

EXPLORING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS IN TÜRKIYE AND EUROPE

1. Overview of Mental Health in Türkiye and Europe

Mental health has emerged as a significant public health issue in both Türkiye and Europe, with growing recognition of its impact on the overall well-being of individuals and societies. Mental health, broadly defined, refers to an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing how they think, feel, and behave in daily life. In recent years, the importance of mental health has gained unprecedented attention due to the increasing prevalence of mental health disorders, particularly among youth, who are more vulnerable to the pressures of modern society.

In Türkiye, mental health has been a relatively under-discussed topic in the public sphere until recent years, where growing awareness, advocacy efforts, and government initiatives have started to address the gap in mental health services. The country's rapid socio-economic changes, combined with a growing population of young people, have placed mental health at the forefront of health concerns. Youth in Türkiye face unique challenges, including navigating between traditional values and modern pressures, managing expectations from family, education, and employment, and grappling with socio-political issues such as unemployment and economic instability.

On the European front, mental health services are generally more advanced, with many countries having established mental health policies and infrastructure. The European Union (EU) has recognised mental health as a key public health priority, leading to the development of frameworks that promote mental well-being, prevent mental illness, and ensure access to mental health services. However, European countries still face disparities in service provision, accessibility, and public awareness.

Mental Health Definitions and Global Context

Globally, mental health has been defined and approached in various ways, but universally, it encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities. Mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities—it is an essential part of overall health.

In Türkiye, traditional views on mental health have historically been shaped by cultural, religious, and social norms, where psychological issues were often stigmatised or misunderstood. The term "mental health" itself is relatively new in the mainstream health discourse, with more emphasis previously placed on physical health. However, this has started to change in recent years, with increased media coverage, public health campaigns, and educational initiatives bringing mental health into the spotlight.

In Europe, mental health has been recognized as a critical component of public health policy for decades. European countries vary in their approaches to mental health, with northern and western European nations typically having more comprehensive mental health systems compared to southern and eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the European Union's mental health policies aim to create a unified approach to mental health, focusing on prevention, early intervention, and reducing the stigma associated with mental health disorders.

The global context of mental health has also been influenced by the rise of globalization, urbanization, and technological advancements, all of which have contributed to the changing nature of mental health issues. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, placing immense psychological pressure on populations worldwide and highlighting the importance of robust mental health systems. In this globalized world, mental health issues are increasingly recognized as not just individual problems but as societal and public health concerns requiring a collective response.

Importance of Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health is a critical component of societal well-being, as it affects not only the individuals involved but also the larger community. Adolescents and young adults are in a transitional phase of life, where they are developing their identities, making important life decisions, and laying the foundations for their future careers and relationships. Mental health problems during this period can have long-lasting effects, leading to lower educational attainment, employment challenges, and poorer quality of life. Early intervention in mental health problems during adolescence can prevent these issues from becoming more severe and chronic in adulthood.

In Türkiye, young people make up a significant proportion of the population. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), approximately 15 million young people, aged between 15 and 24, live in Türkiye, representing about 20% of the total population. This demographic has specific mental health needs, which are often shaped by the unique socio-cultural context of Türkiye. Youth in Türkiye are confronted with the pressure of achieving academic success, securing employment in a competitive job market, and navigating societal expectations around family and marriage. These pressures, combined with the rapid pace of modernization and urbanization, have contributed to rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among Turkish youth.

Similarly, youth across Europe face their own set of challenges. The European Youth Forum has highlighted mental health as one of the top concerns for young people in the region. Youth in Europe are affected by various factors, including educational pressures, job insecurity, housing instability, and the influence of social media. Moreover, issues such as climate change, political instability, and economic inequality have added to the mental burden faced by young people in Europe. The European Union has recognized the importance of addressing youth mental health, with initiatives such as the European Youth Strategy 2019-2027 emphasizing mental well-being as a key priority.

The importance of youth mental health extends beyond individual well-being. Mental health problems in youth can lead to social isolation, disengagement from education and employment, and increased risk of substance abuse and involvement in criminal activities. These issues, if left unaddressed, can have long-term consequences for society, contributing to cycles of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Therefore, investing in youth mental

health is not only a matter of supporting individual well-being but also a critical investment in the future of society.

The Role of Technology and Social Media in Youth Mental Health

The rise of technology, particularly social media, has had a profound impact on youth mental health. While technology can offer many benefits, such as increased access to information, social connection, and educational opportunities, it also presents significant risks. Studies have shown that excessive use of social media can contribute to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, particularly among young people.

In Türkiye, the use of social media has become ubiquitous, with young people spending significant amounts of time on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. While these platforms offer a means of self-expression and social connection, they also expose young people to cyberbullying, unrealistic expectations around body image and lifestyle, and a constant stream of information that can be overwhelming. Research conducted by the Turkish Ministry of Health has highlighted the negative impact of social media on mental health, particularly among adolescents, with a significant percentage reporting feelings of anxiety and depression related to their online activities.

In Europe, similar concerns have been raised about the impact of social media on youth mental health. The European Union has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting digital literacy and responsible use of technology among young people. However, the fast-paced nature of technological change means that policies and interventions often struggle to keep up with the evolving digital landscape.

Socioeconomic and Cultural Influences on Mental Health

Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in shaping mental health outcomes. In Türkiye, economic instability, high unemployment rates, and income inequality have contributed to rising levels of stress and anxiety among young people. The pressure to succeed academically and professionally is particularly acute in a country where youth unemployment rates have been persistently high. The Turkish education system, which places a strong emphasis on standardized testing, further exacerbates stress among students, with many young people feeling intense pressure to perform well in exams to secure a place at a prestigious university or find stable employment.

Culturally, mental health is still a stigmatized topic in many parts of Türkiye. Traditional values and societal expectations around gender, family, and success can create additional pressure for young people, particularly women, who may face conflicting demands around career and family life. The cultural reluctance to openly discuss mental health issues often prevents individuals from seeking help, contributing to the under-reporting of mental health problems and a lack of adequate support services.

In Europe, while cultural attitudes towards mental health vary between countries, there is generally a more open dialogue around mental health issues. European countries, particularly in northern and western Europe, have made significant strides in de-stigmatizing mental health and promoting mental well-being through public health campaigns, education, and policy initiatives. However, socioeconomic factors such as unemployment, housing instability, and income inequality continue to pose significant challenges to youth mental health in Europe.

2. Mental Health in Türkiye: Current State

Key Mental Health Challenges Facing Turkish Youth

Mental health challenges among Turkish youth have seen a dramatic rise in recent years, reflecting both global trends and specific local factors that contribute to the unique experience of mental health issues in Türkiye. Young people in Türkiye, much like their peers across the world, are contending with a range of psychological stressors, including academic pressures, job insecurity, socio-political turbulence, and the pervasive influence of social media. These challenges are further compounded by Türkiye's rapid modernization, which often leads to a conflict between traditional values and contemporary societal expectations.

According to a 2023 survey by the Global Health Service Monitor (Herkes İçin Sağlık Sunum), mental health has become one of the top health concerns in Türkiye, with nearly half of the population citing it as a critical issue. Stress, anxiety, and depression are among the most commonly reported mental health problems, particularly among the youth.

