

Do you want more information,
inspiration, or an invitation
for dialogue?

Healthcare DENMARK arranges
roundtables, webinars and
delegation visits and represents
Danish Life Science and
Healthcare at conferences
and meetings abroad.

**We look forward to
hearing from you.**

The Danish Approach to Mental Health



Foreword



Mental health is a challenge for all healthcare systems around the world. In Denmark, we strive to improve mental health for all and to break down stigma and secure prevention and early treatment. We also provide free and equal access for psychiatric treatment for all.

We have worked intensively with prevention and early detection in primary care, and we have explored innovative treatment systems and psychiatric hospital settings to strengthen our offerings within mental health.

With the Finance Act of 2020, 600 million DKK (~80.3 million EUR) are allocated annually to strengthen the regional psychiatry. Furthermore, we are currently working on a comprehensive 10-year plan for the improvement of psychiatric care. The plan will set the long-term direction for mental health treatment in Denmark.

The plan will especially focus on prevention and stronger coherence between general practice, psychiatric hospital services (including outpatient treatment) and social psychiatry. Furthermore, the needs of children and young people as well as citizens with both mental health disorders and drug and/or alcohol abuse disorders will be given special attention in the plan.

I hope that the examples of successful Danish initiatives described in this publication will inspire you and spark the interest for further discussion and exchange of experience across borders.

Magnus Heunicke
Minister for Health

Contents

- 5 **The Danish approach** to mental health
- 10 **Digital psychiatry**
- 13 Early **intervention**
- 18 **Civil society** initiatives
- 22 **Stigma** and mental health
- 26 Suicide **prevention**
- 30 **Modern** psychiatric hospitals
- 34 **References & credits**

