

White Paper on the Role of Psychologists within Health

EFPA Standing Committee Psychology and Health

The EFPA Standing Committee on Psychology and Health, with a role to “monitor and assess developments in research, education and professional practice pertaining to mental and physical health, and suggest standards for the education and professional practice of psychologists working in the field of health” (EFPA, 2021) created this white paper to present key messages regarding Psychology and Health and the role of Psychologists within Health.

- 1) This group adopts the World Health Organization (1948) definition of Health:

Health is a complete state of physical, mental, & social well-being. Mental and physical health cannot be treated separately. Health is not merely the absence of disease, but it involves human development, optimization and thriving.

- 2) Health is continuously changing. Health is related to a dynamic interplay of genetics, environmental conditions, life events, personality, human behaviour, cognitions, emotions, relationships, as well as cultural, economic, structural and political conditions (e.g., Davis, 2015). Psychologists working in health acknowledge all these parameters affecting and being affected by an individual’s health and utilize a bio-psycho-social perspective concerning all aspects of health and illness across the lifespan (Taylor, 2018).
- 3) There are a number of sub-disciplines of academic and professional psychology that are concerned with health and wellbeing, and understanding psychological influences

on health. The precise definition and organization of the sub-disciplines differ between countries and include mostly fields such as health psychology, behavioral medicine, clinical psychology, clinical health psychology, and psychotherapy. Activities span from academic research, education, training, policy work to professional practice, across a range of settings (community, clinical, health care, occupational).

- 4) Key questions that psychologists engage within health and wellbeing work include:
 - Why do some people become ill and others do not?
 - How do people stay healthy?
 - How do people develop resilience, and how can communities/society foster resilience?
 - How do people respond to illness and how do they recover from a disease or adjust to chronic illness?
 - How do they cope with mental illnesses, adverse life events and psychological disturbances?
 - What interventions may work for whom and under what circumstances?
- 5) Psychology in the area of health (Johnston, 1994; Johnston et al., 2011; Matarazzo, 1982) aims to:
 - a. Understand, explain, develop and test theory
 - Evaluate the role of behavior in etiology and correlates of health wellbeing, illness and disability
 - Predict unhealthy behaviors

- Examine interactions between biological, psychological and social factors
 - Comprehend the role of psychology in the experience of illness
 - Evaluate the role of psychology in the treatment of illness
- b. Bridge the theory-practice gap by putting theory and research into practice
- Promote healthy behaviors
 - Prevent illnesses
 - Adaptation, Treatment, and Rehabilitation of diseases, illness and disability
 - Adjustment during and after illness and disability,
 - Enhance medical interventions (e.g., reduce side-effects of treatment, improve adherence, acceptance and uptake)
 - Elaborate, test and implement evidence-based psychological approaches in health/wellbeing promotion and prevention and treatment of diseases
 - Develop guidelines for ethical non-discriminatory practice
 - Impact on health outcomes such as quality of life and longevity
- c. Improve the health care system
- Disseminate, train, educate, and support patients, health professionals, policy makers and the public on health practices, empirical evidence and communication skills.
 - Decrease health care costs and optimize help-seeking behaviors
 - Policy making including policy effectiveness research

- 6) The role of psychologists working within health is multifaceted, multimodal and multilevel (from the individual to the population level; Gloster & Karekla, 2020). Also, psychologists within health work in multidisciplinary teams comprised of professionals from a variety of disciplines (nursing, medicine, public health, computer science and technology, etc.)
- 7) Psychology research in the area of health has developed a robust evidence base to understand and identify behaviours, cognitions and attitudes, emotions, relationship factors and conditions affecting these factors. Psychological research has provided a large body of evidence that explains why people behave the way they do, and how they can be supported to change their behaviors (Armitage et al., 2021; Michie & Abraham, 2004; Michie & Johnston, 2012; Michie et al., 2009, 2011; Sniehotta et al., 2009). Empirically supported interventions and treatments have been developed and are continuing to be expanded, developed and tested based on new emerging theories and evidence (Abraham & Michie, 2008; Karekla, Karademas & Gloster, 2019; McHugh & Barlow, 2010; Ogden, 2016). Mechanisms of action and process of change research is gaining more interest and will continue to shed light on underdeveloped areas of impact (Carey et al., 2019; Karekla, 2021).
 - a. A population and public focused approach is important both in prevention as in treatment. Psychology has provided the knowledge to build clinical interventions that aren't just focused on the individual patient but on the whole community or population. On prevention, there is good and solid evidence for promoting health through supporting people on how to change their behaviour. Likewise, psychology has much to offer in building resilience for preventing mental illness. Psychology also offers ways to provide support

in dealing with somatic health problems as in effective evidence - based interventions for dealing with mental health problems. Implementing these in a public health approach already has shown to be highly cost-effective.

- 8) The expertise of psychology in the area of health should be integrated into decision-making, action-planning and care-giving on all political and regional levels to promote health and well-being. Psychologists have an important role in contributing to and influencing policy locally, nationally and internationally.

EFPA Standing Committee for Psychology and Health group May 2021

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