World Mental Health Day in October 2023 was an opportunity for people and communities to unite behind the theme 'Mental health is a universal human right" to improve knowledge, raise awareness, and drive actions that promote and protect everyone's mental health as a universal human right. (1000 words)

Please discuss the challenges which prevent good mental health from being accessible to everyone

Introduction

The theme of World Mental Health Day 2023 is a topic that is very close to my own heart. Having experienced difficulties with accessing Mental Health Services and supports myself during my younger years, I have a lived experience of the issues that impact how certain members of the Irish population do not receive/have access to the kind of Mental Health Support, and/or Psycho Education that is vital to our overall wellbeing and to the condition of our Mental Health.

In my discussion I would like to identify three areas which I believe are the main issues impacting how or if a member of the Irish General Public can access adequate mental health support and psycho education. I will also discuss the role or responsibility of Counsellors and Psychotherapists in influencing change to these current challenges.

1. *Socioeconomic Background*

We know that cost of living has skyrocketed in Ireland over recent years, which means that despite how beneficial and necessary therapy might be, it does not fill bellies or keep the lights on so unfortunately for many is not a priority. Despite the development in our awareness of mental health as key to our overall wellbeing, support for mental health and wellbeing still remains outside of the medical health profession and so it is really only readily accessible to those

who are financially secure. There are plenty of low-cost services available in Ireland, such as PCI Counselling Service. But these services are limited to certain areas due to a lack of funding by our government. Unfortunately waiting lists to access our public mental health services can span up to 12 months. This puts significant pressure and unnecessary risk on the lives of people affected. During a recent debate in Dail Eireann it was stated that ‘’The waiting list to access CAMH services has increased from 2,755 in December 2020 to 4,434 at the end of February 2023.

2. *Stigma*

Ireland in 2024, thankfully, is more open to embracing mental health services but it is not without some stigmas attached. Still in the 21st Century we see many people who feel that attending Therapy is only for ‘really sick’ people. As a 14-year-old I had my first experiences of therapy and even then, I felt the need to lie about it for fear of being treated like something was wrong with me. This attached stigma led me to be reluctant to engage in the first place. I did not want other people to find out because I was afraid of the social isolation that might follow me into my social circles and school. Thankfully, my family members and very close friends were supportive which was of huge help. Not everybody has this privilege though. And very often the person in most need of support struggles to express their needs in the first place!

Geographical

Unfortunately, your postcode will dictate a huge part of your life when it comes to things like the cost of insurance, education opportunities and healthcare. This is known commonly referred to as the postcode lottery. This means if you live in the ‘’wrong’’ or ‘a bad’ area of

Ireland, like Athy Co. Kildare or Cherry Orchard, Dublin; you are looking at longer waiting times to be seen, potentially needing to travel to therapy (which presents its own challenges if you have young children or are without a car) and lastly potentially struggling to pay for service use. An interesting example of this is seen in cases where certain national schools receive funding for Psychoeducation or Mental Health Supports for students based on their location i.e. Schools in underprivileged areas V's Schools in Working Class areas. Yet, the mental health struggles among our young people does not discriminate according to location. Ref: Counselling in Schools Pilot 2023-2025

2. How counsellors and psychotherapists can play a role in making this goal a reality.

Socioeconomic Background

We know that social connection, movement and a good diet play a huge part in good mental health so my suggestion would be to offer more prosocial activities in low socioeconomic areas in conjunction with the offer of low-cost counselling in every community centre across the country as well as in every school. This can look like sports clubs, education around healthy eating habits, community events showcasing the talents of the community, access to holistic therapies like meditation, yoga and acupuncture. This teaches a community how to regulate or co-regulate in a healthy way outside of therapy hours and also creates a bridge to accessing therapy for a fraction of the usual price.

Stigma

Stigma is born through a lack of information and understanding of a subject. So; my suggestion to combat stigma attached to mental health issues in Ireland is to be more proactive about educating ourselves and our peers about the issue. This could look like having

open and honest conversations about our own experiences, holding workshops and information nights in schools, community centres and workplaces. Ensuring our own places have sufficient policies to support employees through difficult times. Lastly and I think most importantly is to be an advocate for mental health. I have recently engaged in the Certificate Programme in PCI College, and I feel very strongly that this programme should be made accessible to all members of the general public, as well as aspects of it being included in the general school curriculum.

Geography

I have two suggestions to combat the ‘’Postcode Lottery’’ in Ireland. I think the first would be for the government to put financial incentives in place for more people to train as mental health professionals. As these individuals become qualified it will help to shorten wait list times. My second recommendation would be for the government to set funding aside for local community organisations like community centres, schools, youth services, probation services and prisons to employ therapists within their buildings at no extra cost. This means that communities no longer need to travel to access mental health services and are therefore more likely to engage in services. I feel it is the responsibility of training providers such as PCI College and all qualified therapists to become more active in lobbying for such changes in Ireland.

REFERENCES

https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-04-20/21/#:~:text=The%20waiting%20list%20to%20access,responded%20to%20within%20three%20days.

https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/spotlight-research/why-stigma-and-shame-associated-mental-illness-ireland

https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/health-inequalities-postcode-lottery

https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.966956/full