

# World mental health on a tightrope: evidence, practice, policy and *BJPsych International*

Marinos Kyriakopoulos 

Assistant Professor in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, School of Medicine, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece. Email: [mkyriakop@med.uoa.gr](mailto:mkyriakop@med.uoa.gr)

First received 27 Feb 2024  
Accepted 27 Feb 2024

doi:10.1192/bji.2024.6

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal College of Psychiatrists. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Taking over from David Skuse as editor of *BJPsych International* is both a privilege and a big task. David has steered the journal into the digital age, transformed its content, broadened its reach and expanded its online presence. He oversaw the journal being indexed in PubMed, which has been a milestone contributing to its growth. In the past decade, under David's leadership, *BJPsych International* has gone from strength to strength and developed as a widely accessible platform for best practice and policy in mental health. I have learned a lot from David, from my first steps in 2012 as a member of the editorial board of the journal (then called *International Psychiatry*) to associate and deputy editorships later. I am very pleased he has agreed to remain on our editorial board alongside the group of amazing expert colleagues who supported *BJPsych International* in different roles over the years. Within the *BJPsych* publications family, our journal has a unique part to play in sharing, promoting and shaping excellence in mental health practice across all countries and cultural contexts.

## Mental health around the world

Mental health is increasingly being recognised as a major public health priority. Mental disorders are highly prevalent worldwide and constitute the leading cause of years lived with disability, as well as being major drivers of excess morbidity and mortality.<sup>1</sup> The economic costs associated with them, both directly and indirectly, are also exceptionally high. Despite this, underfunding of services and commissioning of suboptimal services are the rule rather than the exception. Several global initiatives, most notably the Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030 by the World Health Organization, aspire to address this through forming systems where promotion of mental health, prevention of and recovery from mental disorders, and development of high-quality culturally appropriate interventions are enabled.<sup>2</sup> Effective leadership and universal, comprehensive, multisectoral, integrated and responsive evidence-based services are paramount for this aim to be achieved. This cannot materialise without the involvement of patients and commitment to safeguarding and respect of human rights every step of the way, from research to policy implementation.

However, despite some positive steps in this direction, there is still a considerable distance to go. Mental health systems in most countries are

lacking the governance and resources to provide for all those in need, resulting in major gaps in service quality and coverage. Competing demands with physical healthcare often find mental healthcare disadvantaged. On average, countries dedicate less than 2% of their healthcare budgets to mental health, with related practices being more affected in low- and middle-income countries. More than 70% of health funds support psychiatric hospitals in middle-income countries, whereas in low-income countries, not enough psychiatrists or psychotropic medicines are available.<sup>1</sup> Poor mental health literacy and associated stigma are further barriers to accessing existing services. Research from low- and middle-income countries is scarce, which is an impediment to the advancement of a culturally relevant evidence base and driving policy.

## Mission and aims of *BJPsych International*

In this context, *BJPsych International* strives to bridge a knowledge gap by providing an overview of current policy and practice in psychiatry – and, more widely, mental health – in countries around the world and fostering the implementation of evidence-based approaches. This is facilitated by an editorial board of academics and senior clinicians from all continents, and through its range of content, including different types of article. Special Papers and Thematic Papers deal with the policy and promotion of mental health, the administration and management of mental health services, worldwide training in psychiatry, and knowledge and best practice from low- and middle-income countries through examination of the relationships among culture, mental health and well-being. Country Profiles provide summary information on mental health policy, services, training and research in a specific country. Mental Health Law Profiles summarise national or regional mental health law, including recent developments, and give commentaries on its application and the monitoring of standards in practice. Editorials provide an expert introduction, or an informed summary of published articles. Global Echoes focus on international mental health work and include brief literature reviews on mental health policy or services, reports of elective projects in psychiatry, or other experiences or challenges of working or volunteering in different countries. Finally,

Pandora's Box highlights research findings, news and matters of interest from around the world. Most of these article types are relatively brief, typically up to 1500 words with up to 12 references. In addition to printed content, *BJPsych International* has increased its online visibility through the creation of videos and podcasts (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-international/videos-and-podcasts#videos>) and its popular arts blog *Muses* (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/blog/tag/muses-the-arts-blog/>).

The time has now come for *BJPsych International* to expand into publishing original research and systematic reviews and meta-analyses, directly contributing to building an evidence base for good practice and policy worldwide, with a special focus on countries that have historically contributed little to the international scientific literature. It has been recognised that a significant increase in the word count for these papers would be necessary in order for the journal to attract top-quality submissions. To that end, two new article types will be introduced: Original Articles, up to 4000 words with up to 40 essential references; and Reviews, up to 6000 words with up to 150 essential references. Together with the fact that *BJPsych International* is open access, not charging a publication fee to the authors of accepted papers or to its readers, this will further elevate the journal to a key

publication in the field of international psychiatry and mental health, facilitating cross-fertilisation without barriers across all cultures and continents.

## Summary

Capitalising on its strengths, *BJPsych International* continues its exciting journey of growth and development. With a prominent online presence, a large readership, clinically relevant content and a high commitment to making a difference, the journal is placed in an excellent position to serve its mission. The inclusion of original research and systematic reviews and meta-analyses will further advance its impact; we welcome submissions of such papers from around the world!

## Declaration of interest

M.K. is Editor in Chief of *BJPsych International*.

## References

- 1 World Health Organization. *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*. WHO, 2022 (<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356119/9789240049338-eng.pdf?sequence=1>) [cited 17 Feb 2024].
- 2 World Health Organization. *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030*. WHO, 2021 (<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/345301/9789240031029-eng.pdf?sequence=1>) [cited 17 Feb 2024].

SPECIAL  
PAPER

# The development of the Helping your Anxious Child programme: a parent-mediated group intervention for parents of autistic children in South Asia

Caitlin Kittridge,<sup>1</sup> Priyanka Rob,<sup>2</sup> Amy Fisher-Rogers,<sup>3</sup> Tarana Anis,<sup>4</sup> Udena Attygalle,<sup>5</sup> Farzana Islam,<sup>6</sup> Aditya Narain Sharma<sup>7</sup> and Jacqui Rodgers<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Assistant, School of Psychology, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

<sup>2</sup>Research Assistant, School of Psychology, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

<sup>3</sup>Research Assistant, School of Psychology, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

<sup>4</sup>Senior Child Psychologist, Child Development Centre, Evercare Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>5</sup>Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Sirimavo Bandaranayake Children's Hospital, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

<sup>6</sup>Specialist, Child Development Centre, Evercare Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Autistic children are at increased risk of experiencing a range of mental health difficulties, including anxiety. A number of intervention programmes are now available in high-income countries to support autistic children. However, to date there are no evidence-based interventions to support families of such children in South Asia. Based on consultations with clinicians, researchers and parents in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, we developed a culturally tailored two-session skills-based group programme for parents whose autistic children present with anxiety. This paper describes the process of creating this programme, to be delivered by mental health professionals.**

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterised by difficulties with social communication and social interaction, and restrictive and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities. Autistic children are at increased risk of experiencing a range of mental health difficulties, including anxiety, which has been found to affect around 40%.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety can have a negative impact on a child's social development<sup>2</sup> and academic attainment.<sup>3</sup>

A number of parent-led cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) programmes for typically developing children experiencing anxiety are available<sup>4</sup> and in recent years programmes have been developed in high-income countries to address anxiety in autistic children (for a recent review see<sup>5</sup>).