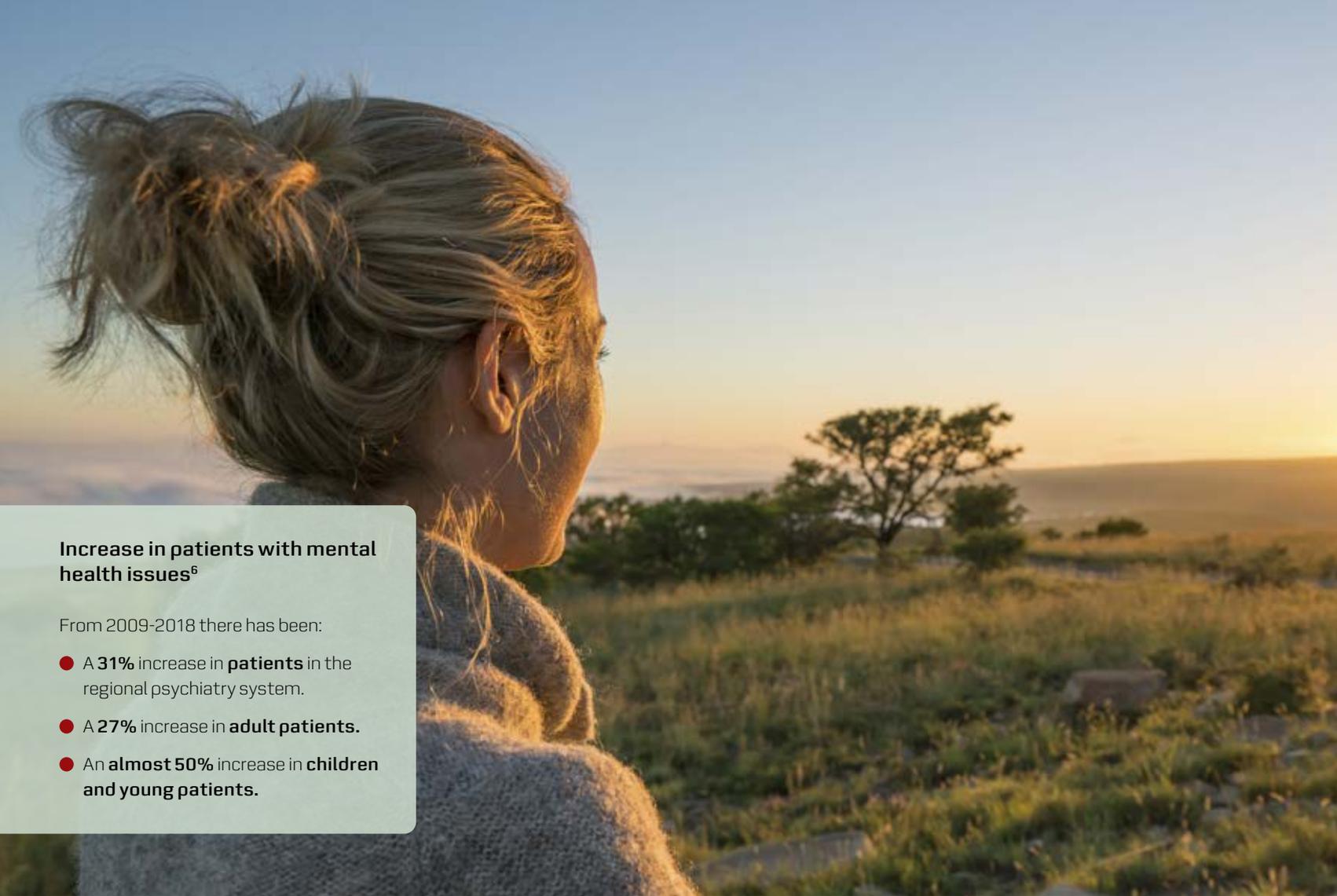
The Danish approach to mental health

Mental health is a growing concern among populations all over the world. More than 970 million people live with a mental health disorder¹, corresponding to more than 10% of the world's population. A number of challenges add to the growing burden of mental health, including lack of resources and psychiatric practitioners in healthcare systems around the world. In addition, mental health disorders are often stigmatised, leading to insufficient awareness, delayed diagnosis and often incoherent treatment.

Denmark aims to bring down the stigmatisation of mental health disorders, speak openly about mental health, and secure early diagnosis and treatment. Denmark is known to be one of the happiest countries in the world² but despite this, around 8% of the Danish population suffers from depression³ and it is estimated that 25% of all contact with a general practitioner is in relation to mental health⁴. Furthermore, 15% of all school children have been treated for mental health issues⁵.

The Danish Healthcare System

- The Danish healthcare system is predominantly public owned and run
- The public healthcare services are financed by taxes
- The healthcare system is decentralised to 5 regions and 98 municipalities
- It is a fundamental principle that all citizens have free and equal access to health care services, including psychiatric care
- Freedom of choice of hospital and general practitioner is always available



Increase in patients with mental health issues⁶

From 2009-2018 there has been:

- A **31%** increase in **patients** in the regional psychiatry system.
- A **27%** increase in **adult patients**.
- An **almost 50%** increase in **children and young patients**.

These rising numbers may, however, partly reflect an increase in transparency and early diagnosis leading to fewer unreported cases.

In Denmark, psychiatric treatment is primarily a public task managed by the regional authorities. The approach is holistic

and involves not only the individual but also the family, work life and surroundings. Treatment ranges from conversational therapy, online cognitive behaviour therapy, and peer-to-peer dialogue, to – for more severe cases – medication for various periods of time. Combinations of these approaches are often used, and most

treatment is out-patient treatment. The individual patient and their possibility of recovery should be the starting point of all treatment which should, when possible, be provided in the local environment so as to facilitate patient access and preserve quality of life.