The intense focus on academic achievement in Türkiye's education system places immense pressure on young people. The national university entrance examination (YKS) is a particularly notable source of stress, as it is highly competitive and determines the future educational and career paths of students. The pressure to perform well in this exam often leads to anxiety, sleep disturbances, and, in severe cases, mental health disorders such as depression.

Beyond academic pressures, youth in Türkiye face significant socio-economic challenges. Türkiye's economy has been unstable in recent years, with high inflation rates, rising unemployment, and a growing wealth gap contributing to financial insecurity, particularly among young people. Youth unemployment rates have remained stubbornly high, with over 25% of young people aged 15-24 unemployed as of 2022. This economic insecurity not only affects young people's mental health but also their sense of self-worth and future outlook. Many young Turks report feeling hopeless about their economic prospects, which further exacerbates feelings of depression and anxiety.

In addition, Türkiye's rapidly changing social landscape plays a significant role in shaping the mental health challenges faced by young people. As the country becomes more urbanized and modernized, traditional values around family, gender roles, and success are increasingly coming into conflict with contemporary, globalized ideals. This cultural clash often leaves young people, especially those from conservative families or rural areas, feeling caught between two worlds, unsure of how to navigate their identities. This tension can lead to feelings of isolation, confusion, and psychological distress.

Trends and Statistics (2020-2023)

The mental health landscape for Turkish youth has evolved significantly over the past few years, with various trends emerging in relation to the types of mental health issues that are most prevalent, as well as the factors contributing to these issues. Data from recent years highlights the growing prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders, particularly among adolescents and young adults.

A study conducted by the Turkish Psychiatric Association in 2021 revealed that nearly 40% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have experienced symptoms of depression

at some point in their lives. This is consistent with findings from global surveys, which indicate a rising trend of depressive symptoms among youth worldwide. The study also found that anxiety disorders are highly prevalent among Turkish youth, with social anxiety being particularly common. Young people in Türkiye are often faced with the pressure to conform to societal expectations, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and social withdrawal.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated when discussing trends in youth mental health. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the mental well-being of young people, both globally and in Türkiye. Lockdowns, school closures, and the shift to online education disrupted the lives of millions of young people, leading to increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. A survey conducted by the Turkish Ministry of Health in 2021 found that over 60% of young people reported experiencing increased stress and anxiety during the pandemic, with many citing concerns about their education, future job prospects, and the health of their loved ones.

Moreover, Türkiye's economic challenges, including rising inflation and unemployment rates, have further contributed to the mental health burden on young people. The economic instability has led to increased financial insecurity among youth, many of whom struggle to find stable employment after completing their education. This economic stress, coupled with the high cost of living in urban areas, has left many young people feeling trapped in a cycle of uncertainty and anxiety.

Stress and Anxiety as Predominant Issues

Stress and anxiety have emerged as the predominant mental health issues among Turkish youth. The pressures of academic performance, the uncertainty of future employment, and the rapid pace of societal change are significant contributors to the high levels of stress experienced by young people in Türkiye.

The academic system in Türkiye is one of the primary sources of stress for young people. From an early age, students are taught that their future success hinges on their ability to excel academically. The high-stakes university entrance exam (YKS) is a particular source of anxiety for many students, as it determines whether they will gain admission to a prestigious university and, by extension, secure a stable career. The intense competition for limited spots in top universities exacerbates the pressure on students, leading to widespread anxiety and stress.

In addition to academic pressures, economic insecurity is a major source of anxiety for young people in Türkiye. The country's high unemployment rate, particularly among youth, has created a sense of hopelessness for many young people, who fear that they will not be able to find stable employment after completing their education. This economic uncertainty, combined with the rising cost of living, particularly in major cities such as Istanbul and Ankara, has left many young people feeling anxious about their financial futures.

Social anxiety is another common issue among Turkish youth. The pressure to conform to societal expectations around success, appearance, and behavior can lead to feelings of inadequacy and social isolation. This is particularly true for young women, who often face additional pressures related to gender roles and family expectations. Many young women in Türkiye report feeling torn between pursuing their career aspirations and fulfilling traditional

expectations around marriage and family life. This tension can lead to significant stress and anxiety, as they struggle to reconcile their personal ambitions with societal expectations.

Impact of Socioeconomic Factors (Unemployment, Poverty, Education)

Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in shaping the mental health outcomes of Turkish youth. The country's economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, rising inflation, and growing income inequality, have contributed to widespread financial insecurity among young people, which in turn affects their mental health.

Unemployment is one of the most significant socioeconomic factors affecting the mental health of Turkish youth. The youth unemployment rate in Türkiye has remained persistently high, with over 25% of young people aged 15-24 unemployed as of 2022. This economic instability has left many young people feeling hopeless about their future job prospects, which contributes to feelings of anxiety and depression. The pressure to find stable employment is particularly acute in a country where financial independence is highly valued, and many young people feel that their self-worth is tied to their ability to contribute financially to their families.

Poverty is another key socioeconomic factor affecting youth mental health in Türkiye. Young people from low-income families are more likely to experience mental health problems, as they are often faced with additional stressors such as financial insecurity, lack of access to quality education, and limited opportunities for social mobility. These stressors can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair, which contribute to the development of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Education is both a source of stress and a potential protective factor for youth mental health. While the pressure to perform well academically can contribute to stress and anxiety, access to quality education can also serve as a buffer against some of the socioeconomic challenges that young people face. Young people who have access to higher education and vocational training are more likely to find stable employment and achieve financial independence, which can improve their mental health outcomes. However, the education system in Türkiye is highly competitive, and the pressure to succeed can often outweigh the potential benefits of education.

3. The Mental Health Landscape in Europe

Comparative Overview: How Mental Health Challenges in Türkiye Align with Europe

Mental health challenges in Türkiye, particularly among youth, share similarities with those faced by young people across Europe. However, while both regions grapple with issues like stress, anxiety, and depression, the scale, cultural context, and the ways in which these issues are addressed can vary considerably. Understanding how Türkiye's mental health challenges align with Europe requires a deeper look into the commonalities, as well as the distinctions that shape mental health experiences on the two sides.

In both Türkiye and Europe, young people face growing psychological pressures driven by factors like academic stress, economic uncertainty, and societal changes. These pressures have only been amplified by the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education, employment, and social interactions. In Türkiye, rising economic challenges such as youth unemployment and inflation have exacerbated mental health problems, while in Europe, the youth population faces similar economic strains in addition to issues like housing insecurity and political instability in certain regions.

A key similarity between Türkiye and Europe is the rising prevalence of stress and anxiety among young people. Studies show that, across Europe, these conditions are often triggered by the pressures of modern life, including academic performance, job market uncertainties, and social comparison, particularly through social media. In Türkiye, these stressors are similarly pronounced, especially with the national university entrance exams and the economic instability affecting young people's career prospects.

