



# Mental Health: From individual stigma to societal issue

South America edition



# Introduction

South America is a large and diverse continent with great variation in human development and levels of peace and prosperity even within countries, giving rise to different mental health challenges and solutions. While the levels of political instability and economic uncertainties widely differ within the continent, they are stressors that can increase violence, further contributing to increased risks for mental disorders. Latin America has a rich history and diverse population with roots from around the world, including indigenous peoples and descendants of Europe and Africa. Strong cultural differences and socioeconomic disparities, even within the same city, are reflected in attitudes towards and access to mental health resources.

There are pronounced differences between countries in regard to resources and conditions conducive to mental health. Today, the Covid-19 crisis has played a major role in driving public awareness of mental health and raising it to a societal issue. In Peru, mental health is considered a right along with physical health, and community mental health centers exist around the country. In Venezuela, currently the country with the lowest GDP per capita in the continent, the contrast is stark. The World Federation for Mental Health declared a crisis in 2020, due to hospitals lacking necessary medication and basic supplies for their facilities even down to inadequate lighting. In addition, there are rising rates of depression, suicide, and addiction disorders in the general population.<sup>1</sup> In Colombia, studies have shown rapid short term improvements in mental health linked to de-escalation of conflicts and improved safety throughout all socioeconomic groups of the population observed without a marked increase in mental health resources.<sup>2</sup> Mental health is linked to the overall well-being in a country, yet access to mental health resources is generally more scarce in the countries which may need them the most.

Cultural expectations can also contribute to the willingness to ask for or accept help. People suffering from mental health issues may be reluctant to speak about them due to ongoing stigma that could affect not only them but their loved ones. Those who see their loved ones suffering are less likely to help them access resources until symptoms becoming dire or life-threatening. Additionally, people may struggle to speak about family-related stresses and conflicts, preferring not to discuss family matters with outsiders. The responsibility of keeping up the family name may constitute major stress in itself as well.<sup>3</sup>

These factors create a mental health landscape that varies greatly within South America, but awareness is shifting the stigma around mental health, pointing towards a brighter future. In this publication, views from Brazil, Chile, and Peru will show how mental health interventions by both government and private actors are helping to shift the conversation around mental health from stigma to a societal issue.

<sup>1</sup> <https://wfmh.global/wfmh-declaration-on-the-mental-health-crisis-in-venezuela/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://equityhealthj.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-021-01381-x>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/mental-health-stigma-in-latin-america#combatting-it>



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# Mental health in Brazil: current challenges and opportunities

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**By Michael Kapps**

Brazil currently has some of the highest rates of mental disorders in the world. We are the most anxious country in the world, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>4</sup>: 9.3% of the population suffers from this condition. For depression, the percentage is 5.8%<sup>5</sup>, the fifth highest in the world. Between 2003 and 2019, the number of cases grew by 34.2%<sup>6</sup>. In addition, 86% of Brazilians face some type of mental health disorder, such as depression, anxiety and others<sup>7</sup>.

Sleep, an important factor in maintaining good mental health, is a problem for most. A study conducted across the country showed that 65% of people have poor quality sleep<sup>8</sup>. However, only 7% seek professional help to deal with the problem.

During the pandemic, this scenario worsened. For 53% of Brazilians<sup>9</sup> mental health disorders increased during this period. The Federal University of Rio de Janeiro identified an increase of 80% in cases of stress and anxiety since covid-19 spread throughout Brazil and the world<sup>10</sup>.

## What's putting Brazilians' mental health at risk?

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What are the causes of this phenomenon? Why does Brazil have such high rates of mental health disorders? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to the problem. There are, however, some clues.

First, there is still a great stigma regarding mental health in Brazil, which prevents a large part of the population from seeking information and treatment. Earlier this year, the Enem, an entrance exam used in several public universities, asked candidates to write an essay on the stigma of mental health disorders in Brazil<sup>11</sup>. This shows how current and urgent the topic is.

There is also a lack of government programs to deal with the issue<sup>12</sup>, especially in the prevention of disorders. According to WHO, Brazil should invest more in training professionals and in educating the population<sup>13</sup>. Even those who do not use public services and have private health insurance find it difficult to access treatment. Insurance companies don't cover most of the costs (when they cover anything at all). The costs of therapy sessions can be very high, costing more than one minimum wage per month.

