

Integrating Mental Health into Primary Healthcare in Pakistan

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Understanding of mental health issues refers to mental health literacy and lack of information regarding these issues, leading to stigmatization, delayed help-seeking, and inadequate treatment. Mental health issues are increasingly recognized as a significant public health concern in Pakistan, where nearly one in four individuals is estimated to experience some form of mental illness during their lifetime. Awareness of dealing with mental health issues is necessary at the community level, and community healthcare workers can play an important role as frontline workers. Despite this growing burden, the healthcare system lacks trained professionals for assessment and diagnosis of mental health issues, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas such as the Kohat Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This region faces not only mental health challenges but also socioeconomic problems like poverty, low literacy, and limited access to healthcare, all of which exacerbate psychological vulnerabilities. Stigma and lack of awareness further hinder timely help-seeking, leaving many individuals untreated (Begum et al, 2020).

In Pakistan's existing healthcare system, Lady Health Workers (LHWs) and community health volunteers are the backbone of primary healthcare delivery in rural areas. They provide essential maternal, child health, and preventive services. However, their training largely overlooks mental health. Without proper training and supervision, LHWs cannot identify or refer individuals with common mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Javed et al, 2020). Consequently, integration of mental health into primary care remains minimal, with a treatment gap exceeding 90%. This gap is widened by the severe shortage of trained professionals. Most specialists are concentrated in tertiary hospitals in major cities, leaving rural districts underserved. Integrating mental health into primary healthcare through task-sharing and WHO's mhGAP framework can improve access and outcomes. Empowering Lady Health Workers with mental health skills can enhance early detection, referral, and community awareness, aligning with national and global mental health priorities.

Community-level health services are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing medical and psychological issues. However, due to lack of trained frontline workers, poor awareness, and fear of stigmatization, mental health problems often remain unrecognized or mismanaged. This gap delays timely intervention and increases the risk of chronic mental illness and social dysfunction.

Key challenges include scarcity of mental health professionals, lack of coordination between primary and tertiary healthcare services, and the need for contextually relevant, low-cost mental health interventions in resource-limited settings. Addressing these challenges can strengthen the capacity of the primary healthcare system and improve access to mental healthcare at the community level (Cheung, Chan & Cheng, 2024). Enhanced mental health literacy among frontline health workers, improved early detection and referral of mental health cases, strengthened capacity of the primary healthcare system, increased community awareness, and reduced stigma are essential for improving mental health outcomes. Ultimately, integrating mental health services into primary healthcare can contribute to better identification and management of mental health conditions and support the development of an effective and sustainable healthcare system.

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