Depression is a common mental disorder. Globally, 322 million people of all ages suffer from depression. Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide and a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease.

In the WHO South-East Asia Region, 86 million people suffer from depression. The number of people living with depression has increased by more than 18% between 2005 and 2015. In humanitarian emergencies and ongoing conflicts, as many as 1 in 5 people are affected by depression and anxiety. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide. Close to 800,000 people die by suicide every year.

Depression also increases the risk of other noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Like other mental health conditions, the support available for people with depression is far from adequate. Most people living with depression in the South-East Asia Region do not receive proper diagnosis and treatment. In the Region, on an average, less than 1% of government health budget is invested in mental health.

Low levels of recognition and access to care lead to avoidable health, social and economic burdens from depression. At the global level, depression causes an estimated economic loss of more than US$1 trillion every year. Loss of income and employment, absenteeism, lower productivity, cost of health care and social welfare, and premature mortality all can substantially hamper socioeconomic growth. In addition, the stigma associated with depression remains high and makes it a challenging area to address.

In recognition of “depression” as a public health priority area, the theme for the World Health Day 2017 is ‘Depression’ with the slogan ‘Depression: Let’s talk.’ The theme reiterates the relevance and significance of mental health, i.e. the “No Health Without Mental Health” concept. The overall goal of the campaign is that more people with depression, in all countries, seek and get help. The campaign focuses on simple measures such as encouraging people to talk about depression as a first step towards recovery.

Every US$1 invested in scaling up treatment for depression and anxiety leads to a return to society of US$4. Depression can be easily prevented and treated at relatively low cost, through talking therapy or antidepressant medication or a combination of both.

Depression is well covered by the WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan for 2013–2020, endorsed by the World Health Assembly in 2013.

This Action Plan has paved the way for inclusion of mental health in the Sustainable Development Goals. WHO’s mental health gap action programme (mhGAP) identifies strategies to scale up coverage of key interventions to reduce the treatment gap for mental disorders in resource-constrained settings, and includes training of non-specialist health workers to provide first-line health-care for depression.

The WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia has developed depression and grief identification tools, which would help in early identification, referral and treatment of people suffering from depression. The Region has witnessed significant advances in prevention of suicide with the development of the WHO South-East Asia Regional Suicide Prevention Strategy. Guidelines for addressing depressive disorders co-occurring with other noncommunicable diseases and substance use disorders are being developed.

Depression affects not only individuals living with it, but also families, and the community as a whole. Addressing depression requires collective efforts: Individuals should be encouraged to reach out for help; family, friends and communities need to be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to offer support; and governments must demonstrate their leadership in strengthening services and care for depression. In particular, expansion of services from psychiatric facilities to the community and strengthening the primary health care systems are strategies to be adopted. All national and international organizations must come together to support these efforts.

On World Health Day 2017, I call upon all to prevent and treat depression. Let us promote the role of mental health in achieving health for all and for sustainable development.

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