## Social equity and inclusion issues are a key risk factor

Considering that Brazil is a highly unequal country, this problem becomes even more profound. Economic uncertainties, high unemployment, and lack of political stability cause great stress on citizens. An unstable scenario also increases the rates of violence in the city and in the countryside, which increases risk for mental disorders.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://veja.abril.com.br/saude/pesquisa-indica-que-86-dos-brasileiros-tem-algum-transtorno-mental/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-56726583>

<sup>6</sup> <https://falarinspiravida.com.br/assets/files/guia-depressao-como-acolher-no-ambiente-de-trabalho-falar-inspira-vida.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://veja.abril.com.br/saude/pesquisa-indica-que-86-dos-brasileiros-tem-algum-transtorno-mental/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://summitsaude.estadao.com.br/saude-humanizada/65-dos-brasileiros-tem-low-quality-de-sono/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/geral-56726583>

<sup>10</sup> <https://falarinspiravida.com.br/assets/files/guia-depressao-como-acolher-no-ambiente-de-trabalho-falar-inspira-vida.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/saude/2021/01/18/psicofobia-os-estigmas-sobre-mental-health-e-medicines>

<sup>12</sup> <https://hospitalsantamonica.com.br/um-panorama-sobre-a-saude-mental-no-brasil/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.paho.org/pt/noticias/6-6-2018-saude-mental-e-necessario-aumentar-recursos-em-todo-mundo-para-atingir-metas>

Traditionally vulnerable groups, such as the LGBTQIAP+ community, face even more adverse conditions overall, and the same is true in terms of their mental health. Surveys reveal<sup>14</sup> that young people rejected by their family for their sexual orientation are 8.4 times more likely to die by suicide. When we consider only gay, lesbian and bisexual people, the chances of suicide are five times greater than in heterosexual people.

In Brazil, members of the LGBTQIAP+ community find it very difficult to integrate into society, especially in terms of employment opportunities. And once employed, many times they do not have access to leadership positions. A small portion (13%) occupy board or C-level positions. The majority (54%) are in entry positions, such as assistant or intern. In the view of 82% of people who identify themselves as part of the LGBTQIAP+ community, employers still have a lot to do to make them feel welcome, with only a third (32%) saying they feel welcomed in their workplace<sup>15</sup>. Being a welcoming environment can make the difference for these professionals to feel more at ease, as 66% believe<sup>16</sup> that revealing their identity can be harmful to their careers.

## How can we improve mental health across all segments of society?

Offering therapy, whether remote or in person, is just a small part of the solution and not enough to resolve the underlying social issues driving mental disorders. It is necessary to educate the members of the workforce and fight stigma, something that we at my company, Vitalk, have perfected through immersive digital communication campaigns with our clients. We provide e-books, webinars, courses and email communications to engage people and create awareness around the topic of mental health.

### The importance of leaders

Involving leadership is also critical. Researchers like Amy Edmondson have shown the importance of having a psychologically safe work environment. Being able to speak openly and freely without fear of punishment or ridicule creates better decision-making and promotes good interpersonal and group relationships. Edmondson

warns us, however, that creating this security is not easy, and leaders need to be an active part of changing the way we think.

Therefore, leaders are central to the creation of mental health policies, actions and strategies within companies. A survey we did in partnership with MindMiners<sup>17</sup> with over 600 employees in Brazil showed that 83.1% of respondents are not comfortable talking about mental health at work. When they do happen, these conversations are with colleagues from other areas (22%), the team itself (18.9%) and, finally, with the leadership (16.9%).

In 2021, Vitalk created an award with the support of 19 companies to recognize inspiring, humane and welcoming leaders. Of the thousand participants, we selected 30 candidates that stood out for their originality, in addition to aspects such as emotional intelligence, communication, autonomy and psychological safety in their leadership stories. This is one step to help form a new generation of leaders that prioritize mental health.

Finally, we believe that Vitalk's approach is effective due, in part, to the application of digital technologies to mental health and social issues. This allows us to tackle difficult and sensitive issues on a large scale. Our mobile app and web portal, which feature an AI-powered mental healthcare assistant, have been used by hundreds of thousands of Brazilians (in the corporate environment and beyond). Our research has even shown<sup>18</sup> that certain mental health symptoms can be reduced by up to 30% after using the Vitalk app for 6 weeks.