Where the landscape diverges, however, is in the infrastructure available to address mental health. In Europe, mental health services are generally more accessible, with many countries offering universal healthcare that includes psychological support and treatment. The European Union (EU) has made strides in creating mental health frameworks that aim to prevent mental health issues and ensure access to care. In contrast, Türkiye's mental health infrastructure is still developing, with limited access to mental health professionals, especially in rural areas. This creates a disparity in the treatment and support available to young people in Türkiye compared to their European counterparts.

Despite these differences, both regions face the common challenge of stigma surrounding mental health. In many parts of Europe and Türkiye, cultural attitudes still discourage open discussions about mental health, and young people often feel shame or fear in seeking help. Addressing this stigma remains a shared goal for both regions as they work toward improving mental health outcomes.

Mental Health Trends Among European Youth

Across Europe, mental health problems among youth have been on the rise for several years. Studies conducted by the European Commission and the World Health Organization (WHO) suggest that anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders are the most common mental health issues affecting European youth. The European Youth Forum, a platform representing young people's interests, has identified mental health as a priority issue for the region, with calls for more robust support systems and preventative measures.

One of the most striking trends is the increase in the number of young people reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression. According to the European Commission's 2022 Youth Report, nearly 20% of European youth aged 15-24 report experiencing mental health problems. This percentage has been steadily rising, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and disruptions to education and employment.

Another notable trend is the growing awareness and reporting of mental health issues among young people. In countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, mental health is increasingly seen as an integral part of overall well-being, and there is greater openness about discussing psychological issues. Young people in these countries are more likely to seek help for mental health problems, thanks in part to well-established support networks and mental health campaigns. However, in southern and eastern European countries, there is still a significant stigma attached to mental health, which prevents many young people from seeking the care they need.

The rise of social media has also had a significant impact on youth mental health in Europe. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat create spaces for social interaction but also expose young people to cyberbullying, unrealistic body image expectations, and constant comparisons. A 2021 report by the European Parliament found that the excessive use of social media contributes to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression among European youth. This mirrors trends seen in Türkiye, where social media plays an increasingly prominent role in young people's lives.

Furthermore, there are disparities in mental health outcomes across different demographic groups in Europe. For example, young women are more likely to report experiencing anxiety and depression compared to young men, a trend also seen in Türkiye. Additionally, youth from low-income backgrounds, minority ethnic groups, and LGBTQ+ communities are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems, both in Europe and Türkiye. These groups often face additional stressors such as discrimination, financial insecurity, and social exclusion, which exacerbate mental health issues.

Policies and Programs Addressing Youth Mental Health in Europe

Europe has taken significant steps in recent years to address the mental health needs of its youth population. At the EU level, mental health is increasingly recognized as a key component of public health policy, and various initiatives have been launched to promote mental well-being and prevent mental illness among young people.

One of the most comprehensive policy frameworks is the **European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being**, launched in 2008. This pact encourages EU member states to take coordinated action on mental health, with a particular focus on promoting mental health in schools, workplaces, and communities. The pact emphasizes the importance of early intervention, reducing stigma, and ensuring access to mental health services for all citizens, including young people. Although the pact is voluntary, many EU countries have adopted its recommendations, leading to improvements in mental health care provision across the region.

In 2016, the **EU Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020** was extended, with a focus on integrating mental health into broader health and social policies. The action plan recognizes the social determinants of mental health and aims to address issues such as poverty,

unemployment, and social exclusion, which disproportionately affect young people. It also highlights the need for specialized mental health services for vulnerable groups, including migrants, refugees, and LGBTQ+ youth.

Many European countries have also developed their own national mental health strategies aimed at improving the mental health of young people. For example, **Finland's National Mental Health Strategy 2020-2030** focuses on prevention, early intervention, and ensuring access to mental health services for all citizens. The strategy also emphasizes the importance of mental health education in schools, with programs designed to teach young people about emotional regulation, coping mechanisms, and resilience.

In the UK, **mental health services for young people** have been significantly expanded in recent years. The **National Health Service (NHS)** has introduced a range of programs aimed at improving access to mental health care for children and adolescents. The **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)** provide support for young people with mental health problems, offering therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), counseling, and family support. In 2019, the UK government also launched the **Green Paper on Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision**, which aims to ensure that every school has a designated mental health lead by 2025.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Access to mental health services is still uneven across Europe, with young people in rural or economically disadvantaged areas often struggling to find the support they need. Moreover, the stigma associated with mental health problems continues to be a barrier to care in many European countries, particularly in southern and eastern Europe. As such, there is still a need for greater investment in mental health services, particularly for young people, and more concerted efforts to reduce stigma.

Best Practices from Europe That Can Be Applied in Türkiye

There are several best practices from Europe that could be adapted to improve the mental health landscape in Türkiye, particularly for youth. One of the key areas where Türkiye can benefit from European experience is in the integration of mental health into the education system. In many European countries, schools play a central role in promoting mental health, with mental health education incorporated into the curriculum and mental health services available on school grounds. This approach not only helps to reduce stigma but also ensures that young people can access support early, before mental health problems become more severe.

The **Youth Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) program**, which originated in Australia but has been widely adopted in Europe, is another model that could be adapted for Türkiye. MHFA trains teachers, youth workers, and other adults who work with young people to recognize the signs of mental health problems and provide initial support until professional help can be obtained. This program has been shown to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma, making it easier for young people to seek help.

In terms of mental health policy, Türkiye could benefit from adopting a national mental health strategy similar to those in place in countries like Finland, the UK, and the Netherlands. A national strategy would provide a coordinated framework for addressing mental health across different sectors, including health care, education, and social services. Such a strategy could also prioritize early intervention and prevention, ensuring that young people receive the support they need before mental health problems escalate.

Additionally, the **promotion of mental health awareness campaigns** is an area where Türkiye could draw inspiration from European countries. Campaigns like **Time to Change** in the UK and **MIND** in Germany have been successful in reducing stigma and encouraging open discussions about mental health. These campaigns often involve partnerships between government agencies, non-profit organizations, and the private sector, creating a broad base of support for mental health awareness.

4. Factors Contributing to Mental Health Issues in Türkiye

Social and Cultural Influences on Youth Mental Health

Mental health among Turkish youth is profoundly influenced by a complex interplay of social and cultural factors. Türkiye's unique position as a bridge between East and West creates a societal landscape where traditional values coexist and sometimes clash with modern, globalized ideals. This dynamic has significant implications for the mental well-being of young people, who often find themselves navigating conflicting expectations from family, community, and society at large.

Traditional Family Structures and Expectations

In Turkish culture, the family unit holds immense importance, and familial expectations can exert substantial pressure on young individuals. Families often have high aspirations for their children, emphasizing academic success, respectable careers, and adherence to cultural norms. This can lead to stress and anxiety as youth strive to meet these expectations.

For example, the pressure to excel in national examinations, such as the university entrance exam (YKS), can be overwhelming. Failure to achieve the desired results may lead to feelings of shame, disappointment, and fear of letting down one's family. This pressure is compounded by the competitive nature of the education system and the limited availability of spots in top universities.

Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

Gender roles in Türkiye, while evolving, still reflect traditional expectations in many regions. Young women may face pressure to conform to traditional roles related to marriage, family, and caregiving, even as they pursue education and careers. This can create internal conflicts and stress, as they balance personal aspirations with societal and familial expectations.

For young men, there is often an expectation to be the primary breadwinner and display traits of strength and stoicism. This can discourage them from expressing vulnerability or seeking help for mental health issues due to fear of appearing weak or unmanly.

Urbanization and Migration

Rapid urbanization has led to significant demographic shifts, with many young people moving from rural areas to urban centers in search of education and employment opportunities. This migration can result in social isolation, as individuals leave behind their support networks. Adapting to urban life brings new challenges, including cultural adjustments, financial pressures, and the loss of traditional community support, all of which can impact mental health.

Cultural Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

Stigma remains a significant barrier to addressing mental health issues in Türkiye. Mental illness is often misunderstood or viewed negatively, leading to discrimination and social exclusion. Many individuals hesitate to seek help due to fear of being labeled or ostracized.

This stigma is deeply rooted in cultural perceptions that associate mental health problems with weakness or moral failing.

Efforts to reduce stigma are ongoing, but progress is gradual. Public awareness campaigns, education initiatives, and advocacy by mental health professionals aim to shift perceptions and encourage open discussions about mental health.

Socio-political Environment

Türkiye's socio-political climate can also affect youth mental health. Political tensions, economic instability, and concerns about freedom of expression may contribute to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety among young people. Additionally, issues such as terrorism, regional conflicts, and the influx of refugees have societal impacts that can exacerbate stress and tension within communities.

Religious and Cultural Beliefs

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of many Turks, influencing values, behaviors, and coping mechanisms. While religious beliefs can provide comfort and community support, they can also contribute to mental health challenges when individuals feel conflicted between personal desires and religious expectations.

For instance, conservative interpretations of religious teachings may discourage open discussions about mental health or reliance on professional help, favoring spiritual or traditional remedies instead. This can delay treatment and increase the severity of mental health conditions.

Collectivist Culture and Social Cohesion

Türkiye's collectivist culture emphasizes group harmony, family loyalty, and community interconnectedness. While these aspects can offer strong support networks, they may also pressure individuals to conform and suppress personal struggles to maintain social harmony. The fear of burdening others or disrupting group cohesion can deter youth from expressing mental health concerns.

The Role of Technology and Social Media (Positive and Negative Impacts)

The proliferation of technology and social media has significantly transformed the social landscape for Turkish youth. While offering numerous benefits, such as connectivity and access to information, these tools also present challenges that can impact mental health.

Positive Impacts

- **Connectivity and Community Building:** Social media platforms enable youth to connect with peers, share experiences, and build supportive networks. Online communities can provide a sense of belonging, especially for those who may feel isolated in their immediate environment.
- **Access to Information and Resources:** The internet offers a wealth of information on mental health, allowing young people to educate themselves and seek help anonymously if needed. Digital mental health services, such as online counseling and support groups, have become more accessible.

- **Empowerment and Self-expression:** Social media allows youth to express themselves creatively, share their talents, and advocate for causes they care about. This can enhance self-esteem and foster a sense of purpose.

Negative Impacts

- **Cyberbullying and Online Harassment:** Cyberbullying is a significant concern, with social media providing a platform for harassment that can be persistent and far-reaching. Victims may experience anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues as a result.
- **Social Comparison and Self-esteem Issues:** Exposure to idealized portrayals of others' lives can lead to negative self-perception and diminished self-worth. Constant comparison to curated images and achievements of peers can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy.
- **Addictive Behaviors and Screen Time:** Excessive use of social media and technology can lead to addiction-like behaviors, impacting sleep patterns, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships. This overuse can contribute to isolation and decreased face-to-face social interactions.
- **Misinformation and Harmful Content:** The spread of misinformation about mental health can hinder proper understanding and treatment. Exposure to harmful content, such as pro-self-harm or pro-eating disorder communities, can negatively influence vulnerable individuals.
- **Privacy Concerns and Data Security:** Fear of personal information being shared or misused can create anxiety. Additionally, online exposure can sometimes lead to real-world safety issues, such as stalking or exploitation.

Digital Divide

Not all youth have equal access to technology, leading to a digital divide that can exacerbate existing inequalities. Those without access may feel excluded or disadvantaged, affecting their social integration and opportunities for learning and development.

Balancing Technology Use

Promoting digital literacy is essential in helping youth navigate technology's benefits and risks. Educating young people about responsible online behavior, privacy protection, and critical evaluation of online content can mitigate negative impacts.

Impact of Education and Employment Opportunities on Mental Well-being

Education and employment are critical factors influencing youth mental health in Türkiye. The pursuit of academic and career success is often accompanied by intense pressure and competition, which can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Educational Pressures

- **High-Stakes Examinations:** The education system in Türkiye places significant emphasis on standardized testing. The university entrance exam (YKS) is a pivotal moment that can determine a young person's future opportunities. The pressure to perform well can be immense, leading to test anxiety, burnout, and fear of failure.
- **Competitive Environment:** Limited availability of spots in prestigious universities and programs intensifies competition among students. This environment can foster stress, reduce collaboration, and negatively affect peer relationships.
- **Academic Expectations:** Parents and teachers often have high expectations for academic achievement. The emphasis on grades and rankings can overshadow the importance of holistic development and personal interests, contributing to mental strain.
- **Educational Inequality:** Disparities in educational quality between urban and rural areas, or between private and public schools, can limit opportunities for some youth. Feeling disadvantaged can lead to frustration, decreased motivation, and lowered self-esteem.

Employment Challenges

- **Youth Unemployment:** Türkiye faces high youth unemployment rates. As of recent data, youth unemployment hovers around 25%. The lack of job opportunities can lead to feelings of hopelessness, financial stress, and decreased life satisfaction.
- **Job Insecurity:** Even employed youth may experience job insecurity due to temporary contracts, low wages, or poor working conditions. This uncertainty can contribute to chronic stress and anxiety.
- **Skill Mismatch:** There may be a gap between the skills provided by the education system and those demanded by the labor market. This mismatch can result in underemployment or unemployment, affecting self-worth and future outlook.
- **Economic Instability:** Economic fluctuations and inflation can exacerbate financial pressures. Youth may struggle with the cost of living, debt, or supporting their families, adding to mental health burdens.

Transition from Education to Employment

The transition period from education to employment is a critical phase. Difficulties in finding suitable employment can lead to prolonged periods of inactivity, known as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). NEET status is associated with higher risks of mental health issues, social exclusion, and decreased future employability.

Workplace Mental Health

Work environments may not always support mental well-being. Lack of awareness about mental health in the workplace, stigma, and absence of support systems can hinder young employees from seeking help or accommodations.

Policy and Support Initiatives

- **Career Guidance and Counseling:** Providing career counseling services can help youth make informed decisions about their education and career paths, reducing anxiety and uncertainty.
- **Job Creation Programs:** Government initiatives aimed at stimulating job growth, particularly for youth, can alleviate unemployment pressures.

