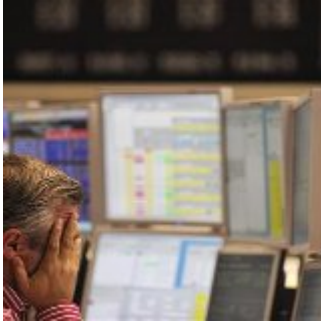


Financial crisis may increase mental health woes



Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are already affected by mental problems such as depression and bi-polar disorders and the current market meltdown could exacerbate feelings of despair among people vulnerable to such illnesses.

The United Nations agency said the impact could be especially marked for those living in low and middle income countries where access to treatment is often limited.

"We should not be surprised or underestimate the turbulence and likely consequences of the current financial crisis. As it is we are seeing a huge gap in taking care of people in great need," WHO director general Margaret Chan told a meeting of mental health experts.

Poverty and its associated stresses including violence, social exclusion and "constant insecurity" are linked to the onset of mental disorders, she said.

"It should not come as a surprise that we continue to see more stresses, suicides and mental disorders," Chan warned.

Chan denounced the "abysmal lack of care" for some mental health patients, especially in low and middle income countries, home to three out of four sufferers. Governments must make mental health a vital part of primary health care, she said.

Benedetto Saraceno, director of WHO's mental health and substance abuse department, said mental health disorders affect one in four people at some point in their lives.

Mental and neurological disorders are often chronic and disabling, he said. Nearly 1 million people commit suicide worldwide every year, a large proportion of them young adults.

Asked about the financial crisis, Saraceno told Reuters: "Poverty can be the consequence of such events -- the debts, despair and sense of loss that may reach middle and lower classes. Even the poor can be affected by this crisis."

"There is a clear evidence that suicide is linked to financial disasters. I am not talking about the millionaire jumping out of the window but about poor people," he said.

The global crisis could be expected to affect the "stability of communities and families," according to Saraceno.

The WHO launched a program on Thursday -- the annual World Mental Health Day -- aimed at increasing funding and services for the mentally ill over the next six years.

More than 75 percent of people suffering from mental disorders in the developing world receive no treatment or care, and many are stigmatized and subject to neglect and abuse, according to the agency.

Globally, the WHO said most countries spend less than 2 percent of their national health budget on mental health.

"I am convinced that even in middle income countries reached by the economic crisis, it (the financial crisis) means less money and access to treatment," Saraceno said.