The 10-year Psychiatry Plan

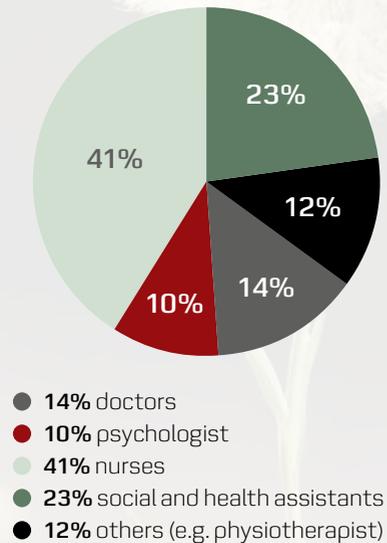
Denmark has successfully improved prevention and treatment in areas such as cancer via prioritised, systematic, and long-term investments. A similar approach is now being taken within mental health where a 10-year psychiatry plan is in the making. The plan will set the long-term direction for mental health treatment in Denmark with an emphasis on prevention and improving the coherence between general practice, psychiatric hospital services (including outpatient treatment) and social psychiatry. Furthermore, children and young people, as well as citizens with both mental health disorders and drug and/or alcohol abuse disorders, will be given a special focus in the plan.

Proportion of the population treated for mental health issues⁷

Of the total Danish population (2016):

- **12.1%** received **treatment with medicine** for their mental illness
- **2.6%** received **outpatient care** from the regional psychiatry system
- **2.3%** received **conversational therapy** from their general practitioner
- **0.4%** received **inpatient care** from the regional psychiatry system
- **0.8%** received treatment from a **practicing psychologist**

Professionals in the regional psychiatry (2016)⁷



Denmark as a data goldmine

Denmark is known as a strong data nation with electronic healthcare data going back more than 40 years. Denmark's social security number system (a unique patient identifier called a CPR) makes it possible to combine specific patient data for research with data from a vast database of 5.8 million Danes.

The Danish Life Science Strategy from 2021 includes an effort to make Denmark a leading country in the use of health data for research and development through transparent requirements for use of data, a flexible approval processes, and an updated data infrastructure.

Task division in the Danish healthcare sector

Regional responsibilities:

- Psychiatric hospital service
- General practitioners
- Specialists
- Psychologist treatment
- Somatic hospital services

Municipal responsibilities:

- Preventive treatment
- Social psychiatry
- Psychiatric homecare
- Psychiatric nursing homes
- Treatment of alcohol and drug abuse
- Rehabilitation which does not take place during hospitalisation

Digitalisation is a cornerstone of Danish healthcare with technology enabling new ways to prevent and treat mental health disorders, often in the patient's own home. These digital treatment and support options promote equal access to effective and evidence-based mental healthcare.

Early intervention is key in the handling of mental health in Denmark and numerous initiatives have been implemented to support people in the early stages of mental health issues, including programmes that target children and young people.

Civil society contributes with a number of free services – add-ons that act in unison with public psychiatric treatment to support both the individuals and their relatives.

The **general practitioner** plays a key role as the gate keeper to psychiatric treatment. This keeps costs down and creates a coherent flow for the service user. However, cooperation between sectors is not straightforward and is an area of ongoing optimisation.

A focused effort to **reduce suicide rates** has led to a decrease in Danish figures from among the highest in the world in the 1980's to one of the lowest rates in the high-income countries today.

Actions taken to improve mental health will not only minimise the burden of the disease

The Danish general practitioner

A Danish general practitioner (GP, family doctor) completes a 6-year basic medical education and an additional 5 year specialist education at the same level as other medical specialists. The GP has knowledge of both the health status and the general circumstances of the patient's life, making the doctor an important player in securing a holistic approach to treatment. Furthermore, the GP is aware of any co-morbidities the patient may have and can take these into account when planning the treatment.

The GP is notified electronically about the citizen's journey through the treatment system including hospitalisation and interactions with municipal offerings. This enables the GP to follow-up and ensure that the citizen is handled in an optimal way.

but will also secure a better and longer life with the ability to partake in the workforce. However, the increasing mental health issues and their burden requires investment, governmental prioritization, and incentives for neuroscience research.

We hope the Danish initiatives presented in this paper will serve as inspiration – encouraging dialogue and knowledge sharing across borders.

Digital psychiatry

Helping Denmark's mental health resources go further

Like many other countries, Denmark is facing a challenging situation where the problem of increasing cases of mental health disorders is exacerbated by a lack of resources and psychiatric practitioners. However, preventive action and digital solutions may solve some of these challenges, not least because digitalisation can mitigate the issue of geographical distance – a considerable hurdle in a country like Denmark with many small island communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to new possibilities in psychiatric treatment. Digital consultations and tools have become widely used with positive effects, and the collaboration between sectors has improved.