## A step forward: Workplace digital solutions

It is clear that taking care of mental health in Brazil also involves dealing with social problems and existing stigmas. A good starting point is the work environment, where leaders must be able to plan, execute and supervise proactive corporate policies to combat mental health issues, and where employees can be educated and engaged in breaking deeply ingrained stigmas. To make the treatment more accessible and reduce barriers to its use, we have also shown that digital-led tools are highly effective in resource constrained settings such as Brazil. They can reach people who cannot afford expensive services, democratizing mental health care.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.politize.com.br/lgbtfobia-brasil-fatos-numeros-polemicas/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/economia/concursos-e-emprego/noticia/2019/06/25/metade-dos-profissionais-lgbt-assumiu-orientacao-sexual-no-trabalho-diz-pesquisa.ghtml>

<sup>16</sup> <https://exame.com/carreira/para-66-dos-profissionais-lgbt-se-assumir-pode-prejudicar-a-carreira/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.vitalk.com.br/blog/pesquisa-realizada-pela-vitalk-em-parceria-com-a-mind-miners-mostra-que-leaders-have-direct-influence-on-collaborators-well-being/>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fdgth.2020.576361/full?utm\\_campaign=gupy\\_vitalk\\_na\\_midia&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=RD+Station](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fdgth.2020.576361/full?utm_campaign=gupy_vitalk_na_midia&utm_medium=email&utm_source=RD+Station)

# Chile: Understanding the mental health landscape

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**Based on contributions  
from Roberto Gatica,  
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The main mental health problems in Chile right now are stress and symptoms of depression, especially due to the pandemic and quarantine issues. It is estimated that more than 30% of the population suffers some symptom associated with mental health problems, which correlate to a great extent with the work and economic situation of each person. The detection of suspicion or presence of problems was 50% among the unemployed, with a proportion of 39% among those who are inactive at work (technically not unemployed, but not part of the labor force) and 29.6% among those who are working. This, in a context in which the country's unemployment rates, according to the latest official figures, continue to be above double digits. The pandemic and lockdowns have only exacerbated the mental health difficulties in the country.

## Access to mental healthcare

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The private insurance companies: In the case of private insurers, they do not have specific programs, but there is coverage for mental health pathologies, although in general they are low amount of coverage. The same happens with the insurance companies, which provide coverage but with limited amounts of UF 20-25 (approximately 625 EUR) per year in the complementary health plans. Since the public health system was not able to deal with the demands of the pandemic, private psychologist consultations have increased. For those with fewer resources, less resilience and lower educational level, access to mental health resources remains expensive- health plans do not deliver a high level of coverage, so the patient must finance a significant part of the costs.

The context of the pandemic makes interpreting the data around mental health very important. Psychological consultations and disability claims have not had a large increase in the last year, influenced in a very important way by the quarantines we have had in the country. However, prior to the pandemic, mental health claims in general had increased and it is expected that once the quarantines are over there will be a significant increase for all those cases that were postponed during that period.

## Reduced stigma

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Nowadays it is no longer viewed with the level of stigma that it was a few years ago. This is influenced by the considerable increase in the number of people who present this type of problem and therefore, it is no longer something that only a few present and that should therefore be "hidden". However, before the pandemic, support systems for the treatment of mental health were scarce in the country, with many exclusions for coverage in private insurance plans. Nowadays, with the pandemic, these mental health problems have increased which has given rise to public aimed at improve the mental health of people as a whole suffering from the same problems, especially to help people better cope with isolation.

## Helping vulnerable populations cope with mental health issues

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In Chile, issues around around social inequality in general, and in particular, in the treatment of general illnesses and mental health, has been of great importance in recent times. Support programs have been implemented to help people in difficult situations cope. For example, monthly vouchers have been given to families to help them cope with isolation. In addition, telephone support lines have been created for people suffering from violence, with addiction problems, women facing unplanned pregnancies, and for other issues. These hotlines are intended to provide support and counselling.

## Responding to the pandemic

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To cope with this pandemic period, the government launched a program to support mental health (a platform called "SaludableMente" was generated). This program aims to strengthen, in the public and private sectors, mental health treatment. It aims to strengthen the Salud Responde support network, establish care operations in primary care family health centers and the installation of a platform where Fonasa beneficiaries can schedule psychological or psychiatric consultations free of charge.

Additionally, private organizations such as the Chilean Security Association and some universities conduct surveys to determine the state of mental health in Chile.

Companies are also launching internal campaigns to maintain physical activity, stay connected by phone or Internet with family and friends and maintain a healthy diet.



# Peru: Interview with Hector Daniel Collantes, Head of Automatic Reinsurance, Health & Life, RIMAC

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## **What are the main current mental health problems identified in your country?**

According to the digital screening conducted by Minsa and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the results of the pandemic were as follows: 60% of Peruvians have emotional distress related to some mental illness, 55% had sleeping problems, 42.8% appetite problems, 44% presented tiredness or fatigue, 35% had concentration problems and 13% suicidal thoughts or ideation. Four out of 10 had symptoms associated with severe depression. To all this we must add 2 mental health problems that have been intensified by the COVID context we have experienced in the last year, stress or anxiety, associated with life changes and quarantine, and bereavement, due to the loss of loved ones in very complicated situations and without a traditional farewell.

