

# What is Mental Health? What is the U.S. Role?

## The U.S. Global Mental Health Alliance

The U.S. Global Mental Health Alliance is a collaboration of organizations committed to expanding global access to effective programming that improves mental health and well-being in foreign assistance. To learn more about the Alliance and its members visit: [PublicHealth.JHU.edu/us-global-mental-health-alliance](http://PublicHealth.JHU.edu/us-global-mental-health-alliance). [publichealth.jhu.edu/us-global-mental-health-alliance](http://publichealth.jhu.edu/us-global-mental-health-alliance)



### What is mental health?

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to his or her community.

### Mental Health: A Cross Cutting Global Issue

Poor mental health can negatively affect physical health, with strong links between mental health and infectious diseases like HIV, TB, and malaria, and non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and substance abuse. Mental health can also impact the effectiveness programs addressing other issues including:

- Nutrition
- Early childhood development
- Education
- Violence prevention and child protection
- Poverty

### U.S. Government Role

Seven U.S. government agencies have a critical role to play in promoting mental health as part of foreign assistance:

- USAID
- Department of State
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Peace Corps
- Department of Labor
- Department of Defense

**USAID** has taken the lead in supporting for global mental health, with significant but varying allocations through its Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance and the Victims of Torture Fund (VoT) Fund(see below). Since 2020, under the Trump Administration and through the Biden Administration, USAID has engaged a Mental Health Coordinator with agency-wide responsibilities to provide technical expertise and otherwise assist in the promotion and development of mental health services integrated into USAID’s health and social development programs. USAID now has a dedicated mental health team consisting of the Coordinator and two senior mental health advisors. In June 2024, USAID published a position statement, its first policy document on mental health.

(<https://www.usaid.gov/inclusivedevelopment/mental-health/mental-health-position-paper>)

*Victims of Torture Fund:* Since the 1990s, the VoT Fund has provided USAID’s only dedicated funding for global mental health—approximately \$12 million annually for programing and research in post-disaster and development contexts and to assist survivors of torture and other structural violence. VoT funding has helped build mental health services in more than 20 conflict affected countries as well as the development of new methods for community-based treatment of mental disorders now used in every region of the globe.

*Global Health:* Since its initial investments in VoT, USAID has expanded funding to support maternal mental health, integration of mental health services into primary health care and PEPFAR programming, and psychological support services as part of youth development initiatives.

In each case, USAID missions work with local governments and through local partnerships. Services can be provided by local nonprofessional people if given adequate training and supervision. Local people, with no more than a middle school education, have been trained and supported by USAID to provide effective treatment for mental health conditions in their own communities in places as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Burma, the Pacific Islands, and Ukraine. Using digital technologies, treatments can now be provided across large distances and, critically, across borders and into war zones and other insecure areas where outside assistance cannot go. In the future, counseling-based mental health interventions could be the most universally available of all health interventions.

The State Department also supports the mental health of refugees and displaced persons through the **Bureau for Population and Migration**. The Bureau has long supported mental health programming for these populations, while also advocating for enhanced attention and quality of programming through international, bilateral, and multilateral engagements. The State Department has also published a brief statement of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support strategy. (<https://www.state.gov/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-mhpss/>)