

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## **Psychological Health and Well-Being: An Exploration and Action Agenda**

Psychological health and well-being are crucial contributors to and reflections of individual and collective quality of life. At this time of growing economic, social, and environmental crisis, Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) is committed to increasing professional and public awareness and understanding of key challenges in broadly advancing psychological health and well-being. These challenges emerge from the interplay of personal, interpersonal, family, community, societal, and environmental influences. Our perspective reflects PsySR's foundational commitment to dynamic peace, social justice, and human rights. Here we summarize several issues of immediate concern.

There is an urgent need to directly address the structural factors that diminish the psychological health and well-being of millions of people. Oppressive conditions such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and violence are significant strains on the capacity of many individuals, families, and communities to effectively cope with life's daily demands. Making high-quality programs that support psychological health more affordable and more accessible to a wider range of individuals, families, and communities can help to limit the damage caused by these and other broad societal inequities. These programs include education, skills training, and family support. Culturally competent and culturally inclusive prevention efforts aimed at tackling the causes and antecedents of stress and psychological suffering must also become a stronger priority. Everyone needs to work together to alter the practices, policies, systems, and institutions that tragically consign significant segments of society to drastically diminished life chances and choices.

At the same time, as a society and throughout the health professions we must advance a broader recognition of the diverse ways in which psychological health finds expression. Mainstream understandings of wellness are far too narrow and, unfortunately, they have frequently found expression in psychology's theories and diagnoses. Too often, acceptable societal norms denigrate divergent lifestyles and life choices, mistaking artifacts of oppression for illness. Such views fail to recognize that these alternatives bring rewards to those who pursue them, and are without adverse consequences for others. Although progress has been made over past decades in reducing the stigmatization of those who are considered "different," this work is far from complete. Concerted educational efforts are still needed to encourage respect and appreciation for those who "march to the beat of a different drummer" – as well as for those who seek out professional help for their psychological difficulties.

Within the therapeutic context itself, we should evaluate current practices – and advocate for improvements in how those who receive these services are treated within the "mental health" system. In particular, we must recognize and challenge the growing dominance and excessive control exerted by the insurance and pharmaceutical industries over professional practice and the experiences of all participants in the therapeutic process. The constraining

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and self-serving biases these industries impose on so-called evidence-based practices is one important example. Similarly, we should carefully examine the scientific problems and multifaceted ramifications associated with the regular use of psychiatric diagnoses. While they can contribute to developing effective treatments, the potential adverse consequences of some diagnoses are also undeniable. These include destructive influences on individuals' self-perceptions, on how the diagnosed are perceived and assigned social roles by society, and on opportunities that often are foreclosed to them. Meanwhile, heavy reliance on pharmaceutical "solutions" – while valuable in certain limited circumstances – risks discouraging individuals and communities from recognizing the contextual factors that contribute to poor psychological health and from being empowered to address them.

On all of these fronts progress can be facilitated by fully respecting the voices and lived experience of those who have been thwarted in their life pursuits, sometimes as a direct result of damaging interactions with the "mental health" system itself. In all settings, frameworks built upon informed consent and shared decision-making are crucial. The harmful dynamics of extreme power differentials and the attendant risks of abuse are often heightened in psychiatric hospitals and other total institutions. One promising path through the thickets involves greater partnership and dialogue on key issues between helping professionals and other stakeholders, including those who have been harmed by failures of the current system. These engagements are inevitably fraught, but through respectful dialogue they can be important sources of valuable and transformative interactions and insights for all parties.

Finally, we must turn our attention to the conditions under which human beings thrive, and seek to nurture these at all levels of organization: individual, family, community, and society. The full agenda described here is clearly broad and demanding, but the need for thought, dialogue, and action is unmistakable. Through its programs and projects, PsySR aims to play an important role in these efforts. We welcome collaborative opportunities with organizations and individuals with similar commitments to advance psychological health and well-being. For more information and inquiries, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org).

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