- **Entrepreneurship Support:** Encouraging entrepreneurship and providing resources for startups can offer alternative career pathways.
- **Educational Reforms:** Aligning education curricula with labor market needs and promoting vocational training can improve employment prospects.

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has had unprecedented effects on global mental health, with youth being particularly vulnerable to its impacts. In Türkiye, the pandemic has intensified existing mental health challenges and introduced new stressors.

Disruption of Daily Life

- **School Closures:** The shift to online learning disrupted educational routines. Challenges included limited access to technology, reduced interaction with peers and teachers, and difficulties adapting to virtual platforms.
- **Social Isolation:** Lockdowns and social distancing measures limited social interactions. Isolation from friends, family, and community activities led to feelings of loneliness and depression.
- **Cancellation of Milestones:** Important life events, such as graduations, weddings, and cultural celebrations, were postponed or canceled, impacting emotional well-being.

Economic Impact

- **Job Loss and Financial Strain:** The pandemic led to job losses and reduced income for many families. Youth entering the job market faced heightened competition and fewer opportunities.
- **Increased Family Stress:** Financial pressures within households could result in heightened tensions, conflict, and a stressful home environment.

Health Anxiety

- **Fear of Illness:** Concerns about contracting the virus or transmitting it to vulnerable family members contributed to anxiety and obsessive health behaviors.
- **Grief and Loss:** Loss of loved ones to the virus without the ability to mourn traditionally exacerbated grief and trauma.

Psychological Stressors

- **Uncertainty About the Future:** The unpredictable nature of the pandemic led to anxiety about the future, including education, employment, and personal goals.
- **Media Exposure:** Constant exposure to news about the pandemic increased stress and fear. Misinformation and sensationalism in media reporting could amplify anxiety.

Vulnerable Populations

- **Mental Health Preconditions:** Youth with pre-existing mental health conditions faced disruptions in access to care and support networks.
- **Marginalized Groups:** Refugees, minorities, and low-income youth were disproportionately affected due to existing inequalities.

Positive Outcomes

- **Resilience and Adaptation:** Some youth developed resilience skills, adapting to new challenges, and finding innovative ways to cope.
- **Increased Awareness:** The pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health, leading to more open conversations and reduced stigma.
- **Digital Mental Health Services:** There was a surge in telehealth services, online counseling, and mental health apps, increasing accessibility for some.

Government and Community Responses

- **Mental Health Hotlines:** The Ministry of Health and various NGOs established helplines to provide psychological support.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Initiatives to promote mental well-being, stress management, and coping strategies were launched.
- **Financial Aid Programs:** Economic support measures aimed at alleviating financial stress for individuals and businesses were implemented.

Long-term Implications

The full extent of the pandemic's impact on youth mental health may not be realized for years. Ongoing support and monitoring are essential to address potential long-term effects, such as chronic anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders.

Recommendations for Mitigation

- **Integrated Mental Health Services:** Incorporate mental health support into pandemic response plans, ensuring accessible services.
- **Support for Educational Institutions:** Provide resources for schools and universities to support students' mental health during and after the pandemic.
- **Community Engagement:** Foster community initiatives that promote social connection while adhering to safety guidelines.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Invest in research to understand the pandemic's impact on mental health and inform future interventions.

5. Mental Health Services in Türkiye

Current State of Mental Health Care Infrastructure

Mental health services in Türkiye have undergone significant changes over the past decade, yet many challenges remain in ensuring accessible and equitable care for all citizens, particularly the youth. The country's mental health infrastructure is still developing, with substantial gaps in service provision, especially in rural areas. Although there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of mental health, the systems in place often lack the capacity to meet the growing demand for mental health services.

Historically, mental health services in Türkiye have been centered around psychiatric hospitals and inpatient care, with limited community-based services. However, this model has been gradually shifting in recent years toward a more integrated approach that emphasizes outpatient care, prevention, and early intervention. The Turkish government has made efforts to decentralize mental health services and promote a community-based model through reforms, such as the **Mental Health Action Plan** and the establishment of **Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs)**.

As of 2023, Türkiye operates more than 180 CMHCs across the country, providing outpatient services, including psychotherapy, medication management, and rehabilitation for individuals with severe mental illnesses. These centers are crucial in extending care to individuals who might otherwise have limited access to services, particularly in urban areas. However, the capacity of these centers is often stretched, and there remains a considerable disparity in the availability of services between rural and urban populations. In rural areas, mental health care is often limited to primary care settings, where general practitioners may not have the specialized training required to address complex mental health issues.

Key Issues in the Current Infrastructure:

- **Insufficient Number of Mental Health Professionals:** The ratio of mental health professionals to the population in Türkiye remains low compared to other countries in Europe. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there are approximately 1.7 psychiatrists per 100,000 people in Türkiye, compared to the European average of 9 per 100,000. This shortage of mental health professionals, including psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses, significantly limits the capacity to provide comprehensive care.
- **Centralized Services:** Mental health services are concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural populations underserved. Young people living in rural or remote areas may have to travel long distances to access care, which poses significant barriers to treatment.
- **Fragmented Services:** Mental health services are often fragmented, with limited integration between different levels of care (e.g., primary care, specialized psychiatric services, and social services). This lack of coordination can result in gaps in care, delayed diagnoses, and inadequate follow-up for patients.
- **Stigma and Lack of Awareness:** Cultural stigma around mental health remains a significant barrier to accessing services. Many individuals, particularly in more conservative or rural areas, may be reluctant to seek help due to fear of social stigma or misunderstandings about mental health conditions.

- **Limited Funding:** Mental health care in Türkiye is underfunded compared to other areas of healthcare. Despite the growing need for mental health services, the mental health sector receives only a small percentage of the national health budget, which limits the capacity to expand services, hire more professionals, and improve the quality of care.

Access to Mental Health Services for Youth

Access to mental health services for young people in Türkiye is limited by several factors, including availability, affordability, and societal attitudes. While there has been progress in expanding mental health services in recent years, young people continue to face significant barriers in seeking and receiving the care they need.

Availability of Services: As mentioned earlier, mental health services are more accessible in urban areas, where psychiatric hospitals, private practices, and CMHCs are concentrated. However, in rural regions, access is often restricted to primary care settings, which may not have the resources or expertise to provide specialized mental health care for youth. Additionally, the existing services are often geared toward severe mental health conditions, with limited availability of preventive and early intervention services.

Affordability: The cost of mental health care can be prohibitive for many young people, particularly those from low-income families. While Türkiye has a universal healthcare system, not all mental health services are covered, and private care can be expensive. For youth seeking therapy or counseling, out-of-pocket expenses can be a major barrier, especially in regions where free or low-cost services are not available.

Cultural Attitudes and Stigma: The stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant obstacle to accessing care in Türkiye. Mental health issues are often perceived as a sign of weakness or personal failure, leading many young people to avoid seeking help for fear of being judged or ostracized by their peers or family. This is particularly true in conservative areas, where traditional beliefs about mental health may prevail. Efforts to reduce stigma through public awareness campaigns and education have been initiated, but much work remains to change cultural perceptions.

