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# 40<sup>th</sup> EPSO Conference, Malta

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# SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS HAVE SERIOUS IMPACTS:



Harm physical and mental **health**



Reduces **life expectancy**  
Loneliness causes

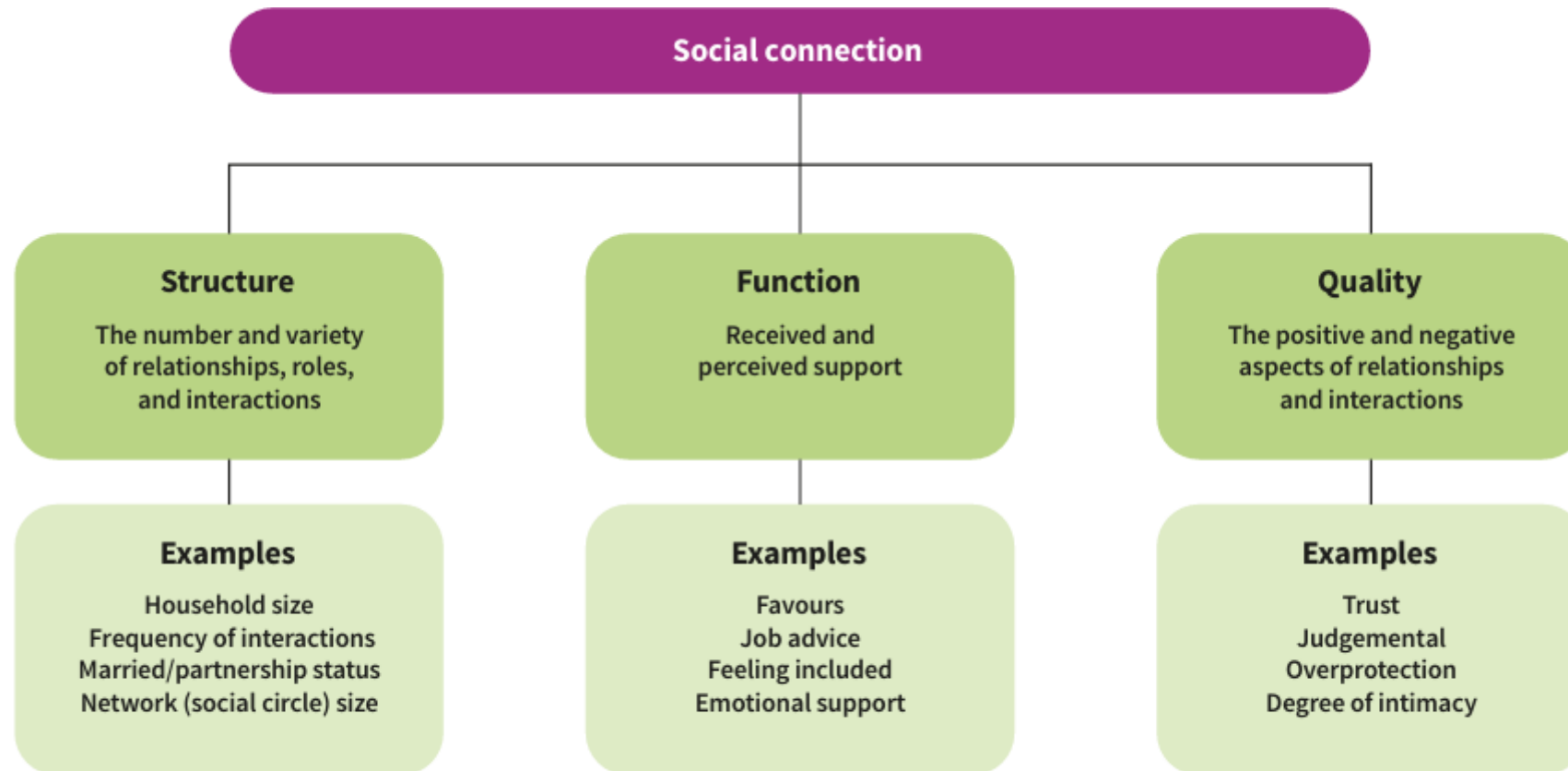
**870 000**  
**DEATHS A YEAR**



Costs society **billions** in terms  
of health care, education and employment

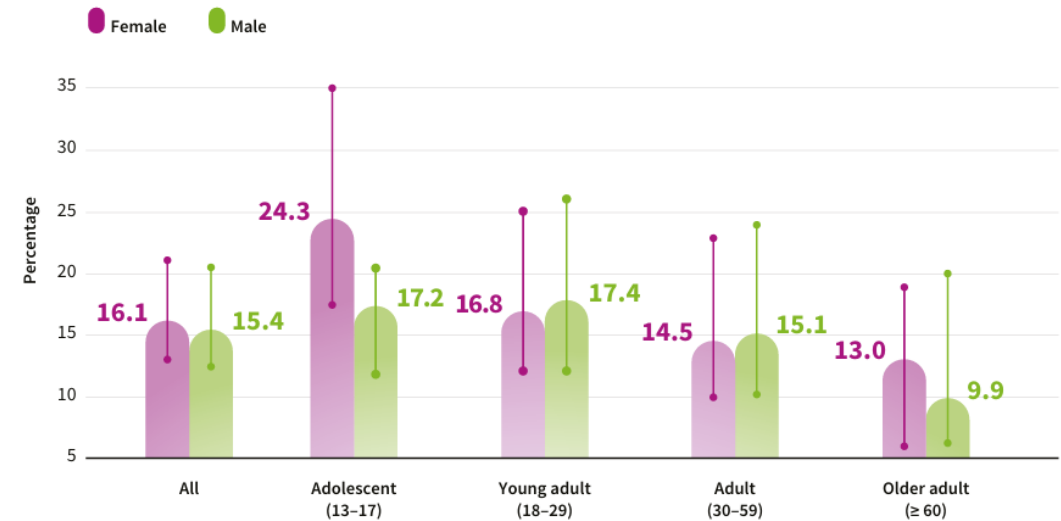
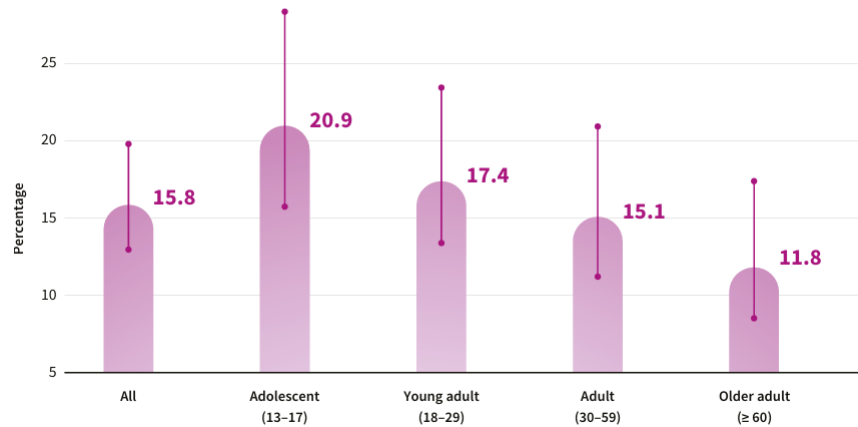


