

UN chief warns psychological suffering from virus is growing

May 14 2020, by Edith M. Lederer

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged governments, civil society and health authorities on Wednesday to urgently address mental health needs arising from the coronavirus pandemic, warning that psychological suffering is increasing.

The U.N. chief said in a video message launching a policy briefing that "after decades of neglect and under-investment in [mental health](#) services, the COVID-19 pandemic is now hitting families and communities with additional mental stress."

He pointed to "grief at the loss of loved ones, shock at the loss of jobs, isolation and restrictions on movement, difficult family dynamics, and uncertainty and fear for the future."

Guterres said those most at risk and in need of help are front-line health care workers, older people, adolescents, young people, those with preexisting mental health conditions, and those caught up in conflict and crisis.

"Mental health services are an essential part of all government responses to COVID-19," he said. "They must be expanded and fully funded."

The 17-page U.N. briefing stressed that "the mental health and well-being of whole societies have been severely impacted by this crisis and are a priority to be addressed urgently."

The U.N. said "a long-term upsurge in the number and severity of mental health problems is likely" and warned that if action isn't taken COVID-19 "has the seeds of a major mental health crisis" as well as "a physical health crisis."

The briefing cited widespread psychological distress from the immediate health aspects of the virus, the consequences of physical isolation, fear of infection, dying and losing family members, physical distancing from loved ones and peers, and economic turmoil.

"Frequent misinformation and rumors about the virus and deep uncertainty about the future are common sources of distress," the U.N. briefing said.

"In every community, there are numerous older adults and people with preexisting health conditions who are terrified and lonely," it said. "Emotional difficulties among children and adolescents are exacerbated by family stress, social isolation, with some facing increased abuse, disrupted education and uncertainty about their futures."

Because of the size of the problem, the U.N. said, most mental health needs remain unaddressed.

It pointed to a historic under-investment in mental health needs and called for the widespread availability of emergency mental health and psychological support during the pandemic.

The U.N. also urged the development of mental health services for the future "to support society's recovery from COVID-19."

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