

Social Determinants of Mental Health and How EAPs Can Help

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The Global Forum on Innovation in Health Professional Education of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine hosted a workshop addressing social determinants in healthcare. Following the workshop, the speakers' presentations and subsequent discussions were summarized into the publication, *Educating Health Professionals to Address the Social Determinants of Mental Health: Proceedings of a Workshop*. An overview of that publication is presented here.

Social Determinants of Health

Ruth Shim, professor in cultural psychiatry at the University of California, defined social determinants and noted the direct impact these have on not only one's physical health but also on one's mental health. Social determinants of health (SDH) are the factors that drive people's lives. The SDH are, Shim stated, "the circumstances into which we are born, grow up, live, work, and age, including the health system" that result in both the health disparities and health inequities that exist in the world (p. 8). To clarify, health disparities are the differences among population groups whereas health inequities are the preventable differences driven by social issues resulting from decisions based on discriminatory policies.

People often make decisions based on what information is available to them; a person with fewer available resources will often make choices that are not considered as good as others. This creates a uniqueness in people that relates to a concept, devised by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, termed intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the individual challenges and experiences that influences a person's individuality.

Social Determinants of Mental Health and How EAPs Can Help

People are multifaceted, and their complex challenges must be considered when determining medical diagnosis and care. Unfortunately, as Shim noted, medical students are typically taught to “reduce somebody down to one individual, one concept, or one idea” which results in an injustice to the person and the medical care received (p. 12).

Social Determinants of Mental Health

In the same way that SDH influences a person’s physical health, social determinants also have a direct impact on a person’s mental health. Mental health affects a person’s overall health, and improper diagnosis and care can result in more severe outcomes for a person. **Although the social determinants of mental health (SDMH) do not actually differ from the SDH, the prevalence of mental illnesses, the high-costs and high-mortality rates associated with mental illness, and the stigmatic silence surrounding mental health needs necessitates the importance of understanding and acknowledging the SDMH.**

Emotional, physiological, and social well-being collectively determine a person’s mental health. Each of these factors are not only influenced by a person’s day-to-day lifestyle but also by a person’s past experiences and environments. This mass combination of varying factors ultimately determines a person’s mental health and is why mental health disorders are particularly difficult to separate from social determinants. **And when providers do not fully identify, consider, and differentiate the social factors in an individual, a person’s mental health diagnosis and resulting medical care produces health inequities.**

Shim declared that mental health inequities are the outcome of unjust economic and social policies and practices. These policy decisions, motivated by social ideas and norms of the perceived worth of people based on their lifestyles, form the notion of social justice. While the concept of social justice seeks equality, true social justice would come from equity. Whereas equality seeks to evenly distribute resources amongst all individuals, equity grants what is specifically needed for the individual to be successful. Ultimately, the distribution of resources impacts social determinants, such as an individual’s community, education, and housing options, which directly influences both mental and physical health outcomes.

Nevertheless, it is precisely these social determinants that providers need to recognize to provide the best patient care and continual support of patient overall well-being. Altering providers’ diagnostic routines to include the consideration of an individual’s full spectrum of social factors begins with the provider’s education which “will require commitment and restructuring of the educational system, collaboration and communication with the local community, and institutional support from organizations” (p. 19). In addition to receiving the knowledge of what social

Social Determinants of Mental Health and How EAPs Can Help

determinants are and how they impact an individual's life, health, diagnosis, and eventual care, it is imperative the students (and providers) have opportunities to apply the education in practice.

To change provider education curriculum as Julian Fisher, research associate at the Peter L. Reichertz Institute for Medical Informatics at the Hannover Medical School in Germany, pointed out, the focus must first be on guiding the healthcare educators to prepare students to approach patient care at an interprofessional level. After all, learning to recognize and appreciate an individual's SDMH is not something that can be achieved at the individual level but requires collaboration within a diverse team that will spark new ideas and perspectives on patient diagnosis and needs to coordinate both patient treatment and care.

How Employee Assistance Programs Can Help

CCA is committed to helping improve health equity in mental health care delivery. We regularly examine and review our policies, procedures, processes, and training to ensure we keep current with best practices and advanced knowledge in recognizing health inequities.

Training Clinicians

We aim to teach our clinical staff, both Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselors and network providers, how to recognize the social determinants of mental health care and how to deliver care that is both equitable and sensitive to each member's unique needs and circumstances. We provide ongoing training for our clinicians on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) as well as unconscious bias, microaggressions, allyship, bystander intervention, and harassment prevention. Our highly interactive trainings emphasize both understanding and empathizing with individuals from a range of cultural backgrounds, reflecting the diverse populations we serve.

Most recently, we have included the concept of structural competency in our training curriculum. Structural competency teaches health care providers to recognize and understand how outside issues (i.e., determinants) intertwine with an individual's presenting clinical symptoms and precursors.

Communication and Promotions

CCA partners with each client organization to create a communication plan with culturally sensitive promotions designed to incorporate language, images, and topics that employees can relate to and identify with. Communications promote awareness of common mental health struggles and work to reduce the stigma around reaching out for help.

Social Determinants of Mental Health and How EAPs Can Help

Creating Diverse Provider Networks

CCA works to ensure that our network includes providers who can deliver both sensitive and effective mental health care. We build our provider network with an eye towards counselors with diverse backgrounds and experiences, in addition to impeccable credentials and skills. We network and partner with organizations within our clinical community to connect with providers of all ethnic backgrounds, from different cultures, who speak various languages, are members of the LGBTQ+ community, and more.

Additionally, CCA provides routine clinical supervision to equip our network providers with the knowhow to recognize and examine their own biases – both conscious and unconscious – in delivering care. All network providers can also participate in ongoing training on cultural competency and other DE&I topics.

Training for Employees and Managers

Furthermore, CCA offers educational trainings on a range of topics to meet the needs of the organization's diverse population. Trainings not only act as an aid to those individuals experiencing struggles but also helps to provide awareness and understanding about potential challenges. Additionally, in striving to cultivate diverse and inclusive workplaces, CCA coordinates with and supports Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), typically led by employees, that fosters a community culture while providing support for life's events – either personal or professional.

In the end, reducing social determinants that produce health inequities is bigger than all of us. While CCA actively takes steps to reduce the negative impact of SDMH, it is important to remember that **“working on the social determinants of mental health is not a onetime endeavor; it is a process that takes time and effort and requires in-depth engagement among the community, academia, and practice”** (p. 23).

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