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How Asia is Addressing Mental Health Issues?

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Nearly one billion people globally live with mental health conditions, and about 260 million of them reside in the World Health Organization (WHO) South-East Asia Region. Governments across Asia are ramping up efforts to combat the rising mental health crisis. As October 10 will be observed as World Mental Health Day, we take a look at the region's focus on policy reforms to address the growing burden of mental healthcare across Asia.



Mental health issues are well-documented, affecting nearly one billion people worldwide, with approximately 260 million residing in the WHO South-East Asia Region. Insufficient investment in mental health services and the healthcare workforce has led to significant treatment gaps in the region, a situation further worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Global estimates indicate the WHO South-East Asia Region accounts for around 27 per cent of all cases of depression and 23 per cent of all cases of anxiety.

Despite its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), only 2 per cent of total government health expenditure and 1 per cent of global development assistance for health are dedicated to mental health, according to the WHO's *Mental Health Atlas 2020*.

Mental illness presents a significant health and socioeconomic burden, accounting for over 20 per cent of total Years Lived with Disability (YLDs) and 9.3 per cent of Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) in the Asia-Pacific region. As per a report by The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (2016), even advanced economies like Australia and New Zealand face GDP deficits of 3.5 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively, linked to mental illness. Furthermore, it is estimated that by 2030, mental illness will result in a loss of $11 trillion in economic growth for India and China alone, according to a report 'Provision for Supporting People with Mental Illness: A Comparison of 15 Asia-Pacific Countries,' prepared by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and sponsored by Janssen Asia Pacific.

To address these growing concerns, policymakers and health systems across the region are taking a note. Various countries have developed national strategic plans and made investments to strengthen mental healthcare.

"I've witnessed the growing focus on mental health across Asia, where governments, organisations and the community are increasingly addressing the rising mental health challenges. Significant reforms have been introduced to improve access to

care, reduce stigma, and integrate mental health into broader healthcare systems. There are quite a few notable reforms that have been introduced in Asia that left me feeling hopeful and encouraged," said **Theodoric Chew, CEO and Co-founder, Intellect, Singapore**. Intellect is Asia's largest mental health platform serving 3.5 million members in 60+ countries. Let's look at some of them in detail.

National Policy Initiatives in Asia

Singapore: In 2023, the Ministry of Health introduced the National Mental Health and Well-being Strategy. This was a comprehensive plan to improve Singapore's mental health ecosystem and outlined planned whole-of-government and whole-of-society efforts to increase accessibility for mental health support. This will include efforts to expand capacity of mental health services, like having more general practitioners (GPs) be trained to provide mental health services like assessment and medical treatment.

There are other initiatives as well. In 2024, a white paper by ground-up initiative Project Hayat (led by advocacy group SG Mental Health Matters) was released. This white paper comprised of 23 recommendations including a national public awareness campaign on suicide prevention and integrating suicide prevention education into school curriculum. The Beyond the Label campaign (launched in 2018) by the National Council of Social Service aims to reduce stigma associated with mental health conditions.

"Additionally, there have been initiatives introduced by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) that focus on workplace wellbeing programmes. One of the notable initiatives is the guidelines that companies must consider if an employee requests for flexible work arrangements. This has since been adopted by the Ministry of Manpower," said Chew.

South Korea: The country is making strides in enhancing its mental health policies with the establishment of a Mental Health Policy Innovation Committee. This initiative aims to develop and implement effective strategies to improve mental health care across the country. As part of these efforts, Korea has also launched a collaboration project with the World Bank to improve mental health awareness. This project will share case studies of successful mental health stigma reduction programmes from different countries, allowing for discussions on their applicability in the Korean context.

"To tackle the country's high suicide rates, South Korea rolled out a plan to offer mental health checkups every two years for Koreans aged 20 to 34. The aim is to detect warning signs of mental distress early. This is a huge improvement from their previous plan, which was to provide mental health checkups for Koreans aged 20 to 70, every ten years," said Chew.

Australia: The country boasts a robust mental health policy, continually prioritising reforms and investing millions to enhance mental health services. In April 2024, the government announced $4.6 million to support youth mental health research.

The 2021–22 Federal Budget allocated $2.3 billion over four years to the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, responding to recommendations from the Productivity Commission's Inquiry Report on Mental Health and the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Most recommendations emphasize collaboration between the Australian Government and state and territory governments through the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement.

This plan is built on five key pillars: prevention and early intervention, suicide prevention, treatment, support for vulnerable populations, and workforce development. In the 2022–23 Budget, an additional $547 million was allocated to reinforce these pillars, followed by a further $586.9 million in the 2023–24 Budget to expand and enhance ongoing projects.

China: In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented various policies and initiatives designed to improve the mental health service system and promote equitable access to these services. The release of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development in 2020 highlighted key national strategic priorities, which encompass mental health education for adolescents and the enhancement of mental health services. China is dedicated to bolstering prevention and treatment to prevalent mental health disorders while expanding public mental health services, especially for the youth, to significantly improve the overall health literacy of the nation.

India: In the past decade, the Government of India has implemented various measures to address the gaps in mental health services and promote equitable access. The National Mental Health Policy (NMHP), introduced in 2014, along with the Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA) of 2017, establishes strategies aimed at enhancing mental health care and protecting the rights of individuals. The NMHP emphasises the importance of providing comprehensive care that includes both outpatient and community-based services. It advocates for increased resource allocation to make these services more accessible and for their integration into general healthcare systems. Additionally, the policy highlights the significance of research, including

national surveys, to inform effective policy planning and implementation.

Japan: The country has a robust mental health policy that is continually being improved. In 2019, the Health and Global Policy Institute (HGPI) launched its Mental Health Policy Project to incorporate the perspectives of citizens and those affected by mental health issues. Despite ongoing progress, challenges persist. HGPI convened an advisory board of experts and individuals with lived experience to identify key issues, resulting in the proposal 'Mental Health 2020 – Proposal for Tomorrow.' This proposal outlines five perspectives: enhancing mental health literacy, developing integrated community care systems, creating supportive community living environments, establishing data-driven policymaking, and fostering ongoing stakeholder engagement in mental health discussions.

These efforts reflect a progressive approach to addressing mental health concerns. A proactive, collaborative, and research-informed strategy is essential for making mental healthcare universally accessible and effective.

Ayesha Siddiqui