

Africa faces mental health crisis as life expectancy improves

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University of Queensland researchers warn that many countries in Africa's Sub-Saharan region could be on the verge of a mental health crisis.

UQ School of Population Health Epidemiologist Fiona Charlson said declining [child mortality rates](#) and improved infectious diseases treatment in Sub-Saharan Africa would lead to a rise in chronic non-communicable diseases already seen in many developed countries.

"Improvements in health care and life expectancy in the Sub-Saharan have driven a sharp change in the age distribution of the population, with the majority of people now more than 25 years old," Ms Charlson said.

"The demographic shift has significant implications for [mental health issues](#) and substance abuse, as people aged between 20 and 54 are most likely to be represented in both categories.

"Mental health issues and substance abuse are already the leading cause of disability in Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for 19 per cent of all years lived with a disability, and we expect this burden to continue to increase, with [mental health disorders](#) rivalling communicable disease in terms of disability by 2050," Ms Charlson said.

She said health services in Sub-Saharan countries were ill-equipped to manage the increasing burden of such disorders.

"The region's [mental health services](#) are generally based in large city hospitals and are often limited to treating people with acute psychoses and those affected by the trauma of war or gender-based violence," she said.

"Understandably, the pressures of communicable diseases and malnutrition have meant that mental health in Africa has been a low priority to date, with African countries reportedly spending less than one per cent of their health budgets on average on mental health."

Ms Charlson said many Sub-Saharan countries had a fraction of the mental health staff they needed.

"Based on our estimates, we fear a significant shortfall of [mental health workers](#) across all Sub-Saharan countries."

Ms Charlson said meeting the [mental health](#) challenge would require a shift in healthcare practice in most African countries, with significant investment needed to train the health workforce, make better use of community-based resources and establish inpatient psychiatric units in district and regional general hospitals.

Ms Charlson's team's findings are published in *PLOS ONE*.

More information: Charlson FJ, Diminic S, Lund C, Degenhardt L, Whiteford HA (2014) Mental and Substance Use Disorders in Sub-Saharan Africa: Predictions of Epidemiological Changes and Mental Health Workforce Requirements for the Next 40 Years. *PLoS ONE* 9(10): e110208. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0110208](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0110208)

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