# Three dimensions of social connection

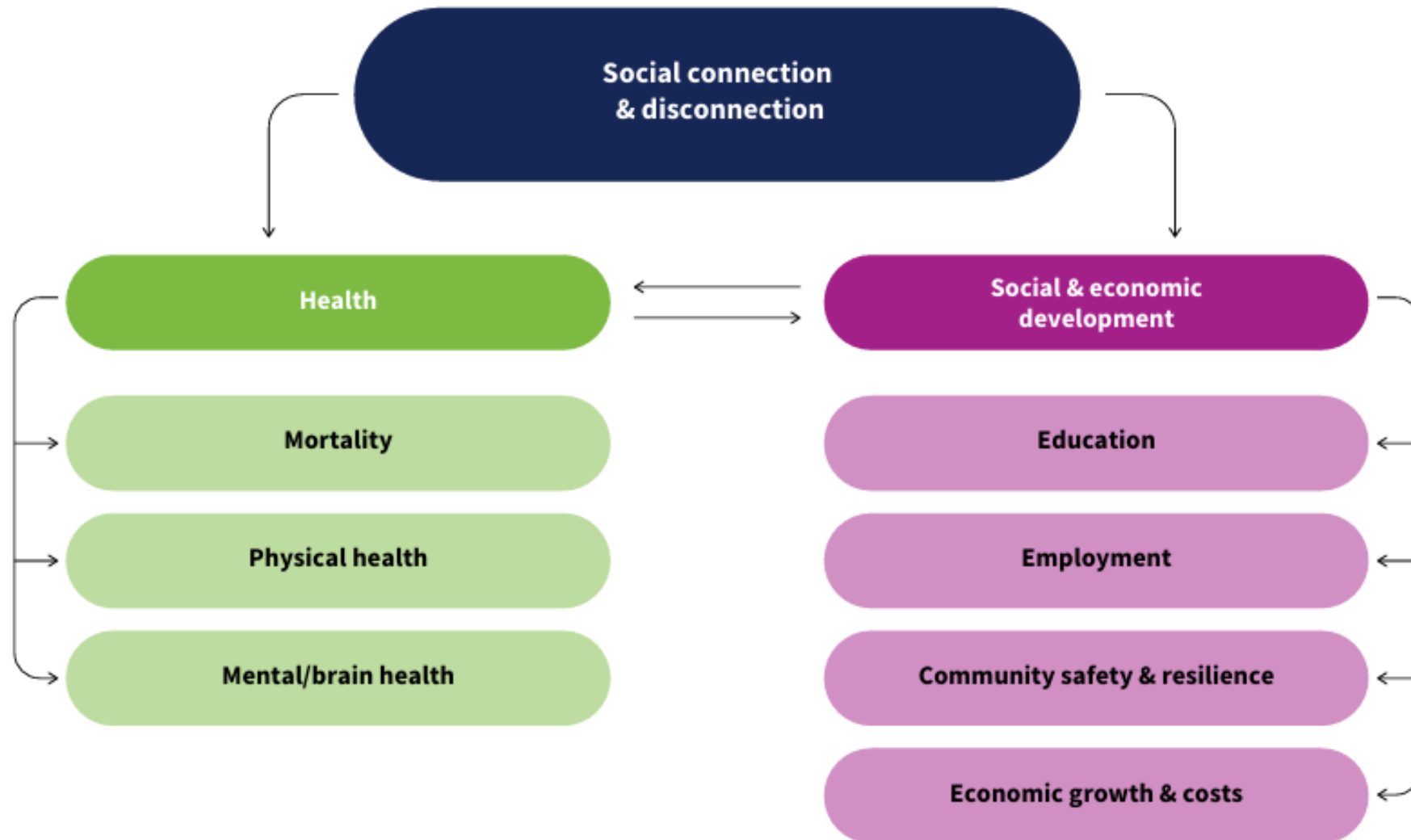


Source: Adapted from Holt-Lunstad (11).

# Global prevalence (%) of loneliness by age and sex, 2014–2023 (with 95% uncertainty intervals)



# Impacts of social connection on various domains



# Mental health needs are high

**1 in 6**

In WHO European Region, 1 in 6 people live with a mental health condition

**1 in 4**

In WHO European Region, 1 in 4 people with psychosis does not receive treatment

**300+**

suicides every day

Over 120 000 people die by suicide each year.

**2%**

Of health budgets globally go to mental health

**Widespread**

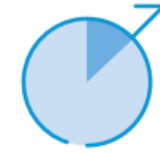
**Undertreated**

**Under-resourced**

# The global prevalence of mental disorders

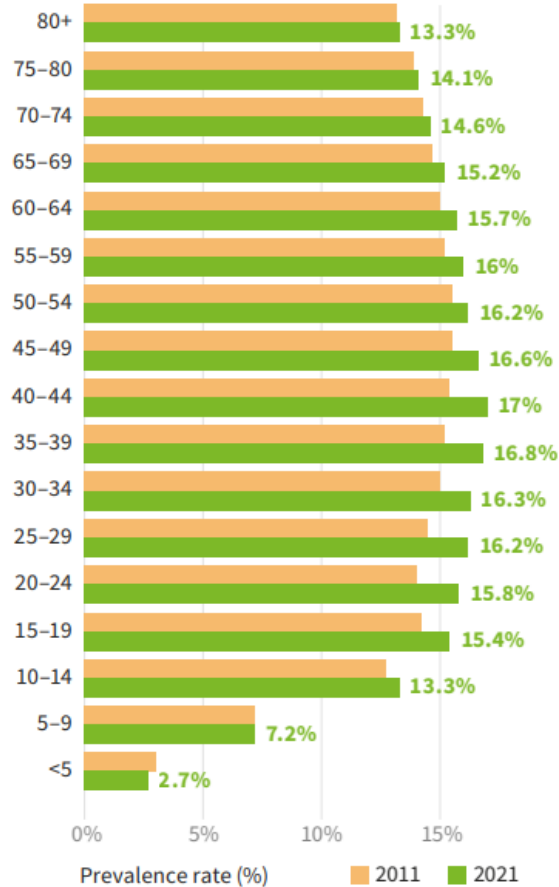
**1.095 billion**  
people living with  
mental disorders