The aim is to deliver meaningful and effective digital offerings covering a broad span from early mental vulnerability to severe illness. The focus is on evidence-based, user friendly solutions with a high level of IT security and privacy, as well as on creating the right mix of digital and traditional treatment offerings in order to meet the needs of all types of patients.

The aim is to deliver meaningful and effective digital offerings covering a broad span from early mental vulnerability to severe illness.

The Danish Internet Psychiatry Clinic – reaching more citizens with fewer resources

The Center for Telepsychiatry is a research and development centre within the Mental Health Services in the Region of Southern Denmark. The centre promotes the use of telepsychiatry and e-mental health to improve the quality and accessibility of care for people with mental health problems.

The Center for Telepsychiatry launched the Danish Internet Psychiatry Clinic in 2014, which provides web-based psychological therapy for adults with mild to moderate depression and anxiety – a population group that has previously not received much attention.

The clinic offers an automated treatment course of 10-12 weeks with exercises and information adapted for the individual patient. The psychologist is only involved in the diagnostic interview and via supporting text messages during the treatment course. This way, the psychologists can help far more patients than through offline therapy.

In 2018, the initiative was rolled out as a national offering funded by a joint regional agreement.

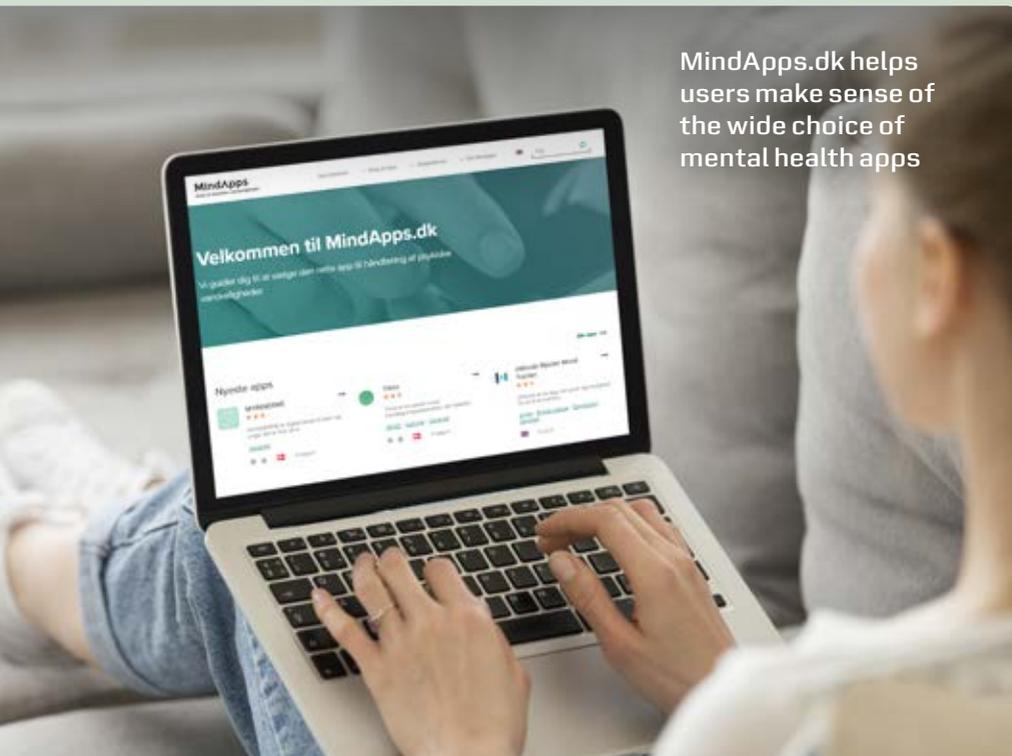


The Center for Telepsychiatry provides web-based psychological therapy for adults with mild to moderate depression and anxiety

Navigating the jungle of mental health apps with MindApps.dk

A large number of healthcare apps have been developed recently, making it hard to navigate and find effective and safe solutions. Therefore, the Centre for Telepsychiatry in Region Southern Denmark has reviewed and recommended a number of apps and other digital solutions for mental health on the website, MindApps.dk.