School-Based Mental Health Services: Schools are a critical setting for promoting mental health among youth, yet the availability of school-based mental health services in Türkiye is limited. Some schools have guidance counselors who can provide support for students experiencing mental health issues, but these services are often inadequate to meet the demand. In many cases, school counselors are overburdened and lack the specialized training needed to address more complex mental health problems. Integrating mental health services into the education system could be a key strategy for improving access to care for young people.

Public Awareness and Stigma Around Mental Health

Cultural stigma is one of the most persistent challenges in addressing mental health issues in Türkiye. Mental illness is often viewed through a lens of misunderstanding, with many people associating it with moral weakness or personal failure. These attitudes create an environment in which individuals are reluctant to seek help, fearing social repercussions such as discrimination or isolation.

Key Aspects of Stigma in Türkiye:

- **Fear of Judgment:** Many individuals, particularly young people, worry about being labeled as "crazy" or "unstable" if they seek help for mental health problems. This fear is often rooted in cultural and religious beliefs that view mental illness as a spiritual or moral failing.
- **Family and Community Pressure:** In Turkish society, where family reputation and honor are highly valued, admitting to a mental health problem can be seen as bringing shame upon the family. As a result, many young people feel pressured to hide their struggles, rather than openly addressing them.
- **Misunderstanding of Mental Health Issues:** There is often a lack of understanding about mental health conditions, which are frequently conflated with more severe psychiatric disorders. This leads to the assumption that seeking mental health care is only necessary for individuals with extreme or visible symptoms, leaving those with more common issues like anxiety or depression without adequate support.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Efforts to reduce stigma have gained momentum in recent years, with public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives playing a key role in shifting perceptions about mental health. Campaigns such as **Ruh Sağlığı İçin Destek Al** (Get Support for Mental Health) have been launched to encourage people to seek help without fear of judgment. These campaigns aim to normalize conversations about mental health and promote understanding of the importance of seeking treatment early.

Additionally, collaborations between the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations like WHO have focused on reducing stigma through educational programs in schools, workplaces, and communities. These initiatives are designed to increase mental health literacy, reduce misconceptions, and encourage individuals to view mental health as an integral part of overall well-being.

Government Initiatives and National Mental Health Policies

The Turkish government has made strides in recent years to improve mental health services and address the growing need for support, particularly among young people. The **Mental Health Action Plan**, implemented in collaboration with the WHO, has been a cornerstone of Türkiye's efforts to develop a more comprehensive mental health system. This plan emphasizes a shift from institutionalized care to community-based services, with a focus on prevention, early intervention, and integration of mental health into primary healthcare.

Key components of the government's approach include:

- **Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs):** As mentioned earlier, CMHCs are designed to provide accessible, community-based mental health care. These centers offer outpatient services, including counseling, medication management, and rehabilitation, and they aim to reduce reliance on inpatient care.
- **Integration of Mental Health into Primary Care:** The Turkish government has worked to integrate mental health services into primary care, allowing general practitioners to play a larger role in identifying and managing mental health issues. However, this integration is still in its early stages, and there are challenges related to training, resource allocation, and the capacity of primary care providers.
- **Youth-Specific Initiatives:** Recognizing the unique challenges faced by young people, the government has initiated programs aimed at promoting mental well-being

among youth. These include school-based mental health education, anti-bullying campaigns, and the expansion of mental health services in universities. However, these initiatives are often underfunded and lack the infrastructure needed to reach a wide audience.

Challenges in Implementing Mental Health Policies

While Türkiye has made important strides in addressing mental health, several challenges remain in the implementation of policies and initiatives.

- **Resource Limitations:** The mental health sector remains underfunded, limiting the capacity to expand services and hire more professionals. Without increased financial investment, many initiatives struggle to reach their full potential.
- **Shortage of Mental Health Professionals:** As noted earlier, the shortage of trained mental health professionals is a major barrier to effective service delivery. Efforts to increase the number of professionals through educational programs and incentives are ongoing but slow.
- **Inconsistent Quality of Services:** There is significant variation in the quality of mental health services across regions. While urban centers may have well-established facilities and highly trained professionals, rural areas often lack adequate services.
- **Cultural Resistance:** Stigma and cultural resistance to discussing mental health remain entrenched in many parts of the country, making it difficult to implement programs that rely on public participation and openness.

Recommendations for Strengthening Mental Health Services in Türkiye

To address the gaps in mental health care and improve access to services for young people, several key recommendations can be made:

- **Increase Funding for Mental Health Services:** Allocating more resources to mental health will enable the expansion of services, the hiring of more professionals, and the improvement of infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas.
- **Enhance Training for Primary Care Providers:** Providing additional training for general practitioners and other primary care providers will improve their ability to identify and manage mental health issues, increasing access to care in rural areas.
- **Expand School-Based Mental Health Programs:** Schools should play a larger role in promoting mental health and providing early intervention services. This includes increasing the number of counselors and integrating mental health education into the curriculum.
- **Reduce Stigma Through Education and Awareness Campaigns:** Continuing to promote public awareness campaigns that reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help is crucial. These campaigns should focus on normalizing mental health care and highlighting the importance of early intervention.
- **Strengthen Community-Based Services:** Expanding the network of CMHCs and ensuring that they are adequately staffed and funded will improve access to care for individuals with mental health conditions. Additionally, increasing collaboration between CMHCs and primary care providers will help to create a more integrated system of care.

- **Develop Youth-Specific Mental Health Services:** Tailoring mental health services to the unique needs of young people is essential. This includes offering services that address the specific challenges faced by youth, such as academic stress, social media pressures, and the transition to adulthood.

6. Comparison with European Mental Health Services

Mental Health Policies and Care Models in Europe

Europe has long recognized the importance of mental health as a key aspect of overall public health. The mental health systems in European countries are generally more developed than in Türkiye, with a range of policies and care models that promote prevention, early intervention, and access to mental health services. Despite regional differences, many European countries follow a common framework for mental health care, emphasizing universal access, community-based care, and integration with general health services.

European Union Initiatives

The European Union (EU) has played a significant role in shaping mental health policies across member states. Several initiatives and frameworks guide the development of mental health services in Europe, such as the **European Pact for Mental Health and Well-Being**, the **EU Joint Action on Mental Health and Well-being**, and the **EU Mental Health Compass**. These initiatives focus on promoting mental health through a life-course approach, addressing social determinants of mental health, reducing inequalities in access to care, and ensuring that mental health services are integrated into broader public health strategies.

The EU promotes the **mental health in all policies** approach, which integrates mental health considerations into various policy areas, including education, employment, and social inclusion. This approach recognizes that mental health is influenced by a range of social, economic, and environmental factors, and addressing these factors is crucial for improving mental health outcomes.

Universal Access and Healthcare Models

One of the key differences between mental health services in Europe and Türkiye is the degree of **universal access**. In many European countries, mental health services are integrated into the public health system, and access to care is largely free or heavily subsidized. This model is particularly effective in countries with strong welfare systems, such as **Sweden**, **Denmark**, and **Finland**, where mental health services are accessible to all citizens, regardless of their economic status.

