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MESSAGE FOR WORLD HEALTH DAY

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Mental illness ravages the hidden landscape of the human mind, often with no outward physical signs to betray its debilitating effects. In turn, many who suffer from such disorders suffer in silence, trapped by the shame or stigma of their often very treatable diseases.

To draw global attention to this problem, the World Health Organisation has dedicated this year's World Health Day to addressing the medical research, care policies, and ethical issues related to mental health. The day's slogan, "Stop exclusion, Dare to care," captures the need for the world community to address mental health concerns openly and honestly. And let there be no doubt, these concerns are urgent.

Today some 400 million people suffer from mental and brain disorders. Schizophrenia, alcohol use, bipolar and obsessive compulsive disorders are among the diseases responsible for the highest disability ratings in the world. Moreover, these numbers are expected to rise sharply over the next few decades, particularly among people in the developing world.

Yet, despite the enormous social and economic burdens posed by mental health problems, more than 40% of the world's countries have no articulated mental health policy, and over 30% have no mental health programmes. A global strategy to address the mental health crisis is needed, one which will incorporate both prevention and care. This issue will be taken up by the WHO's 191 Member States at the annual gathering of the World Health Assembly in May, and assessed in the World Health report to be released in October. But there is still more that can be done.

It is time for governments to allocate resources and establish public policy to meet mental health needs. It is time for us individually to face our fears and overcome our misconceptions about mental disorders. Through honesty and understanding, we can break down the walls of social stigma that surround mental illness. On this, World Health Day, let us commit ourselves to these tasks, to ensure that those who suffer from mental illness no longer suffer in silence.