The app solutions are meant as add-ons to existing offerings in the psychiatry system and have proven especially relevant during the recent pandemic. These digital solutions have the advantage of being available 24/7 and that they are available not only for patients with a psychiatric diagnosis but anyone who feels that their mental health is challenged.



MindApps.dk helps users make sense of the wide choice of mental health apps

Early intervention

Tackling the growing problem of mental health issues in young people

Mental health issues in young people is a large and growing problem in Denmark as well as many other countries. Today, one in six Danish children is diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder before they turn 18.⁸ At the same time, less than half of young people who experience mental health problems seek help.

Therefore, an increased focus is put on early detection and early intervention in young populations – an area which will also be reflected in the upcoming 10-year psychiatric plan.

Today, one in six Danish children is diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder before they turn 18.⁸



The Mind My Mind programme offers psychologic treatment for school-age children.

Early intervention for psychotic young people **by the OPUS programme**

The early intervention programme OPUS targets young people with psychosis or similar symptoms through a supportive and assertive approach. OPUS uses a concept with specialised assertive teams in which staff members have a reduced caseload compared to conventional mental health services. The OPUS project has, through an intensive effort and the involvement of relatives, improved the clinical progress

of people with first episode psychosis.

The OPUS programme originates from research showing convincing evidence of better outcomes and lower costs through this method, compared to standard treatment.^{9,10} The concept was initially run as a research pilot project in two regions after which it was rolled out to all regions with governmental support. It is now a standard treatment in Denmark.

Mind My Mind – mental health support delivered like dental care

The Mind My Mind programme offers psychologic treatment for school-age children (6-16 years).

The concept is a result of a research project¹¹ driven by Psykiatrifonden (Mental Health Foundation Denmark), where methodology (in this case cognitive behavioural therapy) is combined with an organisational setup that enables evidence-

based offerings for schoolchildren in all parts of Denmark – much like the way dental care is administrated today. The treatment has had a documented clinical effect with 75% of the participating children showing reduced symptoms.

The rollout of this programme to all municipalities to make it a national offering is being considered.



Mindhelper – an online guide for young people in difficult times

Mindhelper is a national website that guides young people through difficult times and experiences. Doctors, school staff, or other adults can refer young people to Mindhelper. It also pops up in relevant search engines if young people look for knowledge or assistance online when they feel troubled. The services on

mindhelper.dk include evidence-based information, digital self-help tools, signposts to further help and Q&A's. Mindhelper was developed by the Centre for Telepsychiatry in Region Southern Denmark and received more than 1.2 million visitors in 2020.

Civil Society Initiatives

Sharing the load of society's mental health care needs

In Denmark, civil society contributes to a high number of free services within mental health, of which just a few are presented on the next few pages. Volunteers offer their spare time answering phone calls, online chats, and participating in physical meetings. These services function as add-ons to the public treatment psychiatry to support both individuals and their relatives. Several of these initiatives are privately funded, and the synergy of civil society initiatives and public mental health offerings reflects the strong culture of public-private collaboration in Denmark.

These services function as add-ons to the public treatment psychiatry to support both individuals and their relatives.



Headspace – where young people can talk anonymously with an adult

Headspace is an initiative for young people between 12 and 25 years of age and offers someone to talk to, free and fully anonymously, either in one of the more than 25 physical centres or via chat.

Most of the staff work on a voluntary basis and everyone is trained in legal requirements

and conversation techniques to secure a consistent method and professional approach. Each year, headspace helps more than 40.000 young people and conducts more than 15.000 individual conversations.

The service is funded by the national budget and private foundations.

