

Future-proofing mental health: Experts set out research roadmap to prioritise key areas

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A group of UK academics are calling for targets for mental health in order to meet the healthcare challenges of the next decade.

Published today in *Journal of Mental Health* researchers set out four overarching goals that will speed up implementation of [mental health](#) research and give a clear direction for researchers and funders to focus their efforts when it comes to better understanding the treatment of mental [health](#).

The treatment of mental illness currently brings substantial costs to not only the NHS, but also to the individual and wider society, and the need for innovation to promote [good mental health](#) has never been greater. In an effort to catalyse this innovation, the researchers have set out four ambitious targets:

1. Halve the number of children and young people experiencing persistent mental health problems
2. Improve our understanding of the links between physical and mental health, and eliminate the mortality gap
3. Increase the number of new and improved treatments, interventions and supports for [mental health problems](#)
4. Improve the availability of choices and access to [mental health care](#), treatment and support in hospital and community settings

The number of goals was limited to four in an effort to easily promote cross-sector partnerships, and to track their impacts.

Professor Dame Til Wykes, Corresponding author from King's College London's Institute for Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) said "While there is a wealth of research taking place to better understand the treatment of mental illness, we must have a clear idea in our heads where we are heading. Without clear targets and goals for mental health we will be amassing information without any clear

trajectory, or worse, no clear understanding of achievements or the expected timescale.

"The four goals that we have set out are in response to this problem, providing a roadmap forwards for all researchers, funders, and policymakers. We have undoubtedly set ourselves a high bar, but they have been designed to give us all a clear sense of purpose."

The research comes at a particularly pertinent time. At least 1 in 6 adults in the UK are likely to experience mental health difficulties in any given week, and the British Medical Association has recently warned that the mental health consequences of COVID will be "considerable". The research has been welcomed by several sector voices, including funders, researchers, and NHS Trusts.

Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer and co-lead of the National Institute for Health Research, said: "Few could disagree that mental health research is crucial in driving innovation in current mental health care and in bringing hope for the future. Working with clinicians, academics, major mental health research funders, mental health research charities and representatives from service users groups, as well as representatives from Public Health England and NHS England has been key to identifying those areas of most concern and transforming them into four distinct research goals which the mental health community can sign up to."

Professor Elaine Fox of the University of Oxford said that "National high-level goals that focus our research efforts are an important part of ensuring that good will and good intentions are translated into genuine innovations and impact."

Professor Peter Jones of the University of Cambridge said, "It's been a pleasure supporting the development of these important mental health

research goals. Involving a wide range of stakeholders, they provide us all with focus, direction and challenge. The goals will galvanise mental health science while holding it to account."

Lea Milligan, CEO of MQ Mental Health Research said "MQ's vision is to create a world where mental illnesses are understood, effectively treated and one day preventable. The research goals that came from an extensive consultation are an opportunity for us bring the mental health research community together in a united and impactful way like never before."

Dr. Nev Jones of One Mind, as US-based non-profit organisation, said "the paper sets the stage for organizations to "all pull in the same direction". Collaboration has been a cornerstone of One Mind's strategy to accelerate research, and this framework will be helpful moving forward."

Professor Dame Til Wykes said, "The pandemic has and will produce a double whammy—the effects of lockdown and the effects of economic slowdown that exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities.

"With so many people facing an [increased risk](#), it's vital that we act now to proactively meet the challenges of the next 10 to 20 years head on."

"The spread of COVID-19 has demonstrated that widespread changes can be implemented rapidly when everyone is working to the same goal. If we can emulate our response to the pandemic in the care of mental illness, we would see positive impacts very quickly."

The four goals were produced following a consultation process that was organised by the Department of Health and Social Care and convened by the Chief Medical Officer. The views of service users and service user organisations supported this activity, as well as research support from the

National Institute for Health Research's Clinical Research Network.

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