SAÚDE MENTAL NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE: DETERMINANTES, ESTIGMA, BUSCA POR AJUDA E ESTRATÉGIAS DE PROMOÇÃO DO CUIDADO

MENTAL HEALTH IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: DETERMINANTS, STIGMA, HELP-SEEKING AND CARE PROMOTION STRATEGIES

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Eixo Temático: Saúde Mental / Saúde Coletiva

RESUMO

Introdução: A saúde mental constitui dimensão essencial do bem-estar e resulta da interação entre fatores individuais, sociais, econômicos e ambientais. Apesar da crescente visibilidade do tema, transtornos mentais permanecem frequentes, com repercussões sobre relações sociais, estudo, trabalho e qualidade de vida, enquanto estigma e barreiras de acesso ainda dificultam a procura por cuidado. Objetivo: Analisar evidências recentes sobre determinantes da saúde mental, impactos do sofrimento psíquico, obstáculos à busca por ajuda e estratégias de promoção e cuidado. Método: Realizou-se revisão narrativa da literatura, com busca em agosto de 2026 nas bases PubMed/MEDLINE e SciELO, complementada por documentos da Organização Mundial da Saúde. Foram considerados estudos e documentos publicados entre 2021 e agosto de 2026, em português ou inglês, relacionados à saúde mental, promoção da saúde, estigma, alfabetização em saúde mental e busca por ajuda. Resultados: As evidências indicam que saúde mental é influenciada por condições sociais e estruturais, além de fatores individuais; ansiedade e depressão figuram entre os problemas mais frequentes. O estigma, o baixo reconhecimento dos sinais de sofrimento, dificuldades de acesso e experiências negativas com serviços reduzem a procura por apoio. Intervenções educativas aumentam o conhecimento em saúde mental, porém seus efeitos sobre estigma e comportamento efetivo de busca por ajuda ainda são inconsistentes. Conclusão: A promoção da saúde mental exige ações contínuas, intersetoriais e acessíveis, associadas à redução do estigma, fortalecimento da alfabetização em saúde mental e ampliação de redes de cuidado acolhedoras.

Palavras-chave: Saúde Mental. Promoção da Saúde. Estigma Social. Busca de Ajuda. Serviços de Saúde Mental.

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Mental health is an essential dimension of well-being and results from the interaction of individual, social, economic, and environmental factors. Despite the growing visibility of the topic, mental disorders remain frequent, affecting social relationships, study, work, and quality of life, while stigma and barriers to access still hinder care-seeking. Objective: To analyze recent evidence on determinants of mental health, impacts of psychological distress, barriers to help-seeking, and health promotion and care strategies. Method: A narrative literature review was conducted, with searches performed in August 2026 in PubMed/MEDLINE and SciELO, complemented by World Health Organization documents. Studies and documents published between 2021 and August 2026, in Portuguese or English, related to mental health,

health promotion, stigma, mental health literacy, and help-seeking were considered. Results: Evidence indicates that mental health is influenced by social and structural conditions as well as individual factors; anxiety and depression are among the most frequent problems. Stigma, poor recognition of signs of distress, access difficulties, and negative experiences with services reduce the search for support. Educational interventions increase mental health knowledge, but their effects on stigma and actual help-seeking behavior remain inconsistent. Conclusion: Mental health promotion requires continuous, intersectoral, and accessible actions associated with stigma reduction, strengthened mental health literacy, and expansion of welcoming care networks.

Keywords: Mental Health. Health Promotion. Social Stigma. Help-Seeking Behavior. Mental Health Services.

INTRODUÇÃO

Mental health is understood as a state of well-being that enables individuals to cope with life's stresses, realize their abilities, learn, work, and participate in their communities. This understanding goes beyond the mere absence of mental disorders and recognizes that psychological well-being is influenced by the interplay of individual, family, community, and structural factors.[1]

The scientific and social significance of this topic is underscored by the high prevalence of mental disorders. Recent data indicate that over one billion people worldwide live with a mental health condition, with anxiety and depressive disorders being particularly common. Beyond individual suffering, these conditions can impair family and social ties, academic and professional performance, autonomy, and quality of life.[1,2]

However, the availability of treatments and prevention strategies does not, in itself, guarantee timely access to care. Stigma associated with mental disorders, difficulty recognizing signs of distress, low confidence in seeking help, and obstacles related to health services can delay or prevent individuals from seeking professional support. Evidence shows that higher mental health literacy is associated with more favorable attitudes toward seeking help, especially when accompanied by reduced stigma and a greater perception of the effectiveness of care.[3,4]

Although educational and mental health promotion initiatives have increased across schools, universities, digital environments, workplaces, and primary care services, a gap remains between expanding knowledge and fostering sustained changes in help-seeking behavior. Recent reviews show consistent improvements in knowledge, but less uniform results regarding stigma reduction and actual uptake of care.[5,6]

Given this context, it is important to gather recent evidence that allows for a broader understanding of mental health and identifies ways to bridge the gap between information, prevention, and care. This review aimed to analyze recent evidence regarding the determinants of mental health, the impacts of psychological distress, barriers to seeking help, and the key promotion and care strategies described in the literature.