## **Tell us about different actors working in the mental health arena:**

### **The government:**

- The Ministry of Health provides mental health care, nationwide, through the Community Mental Health Centers, which follows the national mental health policy in the country through the Mental Health Law (Law No. 30947).
- To address the COVID-19 challenge, the government has promoted the Mental Health Plan Covid 2021 and the Campaign “Healthy Coexistence”, both aim to strengthen the care and self-care of mental health in the population, which will allow them to have emotional support to cope with periods of stress, anxiety and depression generated by COVID-19.

### **Private insurers:**

Insurance companies play a fundamental role in the promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of mental health disorders in the population. We must bear in mind that the main mental health diagnoses such as depression, anxiety, alcoholism and schizophrenia are considered by the Peruvian Mental Health Law (Law No. 30947) as diagnoses of mandatory coverage and the insurers guarantee the same.

For this reason, insurance companies have generally created a network of services to guarantee accessibility to these treatments and have focused on strengthening prevention with a series of strategies that allow early identification of these diagnoses. They even make use of digital media and teleconsultations to promote mental health support for patients and their families affected by this pandemic.

All EPS health plans include care for diagnoses related to mental illnesses that are part of the PEAS (Essential Health Insurance Plan), which are anxiety, schizophrenia, alcoholism and depression. This coverage includes both psychological and psychiatric care, and covers medical consultations, hospitalizations and medications.

## **Are they any other important actors?**

According to a Marsh survey of companies in 2018, among the companies that have decided to take measures addressing mental health, 65% have been implementing virtual talks on stress and anxiety management, while 61% send relaxation tips. Likewise, 52% have developed a communication plan to accompany these activities. In addition, occupational health strategies have been implemented to identify mental health problems.

## **How do mental health problems affect your country's society as a whole?**

According to reports from the Ministry of Health, anxiety disorders and depression increased by 40% compared to the beginning of the pandemic. However, this is not reflected in the increase of care from the health plans, in 2020 there were approximately 500 psychological and psychiatric consultations (out of a total of approximately 450 thousand affiliates). In addition, what we have noticed is an increase in the services of psychological accompaniment via digital and teleconsultation, which has allowed us to get a little closer to the people, taking into account the context in which we now live.

## **To what extent, if at all, is mental health seen as an individual stigma as opposed to a social problem?**

An interesting situation occurs in this area- health plans include coverage for the main mental health disorders, however few claims are registered throughout the year, and this situation is due to multiple factors such as: the stigma that exists for mental disorders, not wanting to have

records of mental illnesses in the insurance and little knowledge of the coverage of the health plan. The main pillar for the management of disorders is correct and timely information, without which it will be difficult to achieve adequate management of the population's mental health.

### **What are some of the trends you have observed for mental health challenges and potential accessibility issues for vulnerable groups, and how can companies support them?**

Mental health problems can affect anyone, regardless of age, social status or gender. This pandemic has pushed everyone to the limit and has exposed the lack of a comprehensive mental health program in the country, as well as a correct dissemination of information that would allow us to carry out significant prevention. The most exposed vulnerable groups are chronic patients, the elderly and the obese. However, traditional vulnerable groups have also been affected and access to mental health is still scarce. Companies have become aware of diversity and have been adapting their organizational culture to accommodate these groups and intensify prevention among them.

### **In your opinion, what role should companies play in addressing mental health challenges in your country?**

The management of mental health involves several actors, not only the patient, but also his or her family and environment, and that is where companies play a fundamental role in generating optimal mental health, promoting prevention and early identification of cases and supporting their workers with timely interventions. Companies must ensure healthy workplaces that prioritize the health of workers, including mental health. This is why they become strategic partners in combating these silent diseases that undermine the productivity of companies.

### **What are some of the best practices in your country that have been adopted to improve mental health issues and that could serve to inspire mental health actors elsewhere?**

We believe that the best practices of Peru include:

- The implementation of the Mental Health Law (Law No. 30947) which is responsible for monitoring the national mental health policy. This regulation seeks to contribute to the welfare of workers, and in turn will allow them to develop in the best possible way, in appropriate working conditions.
- Mental health care, provided by MINSA throughout the country, with specialized and multidisciplinary professionals, focused on the recovery of the person.
- The inclusive policies in mental health which address care of addictions of adolescents and women, and now to the LGTB population, promoted by the Health Ministry, which makes Peru a reference for other countries.





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A limited liability company (“Société anonyme”)  
governed by French law, with a share capital of 487 725 073,50 euros  
which the registered office is at 313 Terrasses de l’Arche, 92 727 Nanterre Cedex, France,  
registered under the number 310 499 959 R.C.S. Nanterre