For instance, Sweden's mental health care system is primarily state-funded, with a focus on early intervention, community-based care, and a patient-centered approach. Sweden has made significant investments in both inpatient and outpatient mental health services, ensuring that patients have access to comprehensive care that includes therapy, medication, and psychosocial support. Denmark's system is similar, with mental health care fully integrated into the general health care system, ensuring that mental health is treated with the same level of importance as physical health.

In contrast, countries with more privatized healthcare systems, such as the **United Kingdom** and **Germany**, offer a mix of public and private services. In the UK, mental health services are delivered through the **National Health Service (NHS)**, which provides free mental health care for all residents. However, long waiting times for therapy and counseling services have been a persistent issue, leading some individuals to seek private care, which can be costly. Germany has a statutory health insurance system, which covers mental health services,

including psychotherapy and psychiatric care, though access to these services can vary based on insurance providers.

Community-Based Mental Health Care

A major focus of mental health care in Europe is the shift from institutionalized care to **community-based care**. This approach emphasizes the importance of treating individuals with mental health issues in their communities, rather than in psychiatric hospitals or long-term care facilities. Community-based care models provide a range of services, including counseling, rehabilitation, and support for daily living, allowing individuals to receive care while maintaining their independence and social connections.

Italy is often cited as a leader in community-based mental health care, following the **Basaglia Law** of 1978, which led to the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the development of a network of community mental health services. This model prioritizes outpatient care, with a focus on integration with general health services and collaboration with social services, housing, and employment agencies. Italy's mental health system is highly decentralized, with regional governments responsible for organizing and delivering care. This has led to variations in the quality of services across the country, but the overall emphasis on community-based care has been widely regarded as a success.

France has also adopted a community-based model, with mental health services provided through **Psychiatric Sectors**, which are regional units responsible for delivering care to a specific geographic area. Each sector offers a range of services, including inpatient and outpatient care, day centers, and home visits, ensuring that individuals with mental health conditions receive comprehensive care tailored to their needs.

Access to Mental Health Services for European Youth

Access to mental health services for young people is a critical issue across Europe, with many countries taking steps to improve youth mental health services in response to the growing prevalence of mental health issues among this population. While Europe generally offers more comprehensive mental health care than Türkiye, access to services can still vary widely depending on the country, region, and individual circumstances.

Youth Mental Health Services in Schools

Many European countries have implemented school-based mental health programs as part of their broader efforts to address youth mental health. These programs aim to provide early intervention for mental health issues, reduce stigma, and promote emotional well-being among students.

For example, **Finland** has a well-established system of school health services, which includes mental health support. Each school is required to have a school nurse, a psychologist, and a social worker available to support students with mental health issues. Additionally, mental health education is integrated into the curriculum, with a focus on teaching students coping skills, emotional regulation, and resilience.

In the **Netherlands**, schools offer similar services through a multidisciplinary approach that involves teachers, school counselors, and external mental health professionals. Dutch schools are encouraged to identify students at risk of mental health issues early and to

provide appropriate support, either through school-based services or referrals to specialized care. The country's **Youth Mental Health Action Plan** emphasizes collaboration between schools, families, and mental health professionals to ensure that young people receive the care they need.

The **UK** has also made significant strides in improving mental health services in schools. The **Green Paper on Children and Young People's Mental Health**, published in 2017, outlines plans to improve access to mental health services for students, with a focus on early intervention and prevention. The paper proposes the creation of **Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)**, which work with schools to provide direct support to students and train school staff to recognize the signs of mental health issues.

Barriers to Access

Despite these efforts, barriers to accessing mental health services for youth remain in many European countries. Long waiting times for therapy and counseling services are a common issue, particularly in countries where mental health services are integrated into the public health system. In the UK, for example, young people seeking therapy through the NHS often face delays of several months before receiving treatment. This can lead to a worsening of symptoms and a greater need for more intensive intervention later on.

In some countries, socioeconomic factors also play a role in limiting access to care. Youth from low-income families or disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle to access private mental health services if public services are unavailable or overwhelmed. Additionally, rural areas often lack sufficient mental health resources, forcing young people to travel long distances to receive care.

Mental Health and Social Media

The rise of social media has had a profound impact on youth mental health across Europe. While social media can provide a platform for social connection and self-expression, it also exposes young people to harmful content, cyberbullying, and unrealistic standards of beauty and success. A 2021 survey conducted by the **European Youth Forum** found that over 60% of European youth believe that social media negatively affects their mental health, with many citing anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy as common outcomes.

In response to these concerns, several European countries have introduced initiatives aimed at promoting digital literacy and responsible use of social media among young people. **France** has implemented a **National Plan for Digital Well-being**, which includes educational programs in schools to teach students about the risks of social media and how to manage their online presence in a healthy way. The **European Commission** has also launched the **Better Internet for Kids** initiative, which aims to create a safer online environment for children and young people by promoting awareness of online risks and encouraging responsible digital behavior.

Best Practices from Europe That Can Be Applied in Türkiye

There are several best practices from Europe that could be adapted to improve mental health services in Türkiye, particularly in the areas of youth mental health, community-based care, and the integration of mental health into broader public health policies.

1. Expansion of Community-Based Mental Health Services

One of the key lessons from Europe is the effectiveness of community-based mental health care models. The success of countries like Italy and France in providing accessible, decentralized mental health services through community-based centers offers a valuable model for Türkiye. Expanding Türkiye's network of **Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs)** could help improve access to mental health care, particularly in rural and underserved areas. These centers should be equipped to provide a range of services, including counseling, rehabilitation, and support for daily living, to ensure that individuals with mental health issues can receive care in their own communities.

2. Integration of Mental Health into Schools

The integration of mental health services into schools is another best practice that could be adopted in Türkiye. School-based mental health programs, such as those in Finland and the Netherlands, provide early intervention and support for students experiencing mental health issues, reducing the need for more intensive treatment later on. In Türkiye, expanding the role of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, and providing mental health education as part of the curriculum, could help address the growing mental health needs of young people.

3. Youth Mental Health Campaigns and Digital Literacy Programs

Europe has made significant progress in promoting youth mental health awareness through public campaigns and educational initiatives. Campaigns like **Time to Change** in the UK and **Mind Yourself** in Ireland have successfully reduced stigma and encouraged young people to seek help for mental health issues. These campaigns often use social media and digital platforms to reach young audiences, making them relevant and accessible.

Türkiye could benefit from similar campaigns, aimed at reducing the stigma surrounding mental health and promoting help-seeking behavior among youth. Additionally, digital literacy programs, like France's **National Plan for Digital Well-being**, could be introduced to help young people navigate the challenges of social media and mitigate its negative effects on mental health.

4. Mental Health in All Policies

Adopting a **mental health in all policies** approach, as promoted by the EU, could help Türkiye address the social determinants of mental health, such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. By integrating mental health considerations into education, employment, housing, and social policies, Türkiye could create a more holistic approach to mental health care, addressing both the immediate needs of individuals and the broader factors that contribute to mental health issues.

