

The need for mental health research in Southeast Asia

Lakshmi Vijayakumar^{a,b,c,d,*}

^aSNEHA, Chennai, India

^bPsychiatry, VHS, Chennai, India

^cWHO Network on Suicide Prevention and Research, Geneva, Switzerland

^dUniveristy of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

A journal focused on the Southeast Asia region is crucial and long overdue. This region faces a range of unique health challenges that require targeted attention and this is especially true of mental health and suicide, which are pressing public health concerns in the Southeast Asia region.

Suicide rates in the region are alarmingly high, with many countries recording rates higher than the global average. The reasons for this are complex and multifaceted, with factors such as poverty, political instability, rapid urbanization, changing family structure and lack of access to services contributing to the problem. Other challenges in the region pertain to non-availability of reliable data due to lack of a systematic process of data collection and absence of a well-functioning data collection authority, all these in turn impede the development of appropriate need-based interventions.

The journal has published several articles on mental health issues and provides evidence-based solutions to improve mental health outcomes in the region. Two articles focused on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the psychological impact of the pandemic.^{1,2} Another article emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive suicide prevention programs in the region, highlighting the significance of involving local communities in the development and implementation of these programs.³

Going forward, there is a need to focus research on cost-effective, culturally appropriate, community interventions for mental health and suicide prevention in the Southeast Asia region. This was also emphasised in the editorial of the journal “Early intervention in mental health: The best bet” in its October issue.⁴

While progress has been made in raising awareness of mental health issues, much more needs to be done to address the significant treatment gap that exists in the region.

Cost-effective interventions are crucial in this region, where resources for mental health are often limited. Research into low-cost interventions, such as peer support programs, group therapy, and teletherapy, could

help provide affordable mental health care to those in need.

It is also essential to ensure that interventions are culturally appropriate, sensitive to the norms and practices of the region, and that local communities are involved in the development and implementation of these interventions. This is essential as cultural beliefs and practices can influence attitudes towards mental health and treatment-seeking behaviour. Involving traditional healers and other community stakeholders and service providers who are outside the formal health care system is crucial for creating large scale impact in the Southeast Asia region where they are often the first point of contact.

Community interventions are important in this context, as they can reach individuals who may not have access to traditional mental health services. Research into community-based interventions, such as gatekeeper training, mental health first aid, and school-based interventions, could help build community capacity to address mental health issues and improve access to care.

Lancet Regional Health – Southeast Asia has made a major impact to the field of health research in the region in its first year of publication. The journal is well placed to continue to make a significant contribution in improving the health of the people in this region.

Contributors

Lakshmi Vijayakumar (LV) Conceptualized, drafted and edited the manuscript.

Declaration of interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- 1 Tsheten T, Chateau D, Dorji N, et al. Impact of COVID-19 on mental health in Bhutan: a way forward for action. *Lancet Reg Health Southeast Asia*. 2023;11:100179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100179>.
- 2 Shoib S, Chandradasa M, Rathnayake L, Usmani S, Saeed F. Children, adolescent, and youth mental health in SriLanka in the context of recent violence, COVID-19, and economic crisis: a call for action. *Lancet Reg Health Southeast Asia*. 2022;2:100021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.100021>.
- 3 Yatirajula SK, Kallakuri S, Paslawar S, Mukherjee A, Maulik PK. Ethical dilemma discussing with parents about adolescents at increased risk of suicide and depression_ Observations from ARTEMIS study in India. *Lancet Reg Health Southeast Asia*. 2022;1:100002. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.03.002>.
- 4 Editorial. Early intervention in mental health: the best bet. *Lancet Reg Health Southeast Asia*. 2022;5:100090. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2022.100090>.

*SNEHA, Chennai, India.

E-mail address: lakshmi@vijayakumars.com.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).



The Lancet Regional Health - Southeast Asia 2023;13: 100228
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2023.100228>