

Youth Mental Health Early Identification and Brief CBT-Based Intervention Programme

The Clinical Psychology Unit of the Policlinico Universitario A. Gemelli IRCCS (Rome, Italy), in collaboration with UNICEF Italy, has established a comprehensive youth mental health prevention programme aimed at the early identification and management of psychological distress among adolescents and their families.

This programme specifically targeted pre-adolescents and adolescents affected by the psychosocial repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and was executed over the course of one year within both hospital and school environments.

Participants

- A total of 1,571 adolescents participated in the programme.
- Among these, 971 adolescents underwent structured psychological assessments and clinical intakes.
- Additionally, 600 adolescents engaged in school-based prevention activities.
- Furthermore, 1,942 parents were involved in the programme.

In summary, the initiative reached 3,513 direct beneficiaries and approximately 35,000 indirect beneficiaries through various community outreach efforts.

Assessment and Profiling

Participants underwent comprehensive psychological screening and multidimensional clinical evaluations to identify vulnerability profiles and early indicators of psychological distress. Key findings revealed the following:

- 39% of the assessed population exhibited clinically significant internalizing symptoms, including anxiety, depressive mood, and psychosomatic complaints.
- 18% displayed clinically significant externalizing symptoms, such as disruptive or aggressive behaviors.
- 16% presented with more complex psychological vulnerabilities across multiple domains.

The assessment phase further identified significant neurodevelopmental conditions within the population:

- 47% of the assessed adolescents demonstrated Specific Learning Disorders (SLD).
- The remaining participants exhibited other neurodevelopmental or psychological conditions, including ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, eating disorders, and neurological or neuromuscular conditions.

This profiling process enabled the identification of varying levels of vulnerability and guided the allocation of appropriate support pathways.

Intervention

Adolescents identified as vulnerable were provided with a brief structured psychological intervention, typically comprising four to eight sessions based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The intervention focused on:

- Emotional regulation
- Stress management
- Behavioral self-regulation
- Family support and psychoeducation

The intervention adopted a bio-psycho-social approach, integrating individual support with family involvement and collaboration with educational institutions.

Outcomes

Preliminary outcome analyses indicated promising results:

- A reduction in perceived psychological distress was measured through the CORE-OM (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure).
- The proportion of participants reporting severe distress decreased from 31% to 16%, while moderate distress decreased from 19% to 8%.
- Satisfaction rates were notably high, with 98% satisfaction among parents and 96% satisfaction among adolescents.
- No drop-out rates were recorded throughout the intervention phase.

These findings suggest that early identification, combined with brief CBT-based support, can effectively alter trajectories of psychological vulnerability and enhance youth mental well-being.