14.8%  
of females

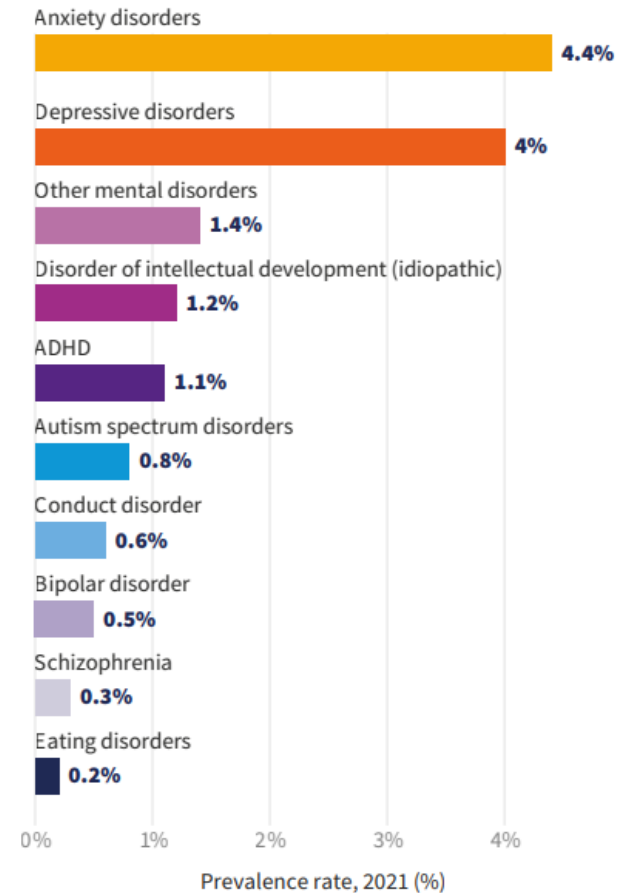


13.0%  
of males

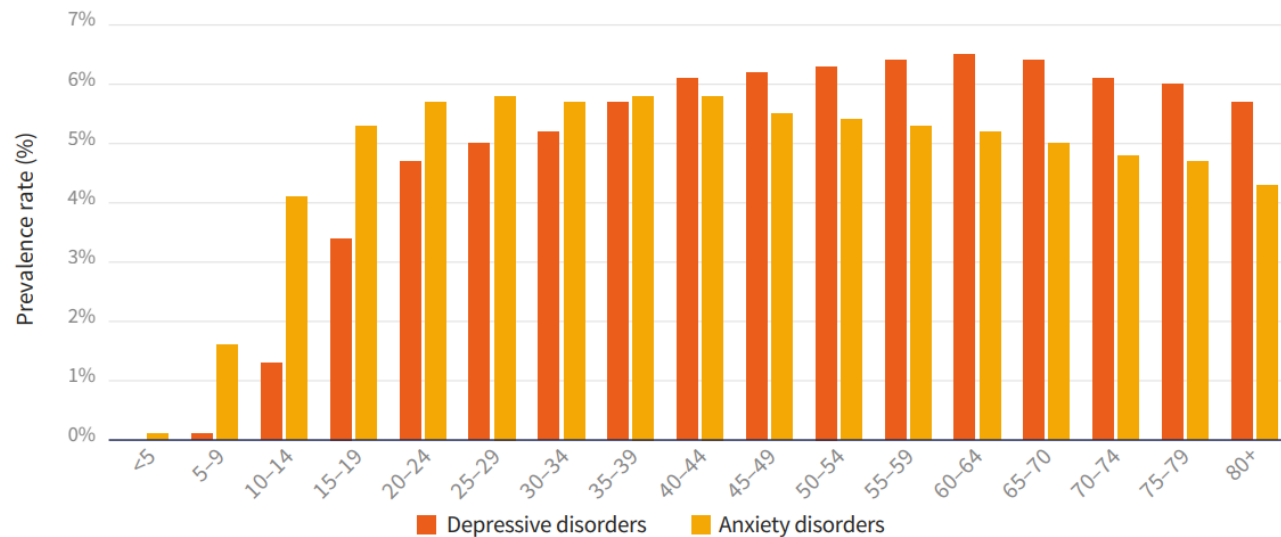
BY AGE GROUP (YEARS)



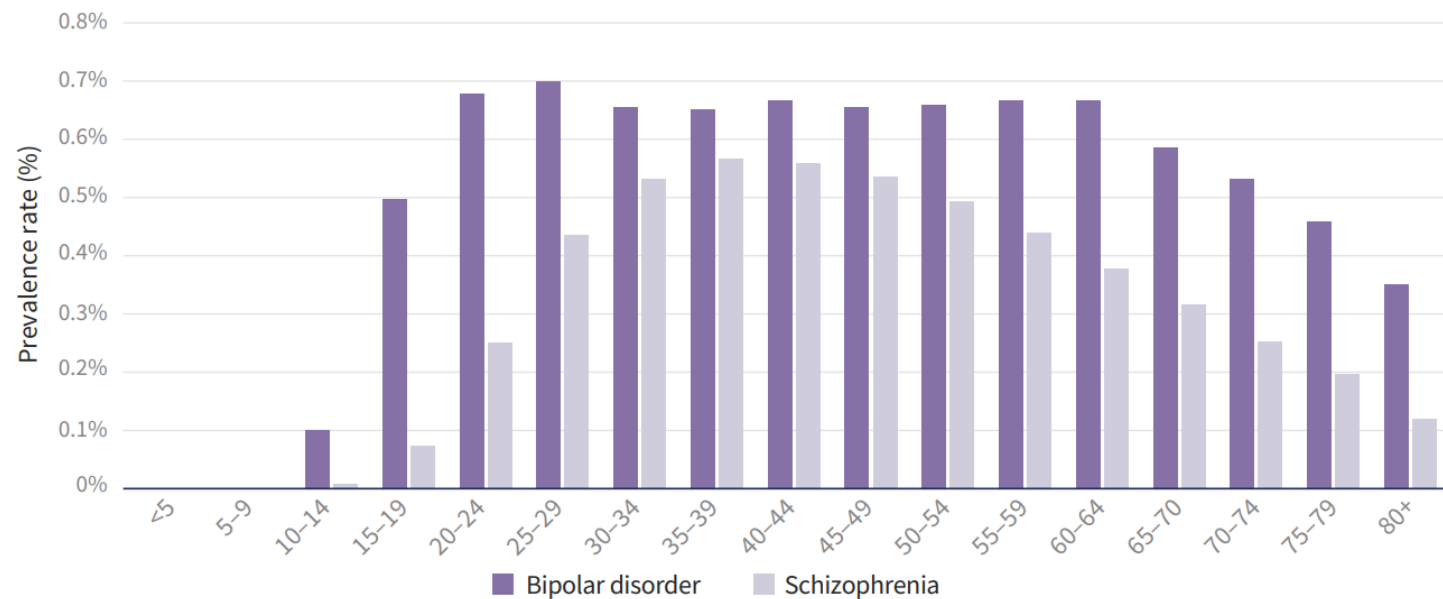
BY DISORDER



# Global prevalence of some common mental disorders over the life-course



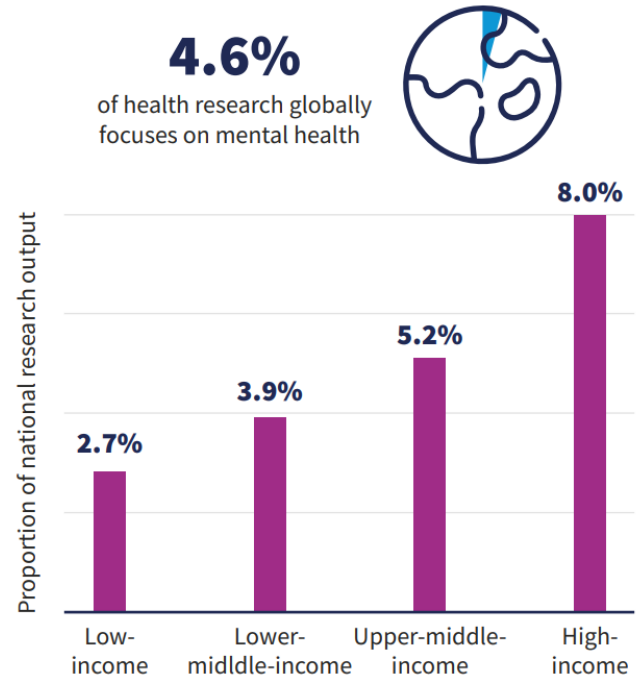
Source: IHME, 2024 (3).



