

Mental Health in an Unequal World

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Last week, my friend and colleague, Harold Pincus, sent me a stunning photo of the vast field of white flags that carpet the Washington Mall in commemoration of the 700,000+ lives lost to COVID in the United States. It is heart-wrenching. The world is so unfair, and the pandemic has brought into stark relief social, economic, and health disparities that have always existed in my home country and around the world – maybe since recorded time.



Photo Credit: Harold Pincus

The many conversations spurred by the pandemic have crystalized for me that the ideals of fairness and justice and equity are quintessentially, and perhaps uniquely, human. They are ideals that inspire and drive us whether we are artists or policymakers, writers or parents. These are the ideals at the heart of this year's World Mental Health Day.

1. Mental Health in an Unequal World. This is the theme of [World Mental Health Day](#), which is this Sunday, October 10, 2021. Each year, led by [The World Federation for Mental Health](#) and the [World Health Organization](#), and supported by organizations around the globe, a particular theme is identified that serves to raise awareness and advance mental health. The implications of “an unequal world” for mental health are many. Ways in which we can promote greater equity are also many.

2. Mental Health Care for All: Let's Make it a Reality. This is the tagline for World Mental Health Day 2021. Within the world of mental health, increasing access to care is one of our most urgent priorities everywhere. The sobering reality is that stigma, discrimination and human rights abuses of people with mental health conditions are widespread. The good news is that attitudes are changing. A [recent study of American adults](#), for example, found that 87% agreed that having a mental health disorder is nothing to be ashamed of and 86% said they believe that people with mental health disorders can get better.

3. Begin with honest conversations about mental health. To increase access to care, we need to make mental health part of our everyday conversations. This will help people understand their own mental health experiences and more fully help them know what to do when they have mental health issues that need attention. We know that public figures and celebrity mental health narratives can [serve to educate, inspire and promote advocacy](#) among the general public. This is also true in the [workplace](#) when leaders talk about mental health and create an organizational culture that protects and promotes mental health. The same is true within community groups and families.

4. Follow up with investment in mental health research and services. First the bad news: we have [underinvested in mental health around the globe](#). On average, countries spend just 2% of their national health budgets on mental health. The lost productivity resulting from depression and anxiety, two of the most common

mental disorders, [costs the global economy \\$1 trillion USD each year](#). Despite an increase of development assistance for mental health in recent years, it has never exceeded 1% of development assistance for health. Now the good news: Common mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, can be treated effectively with talk therapies, medication, or a combination of these. Scaled-up treatments for depression and anxiety demonstrate a [4:1 return on investment](#).

5. So what can you do? This Sunday, speak up. Say something about mental health online or in person. Put the [World Mental Health Day Image](#) on social media with #WorldMentalHealthDay — tag [@columbiaGMHP](#) and [@PikeKM](#) and we will amplify your message. Share this Five on Friday with someone. In the month of October, continue the conversation. Take the time to talk publicly about mental health or have an intimate conversation with a family member, friend or colleague. Before year's end, demonstrate your support for increased investment in mental health in whatever way suits you. [Join a walk](#). [Enter a virtual race](#). [Support a campaign](#). Any day, be present and listen to someone who needs your open heart and ear.

The aspiration of mental health in an unequal world is fueled by the quintessential human values of fairness, justice, and equity. Values that distinguish what it means to be human. Ideals that put us on an inspired and inspiring asymptotic journey. One where mental health is health, and care is available to all.