and looks forward to working with partners to make these shared principles – lived experience, local innovation, larger than healthcare – the foundation of our collective actions.”

Mr. Omar Abdi, Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF

“UNICEF is committed to exploring ways in which the COVID crisis can be used as a positive driver of new thinking and new approaches to caring for the mental health, psychosocial wellbeing and development of young people and their caregivers. As a partner in this collaboration, we look forward to sharing experiences and, through this process, forging a more robust, actionable and coordinated response that will have a positive impact on the lives of many.”



**Wellcome exists to improve health
by helping great ideas to thrive.**

**We support researchers, we take on
big health challenges, we campaign
for better science, and we help
everyone get involved with science
and health research.**

**We are a politically and financially
independent foundation.**

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