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# What are we trying to find out?

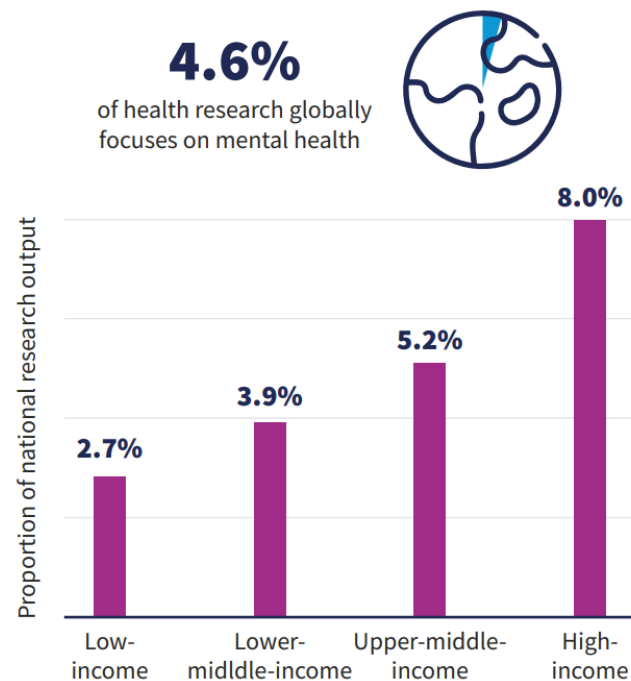
## Proportion of national health research focused on mental health across income group



Source: WHO, 2021 (61).

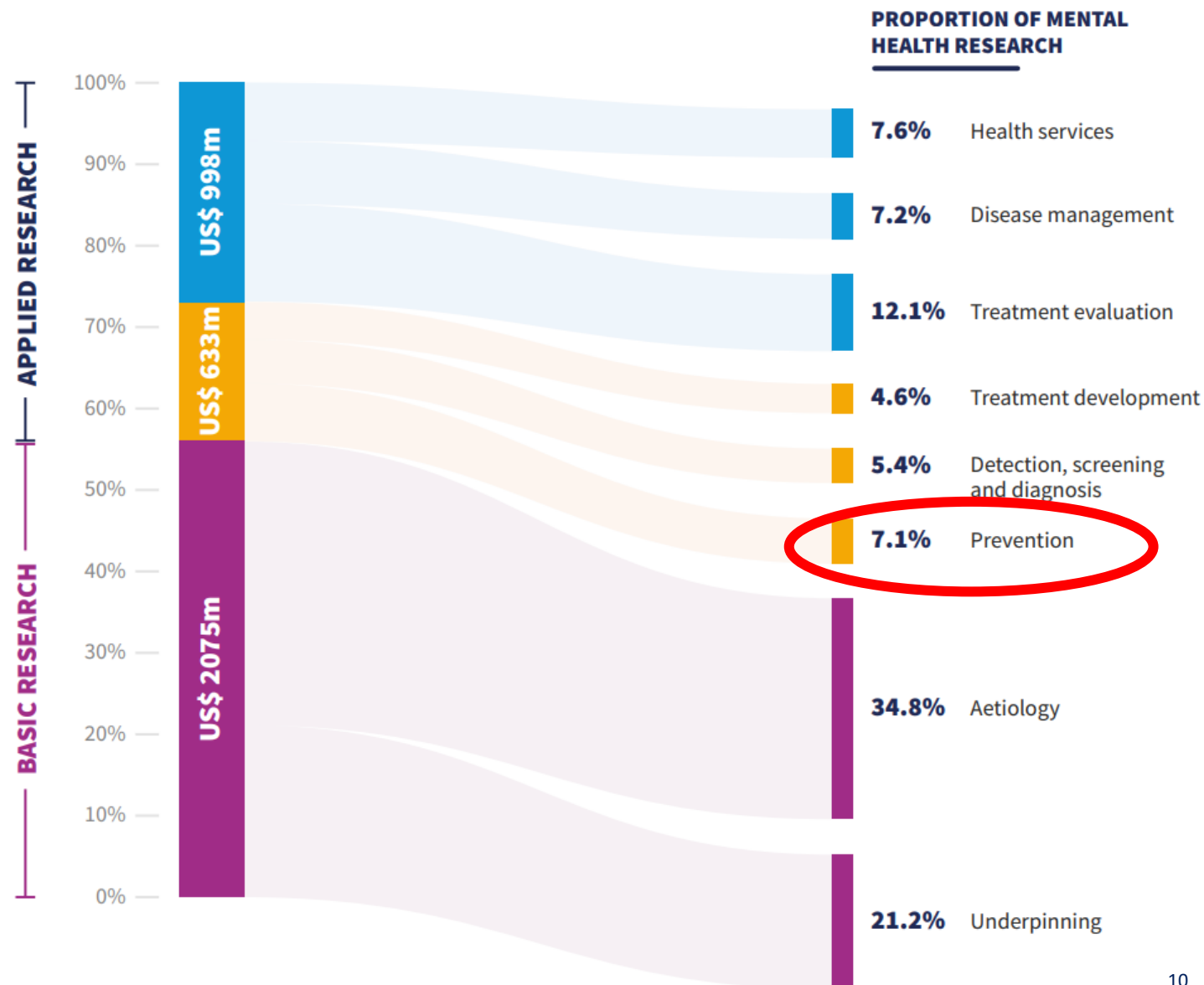
# And, what are we trying to find out?

## Proportion of national health research focused on mental health across income group



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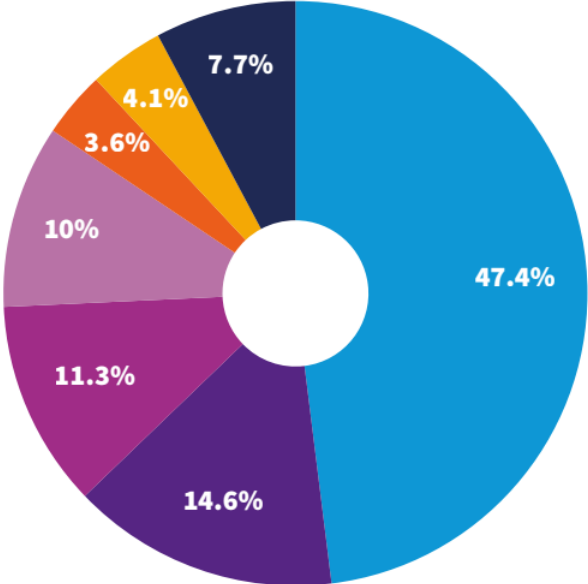
## More than half of mental health research is focused on the basic end of the spectrum



Source: Woelbert et al, 2020 (63).