GirlTalk – supporting and empowering girls

GirlTalk is a non-profit organisation established in 2004 with the purpose of helping girls and young women (age 12-24) to strengthen their self-esteem and prevent mental vulnerability. GirlTalk provides free

and anonymous chat, SMS counselling, and dialog groups and is based on the work of 250 volunteers. GirlTalk also deals with self-harming behaviour which is unfortunately a rising trend within Danish society.

Lifeline – a suicide prevention helpline

The Danish non-profit organisation Livslinien (Lifeline) is a suicide prevention helpline that offers anonymous counselling by trained volunteers. It is supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and is financed by both public funds and foundations, companies and private contributors. If you

have a crisis or suicidal thoughts, you can contact Livslinien anonymously by phone, email or chat. Additionally, Livslinien actively seeks a dialogue with journalists about suicide prevention and suicide reporting with the aim of breaking down the taboos surrounding the subject.



The Danish Association for Depression – a unique, national community

The Danish Depression Association is a nationwide organisation for people diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder and for their relatives. It was established in 1998 by four medical doctors who realised there was a need for patients to come together to advocate for improved treatment options and a better understanding of affective disorders to help reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. This continues to be the

overall mission of the organisation. A core of 150 volunteers along with members and other stakeholders play an important role in organising a wide range of activities including peer-to-peer self-help groups, telephone counselling, a social café, an annual summer camp, local outdoor events, and virtual cafés to create online communities for sharing experiences and combatting loneliness.

Stigma and mental health

Encouraging an open dialogue on mental health

After centuries of taboo and a lack of knowledge about mental health and its associated disorders, it has never been more important to raise awareness, fight stigma, and encourage conversations about mental health. Because, when people with mental illness share their own experiences and talk openly about their situation, the taboo is broken. In Denmark, we have seen more openness around this subject in recent years, and many celebrities, bloggers, and politicians talk openly about their personal experiences.

The Danish government established a national destigmatisation effort (ONE OF US, see below) with a special focus on mental health. From August 2021, this initiative will be incorporated into the Danish Health Authority, making this the first antistigma effort in the world to be an integrated part of a national health service.

When people with mental illness share their own experiences and talk openly about their situation, the taboo is broken.

ONE OF US – a national campaign against stigma

ONE OF US is a national campaign for antistigma in Denmark and is part of the national destigmatisation effort. The ONE OF US vision is to improve life for all by promoting inclusion and combatting discrimination connected to mental health in Denmark. This is done by increasing

general knowledge about life with mental illness and decreasing the distance that leads to prejudice and social exclusion. Ambassadors share their lived experience of mental illness in many different settings, thereby creating identification and breaking down prejudice.

Quote from a ONE OF US ambassador¹²:

“When I share my story, I loosen up and become alive. When I share, I take control over my life. Because when I share, my weakness is converted to my strength. And when my experiences can be used for something, it is not just waste of life. It is magical.”



H.R.H. Crown Princess of Denmark talks to ambassadors from ONE OF US during her visit at Aarhus University Hospital Psychiatry in 2019

Mental Health Foundation Denmark – 25 years of fighting stigma

Mental Health Foundation Denmark (Psykiatrifonden) is a private foundation which has worked to destigmatise mental health through easily understandable information about mental health disorders for the past 25 years.

The foundation works politically to create the necessary changes in the society to support mental health.

The foundation works closely with municipalities and NGO's such as ONE OF US and has also developed various campaigns – for example the “Say it out loud” campaign where influencers talk openly about how they feel inside. The campaign touches upon the fact that many influencers appear happy and well-functioning to their followers, but often deal with serious issues, also within mental health, in the hidden.

“The first step can be just to say it out loud. Because it is okay not to feel okay”.

— **Julia Sofia**
Danish influencer



I am fine, thank you. How are you?

Suicide prevention

How Denmark got its suicide rate under control

The Danish strategy for suicide prevention is multipronged and spans decades. In the 1980s, the Danish suicide rate was among the highest in the world with 38 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants above 15 years of age¹³. But a targeted effort led to a decline in this rate, reaching 11.4 per 100,000 in 2007, roughly where it still stands today and among the lowest levels in high-income countries.

