



Public Mental Health Today

A handbook

Edited by Isabella Goldie

Mental Health Foundation

Pavilion



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Chapter 1

Introduction

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Public mental health is a relatively new concept that draws on the tradition of public health established in Victorian times. The idea of applying the public health model to mental health is on the face of it an obvious, and necessary, one. After all, mental illness is a massive ‘disease group’ with heavy mortality, morbidity and social and personal cost. Equally, poor mental health across society contributes to wider socio-economic and health problems such as higher levels of physical morbidity and mortality, lower levels of educational achievement and work performance/productivity, greater incidence of addictions, higher crime rates and poor community and societal cohesion. Anything that can be done to improve mental health at a population level will be of enormous benefit to society.

This much is apparently straightforward but as the subject is unpacked, difficulties and confusions can arise. Some of the key questions people ask about public mental health include the following.

- ▶ How is it different to public health? Is there any difference in the factors that support good physical health and those that support good mental health? What is distinctive about public mental health?
- ▶ What is the relationship between public mental health, mental health promotion, the prevention of mental illness and its treatment? Consequently do mental health services have a role?
- ▶ Given the determinants of mental health (eg. poverty, lifestyle), is public mental health not just progressive social policy?
- ▶ What is the hard evidence that you can improve population mental health? What are the equivalents to clean water and air in mental health terms?
- ▶ Can investment in mental health promotion be prioritised within an economic environment where we have finite resources? Isn't it more ethical to focus limited resources on developing effective treatments for mental illness?

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