# Mental health resources

## Average government spending on mental health (2024)

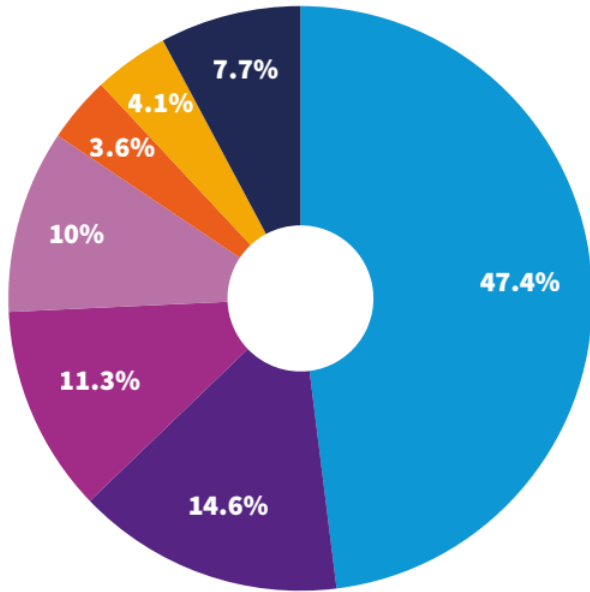


- Psychiatric hospitals
- Mental health care in general hospitals
- Community mental health services
- Mental health care in primary care
- Mental health prevention and promotion
- Mental health and psychosocial support (emergencies)
- Other

Source: WHO, 2025 (2).

# Mental health resources

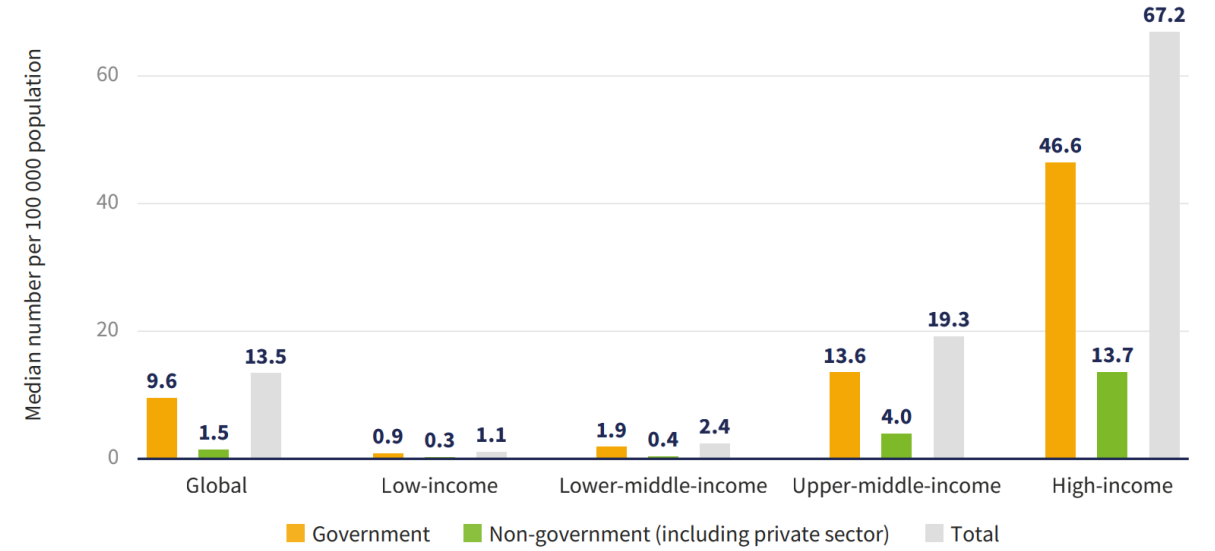
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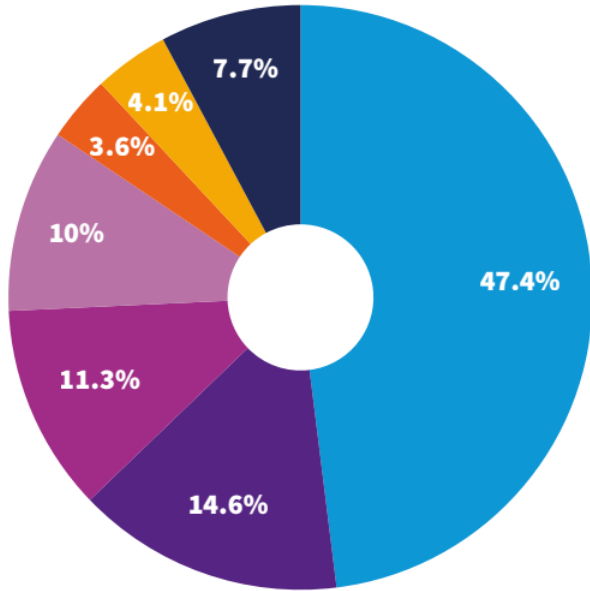
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## The specialized mental health workforce



# Mental health resources

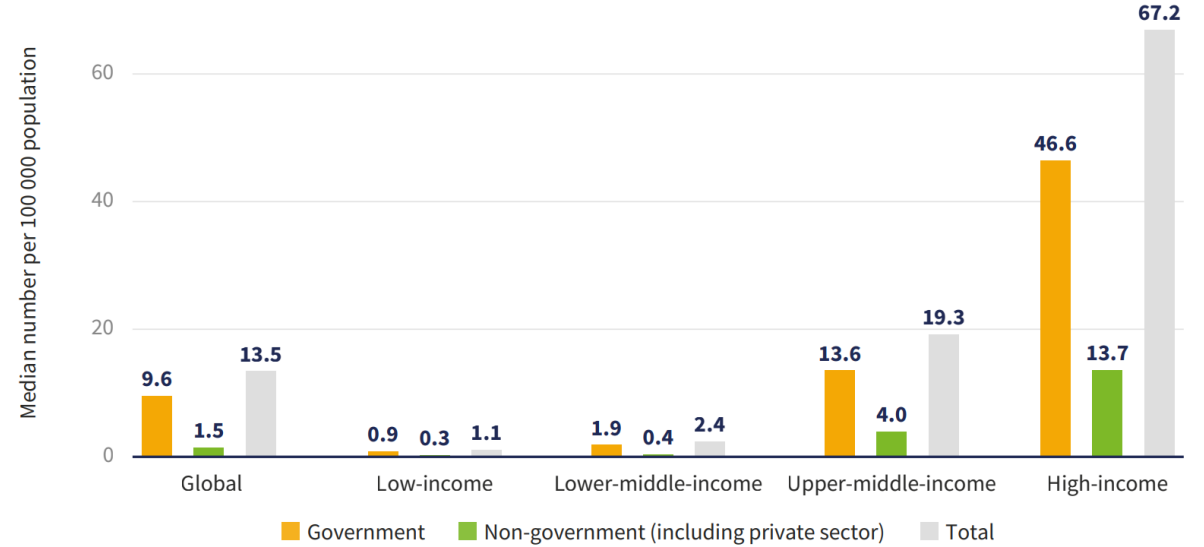
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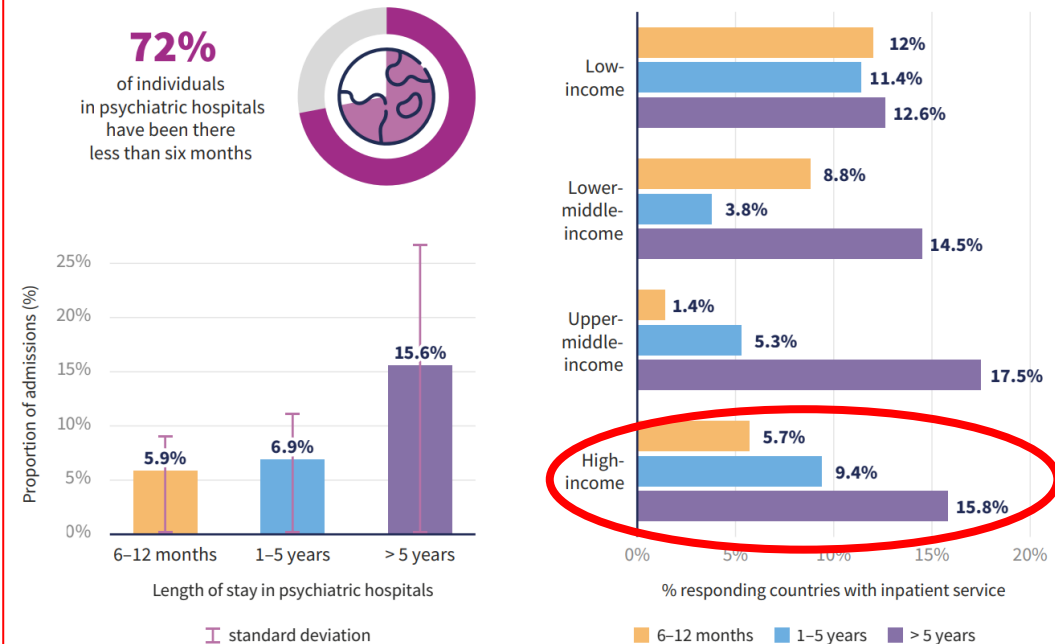
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## The specialized mental health workforce