Suicide is a devastating public health problem afflicting individuals, families, and societies. But Denmark's experience with suicide prevention offers some hope that prevention of suicide is possible.

Measures to reduce the suicide rate

A number of initiatives have been taken at a government level to reduce the high suicide rate. These initiatives include:

- Deregistration of barbiturates
- Introduction of less dangerous analgesics and antidepressants
- Packet size restriction for weak analgesics
- Removal of carbon monoxide from household gas
- Introduction of catalytic converters in car exhaust systems to reduce the emission of toxic concentrations of carbon monoxide
- Reduced access to firearms
- Redesign of psychiatric wards to eliminate opportunity for suicide
- Implementation of Suicide Prevention Clinics offering counselling, therapy, and practical support



The guiding principle is to establish aid for suicidal people so that they are not left on their own

Suicide Prevention Clinics gives long-term reductions in suicidal acts

The implementation of Suicide Prevention Clinics as permanent structures with national coverage since 2007 has proven highly effective and has reduce self-harm and suicide considerably.

The guiding principle is to establish aid for suicidal people so that they are not left on

their own before other relevant support can be initiated.

The clinics offer counselling, therapy and practical support to persons with suicidal thoughts or behaviour. This therapy has been linked to long-term reductions in fatal (29%) and non-fatal (18%) suicidal acts.^{13, 14}

Acute psychiatric **emergency** outreach 24/7

The acute, psychiatric emergency outreach programme was developed in the Capital Region of Denmark and has now been adopted in all Danish regions. The aim is to help individuals avoid severe suicidal crises or provide support to people who have

already attempted suicide. This service is available 24/7 where a psychiatrist answers the phone and decides if physical outreach is necessary or whether a telephone conversation is sufficient.



“It is important to intensify the support to mentally ill persons in high-risk periods, for example just after discharge. Close contact and help with practicalities are key to bring down the suicide rate”.

— **Merete Nordentoft**

Professor, Psychiatric Centre Copenhagen, Head of Danish Research Institute for Suicide Prevention.



Modern psychiatric hospitals

Creating a healing environment for mental health patients

People with mental health disorders have increased mortality. In Denmark, suicide accounts for 40% of the excess mortality, while somatic conditions count for 60%.¹⁵ Because of this, modern Danish psychiatric hospital wards are designed to hinder suicide attempts.

Furthermore, relaxing audio and visual effects are increasingly recognised for their positive effect and Danish super-hospitals include features to improve mental health through healing architecture.

In Denmark, suicide accounts for 40% of the excess mortality for people with mental health conditions.



Cutting edge architecture at Slagelse Psychiatric Hospital

The award-winning Slagelse Psychiatric Hospital is globally known for its healing architecture which includes the world's most advanced LED lightning system and healing decoration.

Psychiatric wards have been redesigned to eliminate opportunity for suicide and

elements of colour, light glass, and nature are incorporated into the design in a way that promotes mental wellbeing. The transparent architecture and tranquil spatial layout promote visual contact between patients and employees and results indicate that this leads to decreased use of physical restraint.¹⁶

Co-creation with patients and relatives at Aalborg Hospital

At Aalborg Hospital, the involvement of patients and relatives has been replaced by actual co-creation in the development of both continuity of care and design of new hospitals. A unit for co-creation has been established where patients and relatives are employed and take part in both optimisation of current processes and design of new processes.

For example, co-creation was used to modify the processes related to monitoring

and analysis of suicide incidents. This process was positively received by clinicians, peers and management, and will be implemented as a standard learning process in 2022.

Furthermore, co-creation was used to develop patient reported outcome measures for psychiatric patients.¹⁷



Ambient applications reduce use of constraints and excessive use of medicine

Wavecare develops dedicated ambient applications for diagnostics, treatment, and care for implementation in psychiatric hospital design. The special combination of ambient light and audio-visual themes is a trusted tool for targeted sensory stimulation in the sensory room.

Successful interdisciplinary implementation of more than 80 sensory rooms at

psychiatric hospitals in Denmark indicates a reduction in the use of constraints and excessive use of medicine.^{18,19}

Patients with positive benefits from the sensory room are offered the Wavecare App for private use at home when discharged from the hospital.

