

Mental Health

A Report of the Surgeon General

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
U.S. Public Health Service



The Center for Mental Health Services
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

NIMH

National Institute
of Mental Health
National Institutes of Health

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Message from Donna E. Shalala

Secretary of Health and Human Services

The United States leads the world in understanding the importance of overall health and well-being to the strength of a Nation and its people. What we are coming to realize is that mental health is absolutely essential to achieving prosperity. According to the landmark “Global Burden of Disease” study, commissioned by the World Health Organization and the World Bank, 4 of the 10 leading causes of disability for persons age 5 and older are mental disorders. Among developed nations, including the United States, major depression is the leading cause of disability. Also near the top of these rankings are manic-depressive illness, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Mental disorders also are tragic contributors to mortality, with suicide perennially representing one of the leading preventable causes of death in the United States and worldwide.

The U.S. Congress declared the 1990s the Decade of the Brain. In this decade we have learned much through research—in basic neuroscience, behavioral science, and genetics—about the complex workings of the brain. Research can help us gain a further understanding of the fundamental mechanisms underlying thought, emotion, and behavior—and an understanding of what goes wrong in the brain in mental illness. It can also lead to better treatments and improved services for our diverse population.

Now, with the publication of this first Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health, we are poised to take what we know and to advance the state of mental health in the Nation. We can with great confidence encourage individuals to seek treatment when they find themselves experiencing the signs and symptoms of mental distress. Research has given us effective treatments and service delivery strategies for many mental disorders. An array of safe and potent medications and psychosocial interventions, typically used in combination, allow us to effectively treat most mental disorders.

This seminal report provides us with an opportunity to dispel the myths and stigma surrounding mental illness. For too long the fear of mental illness has been profoundly destructive to people’s lives. In fact mental illnesses are just as real as other illnesses, and they are like other illnesses in most ways. Yet fear and stigma persist, resulting in lost opportunities for individuals to seek treatment and improve or recover.

In this Administration, a persistent, courageous advocate of affordable, quality mental health services for all Americans is Mrs. Tipper Gore, wife of the Vice President. We salute her for her historic leadership and for her enthusiastic support of the initiative by the Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, to issue this groundbreaking Report on Mental Health.

The 1999 White House Conference on Mental Health called for a national antistigma campaign. The Surgeon General issued a Call to Action on Suicide Prevention in 1999 as well. This Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health takes the next step in advancing the important notion that mental health is fundamental health.

Foreword

Since the turn of this century, thanks in large measure to research-based public health innovations, the lifespan of the average American has nearly doubled. Today, our Nation's physical health—as a whole—has never been better. Moreover, illnesses of the body, once shrouded in fear—such as cancer, epilepsy, and HIV/AIDS to name just a few—increasingly are seen as treatable, survivable, even curable ailments. Yet, despite unprecedented knowledge gained in just the past three decades about the brain and human behavior, mental health is often an afterthought and illnesses of the mind remain shrouded in fear and misunderstanding.

This Report of the Surgeon General on Mental Health is the product of an invigorating collaboration between two Federal agencies. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which provides national leadership and funding to the states and many professional and citizen organizations that are striving to improve the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health services, was assigned lead responsibility for coordinating the development of the report. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), which supports and conducts research on mental illness and mental health through its National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), was pleased to be a partner in this effort. The agencies we respectively head were able to rely on the enthusiastic participation of hundreds of people who played a role in researching, writing, reviewing, and disseminating this report. We wish to express our appreciation and that of a mental health constituency, millions of Americans strong, to Surgeon General David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., for inviting us to participate in this landmark report.

The year 1999 witnessed the first White House Conference on Mental Health and the first Secretarial Initiative on Mental Health prepared under the aegis of the Department of Health and Human Services. These activities set an optimistic tone for progress that will be realized in the years ahead. Looking ahead, we take special pride in the remarkable record of accomplishment, in the spheres of both science and services, to which our agencies have contributed over past decades. With the impetus that the Surgeon General's report provides, we intend to expand that record of accomplishment. This report recognizes the inextricably intertwined relationship between our mental health and our physical health and well-being. The report emphasizes that mental health and mental illnesses are important concerns at all ages. Accordingly, we will continue to attend to needs that occur across the lifespan, from the youngest child to the oldest among us.

The report lays down a challenge to the Nation—to our communities, our health and social service agencies, our policymakers, employers, and citizens—to take action. SAMHSA and NIH look forward to continuing our collaboration to generate needed knowledge about the brain and behavior and to translate that knowledge to the service systems, providers, and citizens.

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Preface

*from the Surgeon General
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The past century has witnessed extraordinary progress in our improvement of the public health through medical science and ambitious, often innovative, approaches to health care services. Previous Surgeons General reports have saluted our gains while continuing to set ever higher benchmarks for the public health. Through much of this era of great challenge and greater achievement, however, concerns regarding mental illness and mental health too often were relegated to the rear of our national consciousness. Tragic and devastating disorders such as schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder, Alzheimer's disease, the mental and behavioral disorders suffered by children, and a range of other mental disorders affect nearly one in five Americans in any year, yet continue too frequently to be spoken of in whispers and shame. Fortunately, leaders in the mental health field—fiercely dedicated advocates, scientists, government officials, and consumers—have been insistent that mental health flow in the mainstream of health. I agree and issue this report in that spirit.

This report makes evident that the neuroscience of mental health—a term that encompasses studies extending from molecular events to psychological, behavioral, and societal phenomena—has emerged as one of the most exciting arenas of scientific activity and human inquiry. We recognize that the brain is the integrator of thought, emotion, behavior, and health. Indeed, one of the foremost contributions of contemporary mental health research is the extent to which it has mended the destructive split between “mental” and “physical” health.

We know more today about how to treat mental illness effectively and appropriately than we know with certainty about how to prevent mental illness and promote mental health. Common sense and respect for our fellow humans tells us that a focus on the positive aspects of mental health demands our immediate attention.

Even more than other areas of health and medicine, the mental health field is plagued by disparities in the availability of and access to its services. These disparities are viewed readily through the lenses of racial and cultural diversity, age, and gender. A key disparity often hinges on a person's financial status; formidable financial barriers block off needed mental health care from too many people regardless of whether one has health insurance with inadequate mental health benefits, or is one of the 44 million Americans who lack any insurance. We have allowed stigma and a now unwarranted sense of hopelessness about the opportunities for recovery from mental illness to erect these barriers. It is time to take them down.

Promoting mental health for all Americans will require scientific know-how but, even more importantly, a societal resolve that we will make the needed investment. The investment does not call for massive budgets; rather, it calls for the willingness of each of us to educate ourselves and others about mental health and mental illness, and thus to confront the attitudes, fear, and misunderstanding that remain as barriers before us. It is my intent that this report will usher in a healthy era of mind and body for the Nation.

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.
Surgeon General