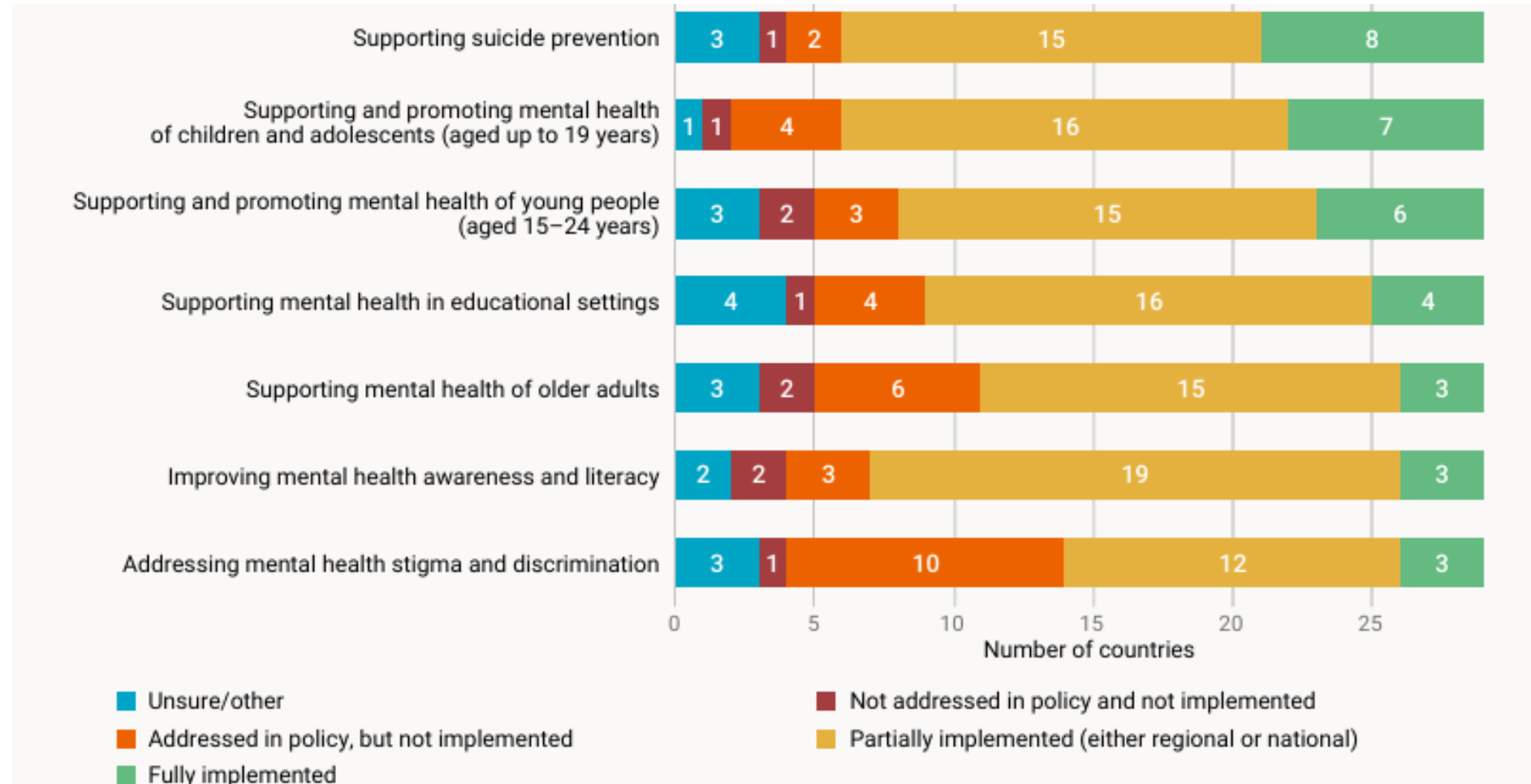


## Long stays in psychiatric hospitals (2024)





## Implementation status of policies in key areas of mental health promotion/prevention and resilience over the life-course



# Emerging concern: digital environments

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**1 in 10** adolescents show **problematic social media use** (up from 7% in 2017)

**16%** report recent **cyberbullying**

**Girls** report higher problematic social media use (**13% vs 9%**) and constant online connectivity (**44% of 15-year-old girls**)

**Boys** report higher problematic gaming risks (**16% vs 7%**)

**34%** game daily, **22%** playing 4 + hours



# Mental health and well-being of adolescents is in **decline** across multiple indicators

**Life satisfaction, self-rated health, and social support declined since 2018, while health complaints increased.**

Over **40%** of adolescents feel pressure from schoolwork.

**16%** of adolescents report being cyberbullied at least once or twice in the past 2 months.

**1 in 5** adolescents report a lack of support from either family or friends.

**1 in 4** girls at age 15 report feeling lonely.



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# Up to **1 in 3** older adults are socially isolated

- Higher risk of **dementia, Alzheimer's**, and memory problems from social disconnection.
- **Protective effects** of social connection on cognitive health.
- **Mixed effects** of online spaces depending on use:
  - **Positive:** useful for people with disabilities or those who can't leave home.
  - **Negative:** overuse and harmful online interactions.
- **Digital tools** like online therapy, chatbots, social media, and virtual reality are **increasingly used in interventions** (especially for isolated individuals).