References & credits

Editor-in-Chief

Healthcare DENMARK, Gerda Marie Rist, gmr@hcd.dk

The Danish Approach to Mental Health – September 2021

A publication in the Triple-I Paper series: Denmark Informs – Inspires – Invites

References

1. GBD 2019 Diseases and Injuries Collaborators, Global burden of 369 diseases and injuries in 204 countries and territories, 1990–2019. *Lancet* 2020; Oct 17;396(10258), pp. 1204-1222.
2. World Happiness Report, United Nations.
3. Psykiatrifonden.dk.
4. Specialevejledning for psykiatri (Guidelines for psychiatry), Danish Health Authority, 2010.
5. Incidence Rates and Cumulative Incidences of the Full Spectrum of Diagnosed Mental Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence. Dalsgaard et al., *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2020 Feb 1;77(2), pp. 155-164.
6. Udvalgte nøgletal for sygehusvæsenet og praksisområdet 2009-2018 (Selected key figures for hospital services and the practice area 2009-2018), The Danish Health Data Authority.
7. Indblik i psykiatrien og sociale indsatser (Insight in psychiatry and social efforts), Ministry of Health, 2018
8. Vidensraad.dk.
9. Early intervention services in psychosis: from evidence to wide implementation. Csillag et al., *Early intervention in Psychiatry*, 2016; 10(6), pp. 540-546.
10. Growth in the use of early intervention for psychosis services. McDavid et al., *PSSRU* 2016, pp. 17-20.
11. Effectiveness of Transdiagnostic Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy Compared With Management as Usual for Youth With Common Mental Health Problems. Jeppesen et al., *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2021;78(3), pp. 250-260.
12. ONE OF US, Yearly Report 2020.
13. Suicide – Turning the tide. Nordentoft and Erlangsen, *Science*, 2019; Vol. 365, Issue 6455, p. 725.
14. Short and long-term effects of psychosocial therapy for people after deliberate self-harm. Erlangsen et al., *Lancet Psychiatry*, 2014.
15. Fysisk helbred blandt psykisk syge: Forebyggelse, diagnostik og behandling (Physical health in mentally ill patients: Prevention, diagnostics and treatment). Jørgensen and Thomsen, *FADL's Forlag*, 2014, pp. 227-237.
16. Innovative architecture is good for mental health. *Troldtekt.com*, 3 April, 2018.
17. Conceptualizing patient-reported outcome measures for use within two Danish psychiatric clinical registries. Kristensen et al., *Nord J Psychiatry*, 2018;72(6), pp. 409-419.
18. Patienter får det bedre i sanserum (Patients get better in sensory rooms). *Kristeligt Dagblad, Liv & Sans*, 15 June 2018.
19. Farvet lys og lyden af skov mindsker tvang på PC Glostrup (Colored light and the sound of forest reduce restraints at Psychiatric Centre Glostrup). *Psykiatri-region.hk/presse-og-nyt*, 9 August 2018.

Photo credits

- Front page: iStock by Getty Images/Mladen Zivkovic
- Page 3: Ministry of Health/external photographer Claus Bech
- Page 4: iStock by Getty Images/AscentXmedia
- Page 6: iStock by Getty Images/swissmediavision
- Page 8: iStock by Getty Images/Dmytro Buianskyi
- Page 11: iStock by Getty Images/fizkes
- Page 12: iStock by Getty Images/bymuratdeniz
- Page 14: iStock by Getty Images/StockPlanets
- Page 16: iStock by Getty Images/Milko
- Page 19: Headspace
- Page 20: Healthcare DENMARK
- Page 21: iStock by Getty Images/alex1981
- Page 23: One of Us/Jesper Voldgaard
- Page 25: Splay One
- Page 27: iStock by Getty Images/Mladen Zivkovic
- Page 28: Markus Redvall
- Page 29: iStock by Getty Images/RgStudio
- Page 31: Healthcare DENMARK
- Page 32: Aalborg Hospital
- Page 33: Wavecare