

Mental Health in Chile: a Preventive Approach

It is essential to identify and understand the risk factors that influence the psychological well-being of the population - the example of Chile

Authors

Davide Brundu: Executive Director Dianova Chile-Nova Salud SA Well-being-Mental Health-Addictions

Rodrigo Sanhueza Rojas: Director of Programmes Dianova Chile

Chile, a country of geographic, cultural and social diversity, faces significant challenges in the field of mental health. In the context of social, historical and environmental transformations, it is imperative to identify and understand the risk factors that influence the psychological well-being of the population. From socio-economic inequalities to modern cultural pressures, these elements shape the mental health landscape in the country. Addressing these factors from a preventive perspective is not only a necessity, but also an ethical and social commitment. In this article, we will explore these risks and reflect on possible prevention strategies to build a country that is more resilient and mentally healthy.

The risk factors

- **Socio-economic inequalities:** The marked socio-economic differences, inequality in accessing educational and health services, the significant level of indebtedness of Chilean households, are some of the factors that are likely to generate stress, hopelessness and frustration, affecting the mental health of those who face more difficult living conditions.
- **Social stigma:** Despite advances in the understanding of mental disorders, prejudice and stigmatization of people with mental health problems still persist in Chile. In this sense, a worrying phenomenon has to do with the dismissal of emotions. As the academia and the mental health-related professional world are making progress in providing a comprehensive view of the emotional sphere in Chilean society, other voices are making progress in taking up parenting processes based on norms and

rules, endorsing violence as a parenting mechanism and relativizing and even ridiculing issues associated with the display of healthy emotions.

- **Historical and recent traumas:** Traumatic events such as Chile's history of dictatorship and recent social mobilizations can generate an emotional impact on various generations, giving rise to post-traumatic stress disorders, among others.
- **Lack of access to specialized care:** Limited or delayed access to mental health services can worsen symptoms and complicate recovery.
- **Substance use:** Excessive use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is associated with mental health problems and can be both a symptom and a risk factor.
- **Environmental factors:** Rapid urbanization, noise, pollution and lack of green areas can have a negative impact on psychological well-being.
- **Unemployment and job insecurity:** Lack of employment or job instability can lead to stress, anxiety and other related problems.
- **Negative life events:** Situations such as bereavement, serious illness or traumatic experiences can increase the risk of mental health problems.
- **Family history:** The presence of mental disorders in the family may increase the risk of developing similar problems.
- **Social pressure and cultural expectations:** Pressure to conform to social roles and expectations, as well as constant comparison in the online world, can generate anxiety and affect self-esteem. In this sense, the role of social networks, the installation of false ideals of beauty, success, wealth and happiness, influence feelings of permanent dissatisfaction.
- **Natural disasters:** Chile, because of its geography, is susceptible to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions, as well as weather-related disasters such as large-scale forest fires in summer or periods of flooding in winter. These events can have a profound impact on the mental health of affected communities and on the sense of permanent danger that is embedded in the national sentiment.

Recognizing these risk factors is essential for developing effective preventive mental health strategies. In Chile, a comprehensive approach is needed to address these challenges based on multiple perspectives, while promoting resilience and community support and ensuring access to quality mental health services. These risk factors are varied and complex and difficult to address, so generating effective preventive strategies in mental health represents

a major challenge. There is a need to make the issue a priority, and the most important challenge is how competent technical bodies can influence public policies with regard to mental health.

A preventive approach: perspectives and proposals from the Academia and civil society preventive approach

Mental health with a preventive approach has gained recognition and relevance in recent decades, and both academic and civil society have put forward various perspectives and proposals in this field. The main positions and recommendations of both are outlined below:

Academia

- **Research:** The importance of ongoing research to identify risk and protective factors associated with mental disorders is stressed. These studies provide a scientific basis for preventive interventions.
- **Early education:** The integration of mental health programmes into educational curricula from an early age, teaching socio-emotional skills, conflict resolution and stress management is promoted.
- **Professional training:** The need to train professionals in health, education and other related sectors in early detection of signs of mental disorders and timely intervention is highlighted.
- **Evidence-based interventions:** The use of preventive interventions that have been shown to be effective in scientific studies is encouraged.
- **Public policy:** Governments are urged to develop and strengthen evidence-based public policies focused on prevention in mental health.

Civil Society

- **Accessibility:** Civil society advocates for ensuring universal access to mental health prevention and care programmes and services, regardless of socio-economic status.
- **Addressing stigma:** Emphasis is placed on the importance of eradicating the stigma associated with mental disorders by promoting awareness and education in this area.

- **Community participation:** The central role of the community in prevention is recognized, promoting the creation of support networks and safe spaces for dialogue and expression.
- **Human rights:** Stresses that mental health prevention and care is a fundamental human right, and demands that this right be respected and guaranteed.
- **Information and resources:** Non-governmental organizations and community groups work to provide information, resources and tools to the population to promote mental health.

Conclusion

Both academic and civil society agree that prevention is a fundamental pillar in the promotion of mental health. While academia focuses on research, training and evidence, civil society emphasizes rights, access and community participation. Both perspectives are essential for a comprehensive and effective preventive mental health strategy. The capacity to build a powerful and influential integral system in the vision of citizens, supported by a quality Public Policy, which facilitates a process of paradigm change with a medium and long term view, will be the central entities to carry forward a virtuous process of change and improvement.