

WHITE PAPER: NATUROPATHIC WORKFORCE AND MENTAL HEALTH

This White Paper is for policymakers and healthcare practitioners to inform them of the essential role that the naturopathic workforce can have on the management and treatment of mental health disorders.

Mental health disorders involve changes in emotion, thinking and/or behaviour including conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorders, psychotic disorders, substance use disorders and other mental health conditions. According to the World Health Organization, mental health disorders contribute 7% of the total burden of disease worldwide. [1]

Contributing factors for mental illness include adverse life events and genetic factors, as well as modifiable risk factors include lifestyle behaviours, physical activity, sedentariness, physical illness, obesity, alcohol consumption, dietary choices, stress management and coping skills – all of which are addressed as part of naturopathic care [2].

The World Naturopathic Federation (WNF) represents naturopathic organizations around the world with the aim of promoting, supporting and enhancing the global naturopathic profession.

There is a need for access to additional therapeutic options, such as naturopathic care, in order to decrease the burden of these illnesses [3, 4].

Key Messages

1. The naturopathic workforce has a long history in working with patients with mental health disorders.
2. The naturopathic workforce are experts in assessing the causes of mental health disorders.
3. There is a substantial body of research supporting naturopathic care for mental health disorders.
4. Most consumers include Traditional and Complementary Medicine (T&CM) therapies, products and practices as part of their personal and family healthcare regimen.



Traditional and complementary medicine (T&CM) is an important and often underestimated health resource with many applications, especially in the prevention and management of lifestyle-related chronic diseases, and in meeting the health needs of the ageing populations.

Foreword from WHO Global Report on Traditional and Complementary Medicine 2019 [5]





The naturopathic workforce has a long history in working with patients with mental health disorders.

A recent international cross-sectional study of naturopathic practice and patient characteristics, including 14 countries, revealed that the naturopathic workforce provides healthcare frequently for individuals with mental health disorders [6].

- Mental health concerns are the third most common reason for patients seeking naturopathic care. 15% of patient visits were related to mental health with anxiety, depression and stress being the most common [6].
- Patients with chronic diseases, such as mental health disorders, who were visit-

ing different practitioner groups indicated that they were the most satisfied with the services they received from naturopathic practitioners [7].

- The naturopathic profession has been instrumental in the development of nutritional psychiatry, the use of nutrients in the prevention and treatment of mental illness [2].
- The naturopathic lens is well-suited to complex conditions with its focus on complexity, addressing multiple causative factors and physiological systems concurrently [2].

The naturopathic workforce are experts in assessing the causes of mental health disorders

- A strength of the naturopathic profession is that it addresses lifestyle factors as an integral part of practice. Naturopathic practitioners support informed decision making and address diet, activity level, breathing, stress management, alcohol and smoking behaviours, microbiome, environmental pollutant exposure and other aspects of healthy living as part of their strategy for the treatment of mental disorders [2].

- The naturopathic approach recognizes the connection between a patient's psychological state and their functional and structural conditions [2].
- 98% of the naturopathic workforce engage in community education and health promotion activities, hence they are well-suited to play a more formal role in public health initiatives aimed at decreasing stigma and increasing health literacy [8].

There is a substantial body of research supporting naturopathic care for mental health disorders.

- A 2009 randomized-controlled trial involved 75 participants with moderate to severe anxiety. Participants were randomized to receive psychotherapy and a placebo supplement or standardized naturopathic care including a herbal medicine, a multi-vitamin supplement, dietary counselling and a relaxation technique. Participants receiving naturopathic care experienced a 57% reduction in anxiety symptoms, compared with 30% in the control group [9].
- A 2017 prospective observational study reported on 60 participants receiving naturopathic care as part of their health services at a community health center. Average symptoms at baseline were consistent with moderate to severe depression and moderate anxiety. There was a significant reduction in average depression and anxiety symptoms. The mean reduction was 48% and 42%, respectively [10].
- Meta-analyses have found a therapeutic benefit for a range of interventions used frequently by the naturopathic work force in the treatment of mental illness. These include omega-3 supplementation, exercise, herbal medicines such as St. John's Wort and Saffron, therapies targeting the microbiome, dietary counselling, yoga, and mind-body interventions [11 – 18].

Most consumers include Traditional and Complementary Medicine (T&CM) therapies, products and practices as part of their personal and family healthcare regimen.

Globally, there is a need for more health professionals who are able to treat mental health disorders. In many low-and middle-income countries greater than 75% of individuals with depression do not receive any treatment [1]. In higher income countries, a significant number of patients do not find the commonly available treatments to be accessible, tolerable or effective.

- Naturopathic care is known for its diverse and flexible therapeutic approach to healthcare. It is individualized to each patient using a range of therapeutic modalities and practices [2].
- There is a growing trend for individuals to choose herbal remedies, vitamins and minerals as part of their healthcare regimen, especially when treating chronic concerns [19].
- It is common for the naturopathic workforce to perform or prescribe four or more different naturopathic therapeutic modalities or practices during a naturopathic visit with the most common being applied and clinical nutrition, lifestyle modifications, and herbal medicine [6].
- The most commonly available treatment options for mental disorders include pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy. However, due to adverse effects, high cost, and/or incomplete resolution of symptoms, many patients report that these options are intolerable, inaccessible, or ineffective [3].
- There is evidence that patients with mental illnesses prefer non-pharmacologic treatment options [20].

Overview of Naturopathy

According to the Health Technology Assessment on Naturopathy: [2]

- Naturopathy is a traditional system of medicine originating in Europe that is now part of T&CM around the world as naturopathy or naturopathic medicine.
- Naturopathy is defined by two philosophies and seven principles and naturopathic care is guided by distinct naturopathic therapies.
- As of 2021, there is a naturopathic workforce in over 108 countries, and it is estimated that the naturopathic workforce sees over 5.5 million patients globally per month.
- Naturopaths / naturopathic doctors provide healthcare for individuals experiencing mental health disorders at all stages of life. The naturopathic workforce is an untapped health resource to address the high burden of mental illness both as primary care practitioners and collaboratively with other healthcare professionals.
- Naturopathic practice is complex and multi-modal and incorporates core naturopathic therapies, modalities and practices including applied nutrition, clinical nutrition, herbal medicine, lifestyle modifications, mind-body medicine techniques, naturopathic physical medicine, hydrotherapy and other therapies based on jurisdictional regulations and level of education.

For more information contact the World Naturopathic Federation at info@worldnaturopathicfederation.org or visit our website at worldnaturopathicfederation.org



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