MÉTODO

This is a descriptive and exploratory narrative literature review. The guiding question was: what recent evidence describes the main determinants of mental health, barriers to seeking help, and strategies for mental health promotion and care?

The literature search was conducted in August 2026 using the PubMed/MEDLINE and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) databases, supplemented by a review of institutional documents from the World Health Organization. Terms and descriptors corresponding to “Mental Health,” “Health Promotion,” “Social Stigma,” “Mental Health Literacy,” “Help-Seeking Behavior,” and “Mental Health Services” were used—both individually and in combination with the Boolean operator AND.

Priority was given to review articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and institutional documents published between 2021 and August 2026 that were available in Portuguese or English and directly relevant to the study's objective. Materials excluded were duplicates, publications unrelated to mental health, and texts focusing exclusively on pharmacological aspects or highly specific conditions that did not contribute to the broader discussion of the topic. Selection involved reading titles and abstracts, followed by an analysis of the available text and a thematic synthesis of the findings. As this was a narrative review, no systematic review protocol (such as PRISMA) was adopted.

RESULTADOS

The synthesis of the evidence allowed the findings to be organized into four thematic areas: determinants and magnitude of mental health problems; repercussions on daily life; stigma and barriers to seeking help; and strategies for promotion, education, and care.

Regarding the first area, it was observed that mental health does not depend on a single factor. Economic conditions, violence, inequality, insecurity, social relationships, work or study environments, and access to protective resources interact with individual characteristics throughout the lifespan. The World Health Organization highlights that risk and protective factors operate at different levels and that adverse contexts increase vulnerability to psychological distress. Anxiety and depression remain among the most common conditions and can lead to significant functional impairment.[1,2]

Regarding the second area of focus, studies indicate that mental distress has repercussions extending beyond emotional symptoms. It can lead to reduced concentration, motivation, and productivity, as well as sleep disturbances, social isolation, interpersonal conflicts, and impaired academic or professional performance. These effects underscore the need to view mental health as a component of overall functioning, rather than merely the presence or absence of a diagnosis.[1,2]

Regarding barriers to seeking care, stigma frequently arises. Shame, fear of judgment, the expectation of resolving the problem on one's own, doubts about the usefulness of treatment, and negative or unwelcoming experiences with services can deter people from seeking care. A review of access to primary care identified the relationship between the user and the professional as a decisive factor, capable of acting either as a facilitator or as an obstacle to the continuity of care.[4,7]

Regarding the fourth axis, mental health literacy emerged as a promising strategy. Educational interventions can improve the recognition of signs, knowledge about disorders, and awareness of care options. However, reviews of school-based and digital interventions indicate that gains in knowledge do not necessarily translate into reduced stigma or a consistent increase in actual help-seeking behavior. This suggests that purely informational initiatives are insufficient unless coupled with accessible support networks, the fostering of connections and a welcoming environment, and efforts to reduce social and institutional barriers.[3,5,6]

In the Brazilian university context, a recent integrative review reinforced the importance of linking student support services with the promotion of mental health care, highlighting that institutional responses must take into account students' actual living conditions rather than focusing solely on individualized interventions.[8]

Taken together, the results indicate that mental health promotion is most effective when it combines high-quality information, early identification of distress, stigma reduction, strengthened social support, easy access to services, and care relationships grounded in listening and acceptance. The literature also highlights the need for more standardized assessment of intervention outcomes, particularly when the expected result is a genuine change in help-seeking behavior.

CONCLUSÃO

The evidence analyzed shows that mental health is determined by individual, social, and structural factors and directly impacts quality of life, relationships, education, and work. Anxiety and depression remain significant issues in the current landscape, while stigma, low mental health literacy, and barriers to access prevent many people from seeking help in a timely manner. Educational interventions yield favorable results in increasing knowledge, yet changing attitudes and behaviors requires broader, ongoing strategies.

This review reinforces that mental health promotion must integrate education, prevention, supportive engagement, and access to care, with actions tailored to diverse social contexts. In practice, recommendations include strengthening community and institutional networks, training professionals in non-stigmatizing approaches, and expanding easily accessible care channels. Future research should evaluate interventions using standardized measures, longitudinal follow-up, and a focus on concrete outcomes—such as actual help-seeking, continuity of care, and improved quality of life.

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