**Executive summary**

This paper reviews the previous literature on the measurement of mental health and factors influencing the state of mental health. The focus is on the appraisal of mental health at population level giving special weight to an assessment that could be useful for mental health promotion. The review is conducted as the background work for developing a set of mental health indicator as part of a comprehensive health monitoring system in Europe. A definition of mental health, which is considered as a component of general health, is presented. Mental ill-health encompasses a continuum, extending from the most severe mental disorders to a range of symptoms of different intensity and duration that result in a variety of consequences.

Aspects of health can be measured by various indicators that is, by measures that summarise the information relevant to a particular phenomenon or by a reasonable proxy for such a measure. A good quality indicator should measure what it is supposed to measure, provide the same answer if measured by different people in similar circumstances, and be able to measure change and reflect changes only in the situation concerned. A mental health indicator should reflect an aspect that is relevant to a chosen target. It measures the state of mental health and related needs. It should inform its users whether the targets set are being achieved or not.

The review presents some findings from research seeking associations between mental health, psychological distress and mental disorders on the one hand and different individual, social, economic, ecological and service-related characteristics on the other. Following the lines of the mental health definitions, these research findings outline specific areas as key starting points in establishing a set of mental health indicators. We can provisionally divide such indicator areas into seven categories: Sociodemographic; Social Networks and Stressful Events; Positive Mental Health; Subjective Experience of the Individual; Services and their Supply, Use and Demand; Morbidity and Disability; and Mortality. The following looks briefly at these categories and at needs index models of mental disorders. Methods to measure factors important in each area and examples of results of studies in each group are presented. There are currently four methods to estimate these factors at population level: the survey method, analysis of utilisation data, analysis of socio-economic factors and a combination of techniques.

The aim of the whole project has been to create a set of a few good (valid and reliable) indicators to monitor mental health. Monitoring mental health is defined here as systematic, repeated measures of matters related to the mental health of the population. The topic of mental health is, however, very complex as most mental disorders are multifactorial in their aetiology, a multitude of risk factors may influence the onset course and restitution of one disorder and a risk factor may be common for many forms of ill-health, both somatic and mental illnesses. There is a growing volume of data to show that some users of care do not satisfy the diagnostic criteria and that others, who satisfy the criteria, do not receive the care they need. The chronic nature of mental disorders increases their prevalence figures, as the incidence figures are quite low. For promotion and prevention purposes it is important to have information on factors predicting and affecting the course of mental ill-health. Functional disabilities seem to be more important than diagnoses as such and therefore interest should not be restricted to diagnostic groups alone.

Ultimately the system would be there to help decision-making. It could be used in estimating how the targets set for policies are met, and whether there has been a measurable decrease in disability, suffering and disease. The indicators could offer tools for the adequate allocation of resources for interventions, policies and programmes. This information could also be used in evaluating the mental health impact of other policies.
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