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Poverty, depression, and anxiety: Causal evidence and mechanisms

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RE:

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Complexity of mental health in low-income countries and the potential of digital interventions

In "Poverty, depression, and anxiety: Causal evidence and mechanisms", Ridley et al. highlight the mechanisms that interrelate common mental health conditions and poverty (1). They identify priorities in studying the effect of mental health interventions on economic outcomes (and vice-versa), dismantling poverty traps, and increasing technology utilization to train healthcare providers and reduce stigma. Two additional points may further advance their agenda.

Systems often show "archetypes" like the systemic trap identified in this review (2). By analyzing the co-evolution of depression, anxiety and poverty, the authors recognize the need for holistic interventions as a way out. This systems-dynamics lens must be extended across the level of analysis: the factors affecting mental health and poverty don't act in isolation; they interact. Thus, they are also prone to these archetypes (e.g., goal erosion, success to the successful, escalation, and addiction). Mapping the interaction structures between the factors will pinpoint new traps and indicate consequent integrated targets for accessible interventions (2).

Secondly, of the people living in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs), 80% possess a mobile phone and internet use increases rapidly (3, 4). Therefore, digital interventions have great potential for upscaling treatment, not only to train healthcare providers and reduce stigma, as the authors mention, but also as treatment for individuals suffering from mental health conditions. Even more so at times of increasing mental health problems as well as social distancing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (5). A meta-analysis

demonstrated that digital interventions (including automatized interventions), are effective in LMICs in treating most common mental health conditions (6), with promising effects for low socioeconomic status groups (7).

Altogether, accounting for the complexity of mental health in the socioeconomic context and acknowledging the potential of digital interventions to reach underserved populations may further advance the commendable effort to improve mental health globally.

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