## Stigma & discrimination

### in mental health:

a major barrier to advance policies, transform services, maximise investments

Most people living with a mental health condition consider the stigma associated with it to be **worse than the condition itself** -

*The Lancet Commission 2022*



**Globally...**

People with severe mental health conditions die

**10 to 20 years**

earlier than the general population.

Mental Health of Nurses and Doctors  
survey in the European Union, Iceland  
and Norway

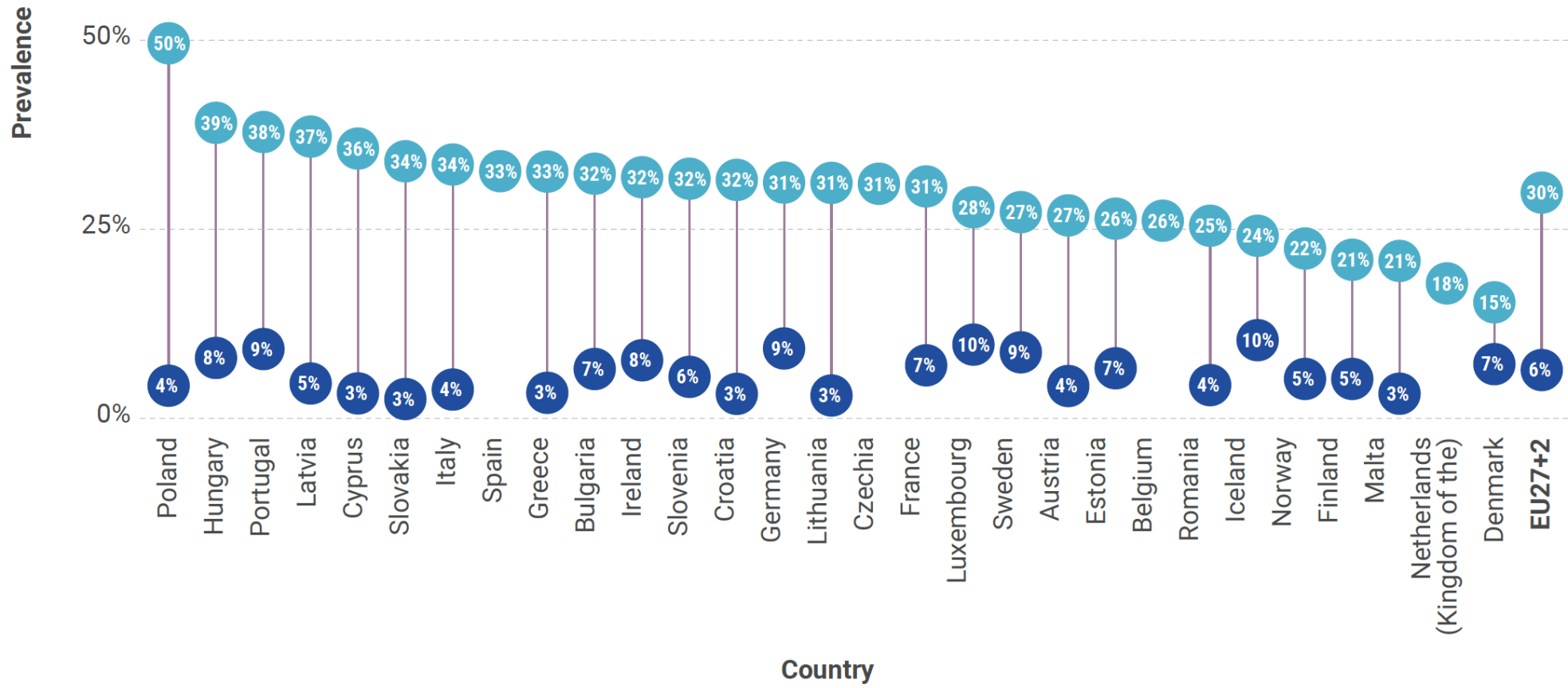
MOND

DOWNLOAD

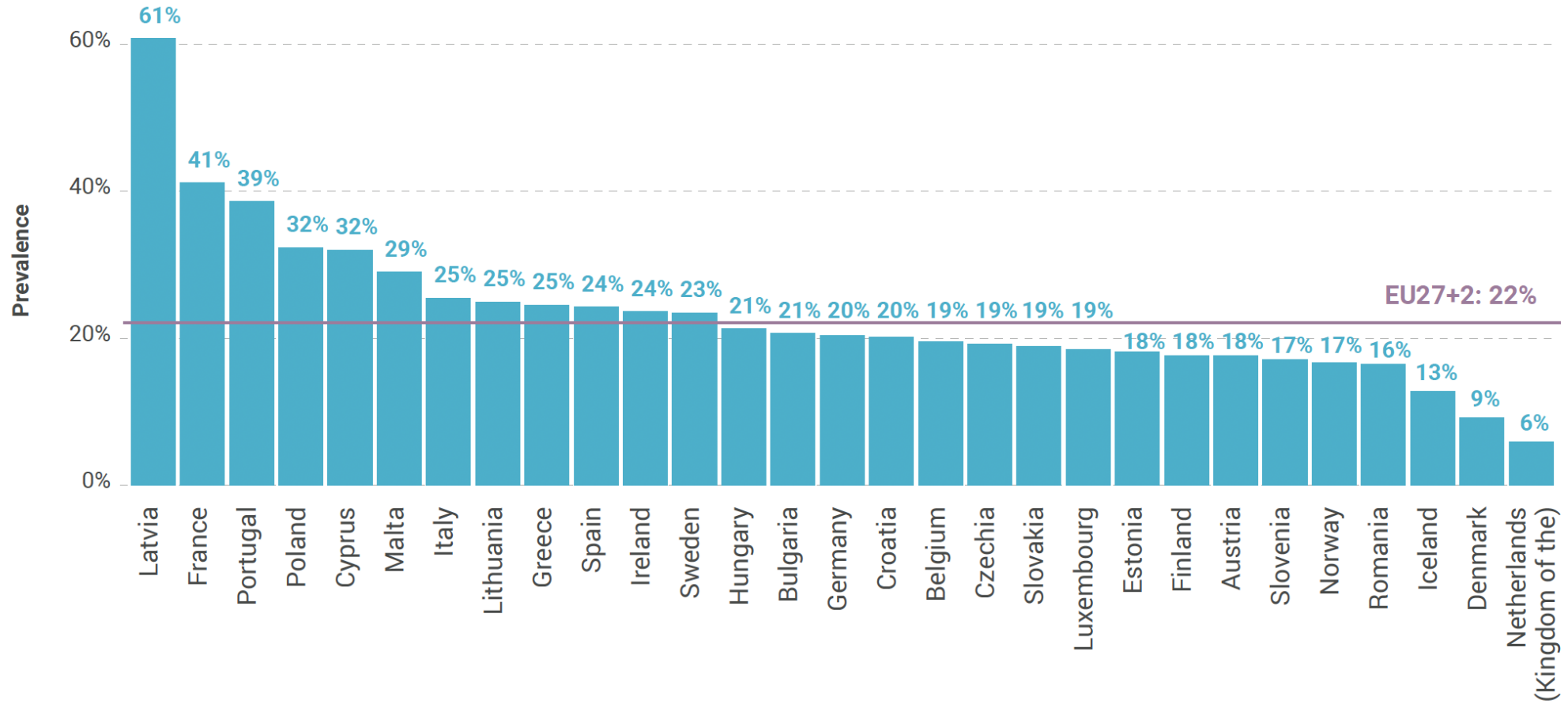
SCAN NOW



# 1 in 3 doctors and nurses report symptoms of depression



# 1 in 4 doctors and nurses report symptoms of anxiety





**Over 10% of doctors and nurses** report thoughts of ending their life or harming themselves

# Impact of peer support on the mental health of health workforce

Figure 43. Prevalence of mental health conditions, by perceived frequency of support from colleagues

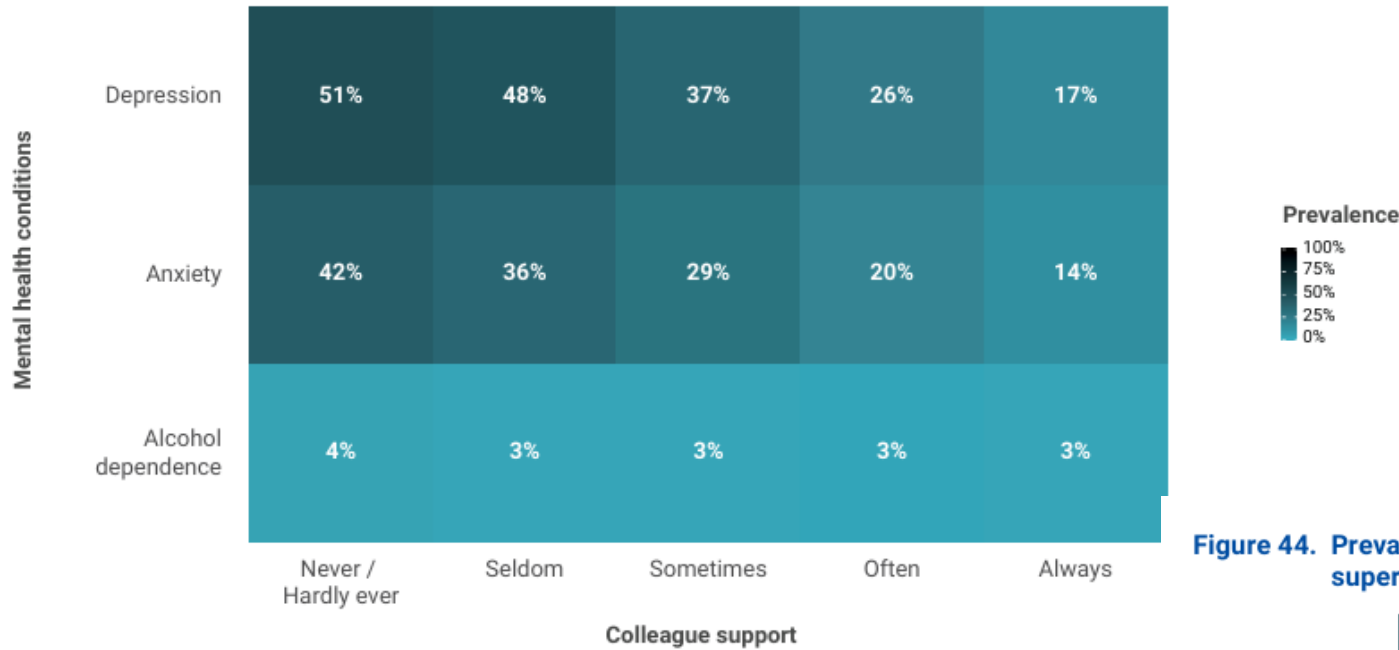
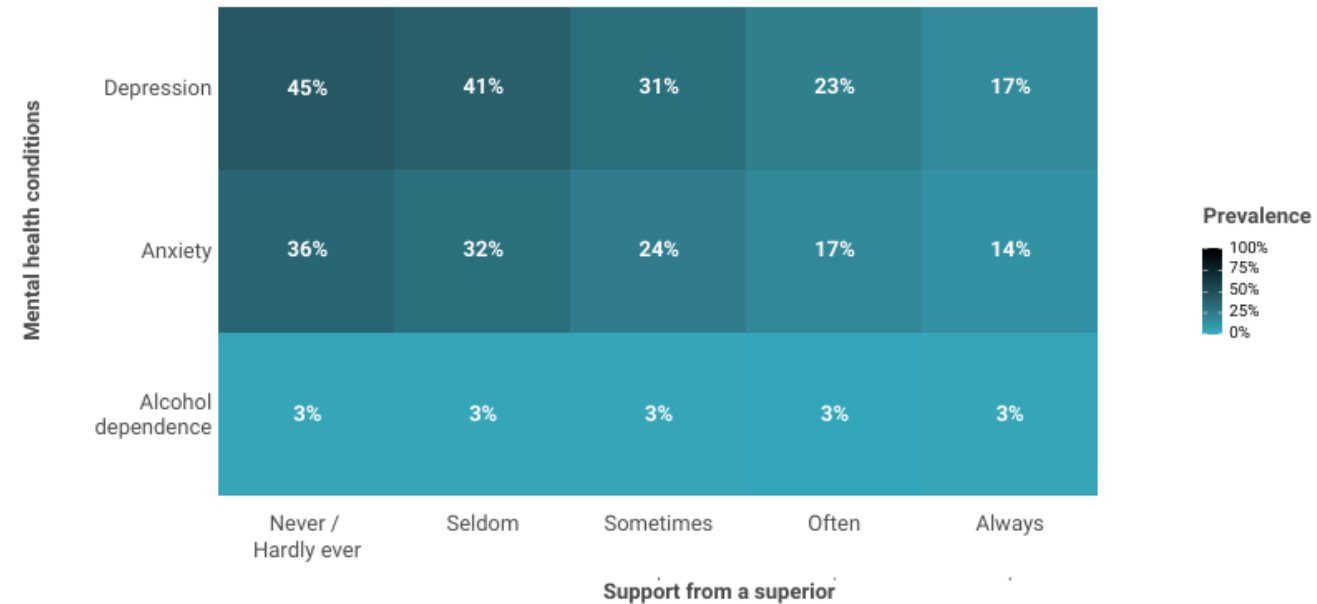


Figure 44. Prevalence of probable mental health conditions, by perceived frequency of support from superiors





## Five strategic areas to address loneliness

### Policy

Governments should develop, adopt, fund, implement and monitor a national policy, strategy or framework to promote social connection in which all sectors, including digital technology are involved.

Strengthen policy leadership.

Facilitate knowledge exchange.

### Research

Build global and national research capacity.

Identify and fund research priorities.

Launch a Grand Challenge initiative.

### Interventions

Develop guidance.

Launch an “intervention accelerator”.

Support implementation.

### Measurement and data

Strengthen national monitoring systems.

Develop a global index of social connection.

Collect data from as many countries as possible during the next decade.

### Engagement

Ensure that social connection is placed higher on global policy and political agendas, and build a coalition of governments and public champions.

Increase public awareness in coordinated campaigns and a unified global narrative.

Build a sustainable movement through multi-sectoral collaboration and dedicated funding.

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# Thank you!

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**World Health  
Organization**

European Region