5. Increase in Training for Mental Health Professionals

The shortage of mental health professionals is a significant challenge in Türkiye, as it is in many European countries. However, countries like Sweden and Finland have addressed this issue by increasing funding for mental health training programs and offering incentives to attract more individuals to the field. Türkiye could implement similar strategies to expand its

workforce of mental health professionals, ensuring that more individuals, particularly in rural areas, have access to the care they need.

Conclusion

While Türkiye's mental health care system is still developing, there are many best practices from Europe that could be adapted to improve access to and the quality of mental health services. By expanding community-based care, integrating mental health services into schools, promoting digital literacy, and adopting a holistic approach to mental health in public policy, Türkiye could address many of the barriers that currently limit access to care. Learning from the successes and challenges of European countries, Türkiye can build a more robust mental health care system that better serves the needs of its youth population.

7. The Role of Stress and Anxiety in Youth Mental Health

Stress as a Major Issue in Türkiye

Stress has emerged as one of the most significant mental health challenges facing Turkish youth, driven by a combination of academic, social, and economic pressures. The experience of stress is universal, but the ways in which it manifests and is managed are often shaped by cultural, societal, and individual factors. For Turkish youth, stress is particularly prevalent in educational settings, where high-stakes exams, intense competition, and family expectations create a high-pressure environment.

According to a 2023 report from the Global Health Service Monitor, 44% of the Turkish population identifies mental health as a primary concern, with stress being one of the most commonly cited issues among young people【11†source】. Stress can be both a cause and a consequence of other mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, creating a vicious cycle that can be difficult to break without proper intervention.

Academic Stress and the Turkish Education System

One of the primary sources of stress for Turkish youth is the education system, particularly the university entrance exams (YKS), which play a pivotal role in determining young people's future opportunities. The YKS is notoriously competitive, with only a limited number of spots available in top universities. The pressure to perform well in this exam, coupled with the long hours of study and the intense focus on academic achievement, can lead to chronic stress, burnout, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Academic stress is not limited to high school students preparing for the YKS. University students in Türkiye also face significant pressures, including the need to maintain high grades, secure internships, and plan for future employment. The fear of failure or underachievement can weigh heavily on students, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. These pressures are often exacerbated by family expectations, as many young people feel responsible for meeting their parents' high hopes for academic and professional success.

In addition to exams and academic performance, students often experience stress related to their future career prospects. With youth unemployment rates in Türkiye hovering around 25%, many students worry about their ability to find a job after graduation. This fear can add to the already high levels of stress, leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

The Role of Parental Expectations

Parental expectations play a significant role in shaping the mental health of Turkish youth. In Türkiye, parents often place great importance on their children's academic and career success, viewing it as a reflection of family honor and status. This can create immense pressure for young people, who may feel that their self-worth is tied to their ability to meet these expectations. While parental support can be a protective factor for mental health, when expectations are too high or rigid, they can become a source of stress and anxiety.

Young people may feel a sense of duty to fulfill their parents' aspirations, even if it means sacrificing their own interests or well-being. This dynamic is particularly common in conservative or traditional families, where gender roles and family expectations may place

additional pressure on young women to succeed academically while adhering to cultural norms related to marriage and family life.

Cultural Factors and Social Expectations

In addition to family pressures, Turkish youth face stress from societal expectations, particularly around issues of success, appearance, and behavior. In a collectivist culture like Türkiye's, where group harmony and reputation are highly valued, young people may feel pressured to conform to societal norms and meet the expectations of their community. This can create internal conflicts for individuals who may feel torn between their personal desires and the demands of society.

Social expectations can also contribute to stress related to body image and self-esteem, particularly for young women. The rise of social media has amplified these pressures, as young people are constantly exposed to images of idealized beauty and success. The pressure to conform to these standards can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth, which can, in turn, contribute to stress and anxiety.

The Impact of Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity is another significant source of stress for Turkish youth. The country's high unemployment rates, inflation, and economic instability have left many young people feeling uncertain about their future. Financial stress can manifest in various ways, including concerns about affording education, finding stable employment, and achieving financial independence.

For many young people, the prospect of unemployment or underemployment after years of hard work in school is a constant source of anxiety. This economic uncertainty can lead to feelings of hopelessness, as young people struggle to envision a stable and secure future. The pressure to find a job, coupled with the financial strain of supporting themselves or their families, can lead to chronic stress, which, if left unaddressed, may develop into more severe mental health issues.

Impact of Daily Life Stressors: Work, School, and Social Pressure

The stress experienced by Turkish youth is not limited to major life events such as exams or job searches; it also permeates everyday life, affecting their ability to function and enjoy daily activities. **Work-related stress**, **academic stress**, and **social pressures** can accumulate over time, contributing to a pervasive sense of overwhelm and exhaustion.

Work-Related Stress

For young people who are employed, work-related stress is a common issue. Many young workers in Türkiye face job insecurity, low wages, and poor working conditions, all of which contribute to stress and anxiety. The uncertainty of temporary or part-time employment can be particularly stressful, as it leaves young people feeling uncertain about their future. Additionally, those who are balancing work and school may experience significant stress as they try to juggle multiple responsibilities, often at the expense of their mental health.

Workplace stress can also arise from unrealistic job demands, lack of control over work tasks, and difficult relationships with supervisors or colleagues. In some cases, young

workers may face discrimination or harassment in the workplace, which can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety. Without adequate support systems or workplace policies to address mental health, young employees may struggle to cope with these challenges.

Academic Stress

Academic stress is a daily reality for many Turkish students, particularly those in high school or university. The pressure to perform well on exams, maintain high grades, and meet the expectations of teachers and family members can create a constant state of stress. For many students, academic stress is compounded by concerns about the future, as they worry about their ability to secure a spot in a prestigious university or find employment after graduation.

In addition to the stress of exams and academic performance, students often experience stress related to time management and workload. The demands of schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and social obligations can leave students feeling overwhelmed and unable to manage their responsibilities effectively. This can lead to feelings of frustration, exhaustion, and burnout.

Social Pressure

Social pressure is another significant source of stress for Turkish youth, particularly in the age of social media. The constant comparison to others' lives, achievements, and appearances can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, can create unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and happiness, which many young people feel pressured to live up to. The pressure to maintain a certain image or lifestyle can lead to stress, anxiety, and even depression.

In addition to the pressures of social media, Turkish youth also face social expectations related to gender roles, family obligations, and societal norms. For example, young women may feel pressured to conform to traditional expectations around marriage and family, even as they pursue education and careers. Young men, on the other hand, may feel pressured to succeed in the workplace and provide for their families, which can create stress and anxiety around financial stability.

Peer Pressure and Social Relationships

Peer pressure and social relationships play a significant role in the mental health of Turkish youth. Young people often feel pressure to fit in with their peers, whether it be through academic achievement, social status, or appearance. This pressure can lead to stress and anxiety, particularly for those who feel they do not meet societal or peer expectations. The fear of rejection or social exclusion can exacerbate feelings of stress, leading young people to engage in behaviors that may not align with their values or goals.

Additionally, interpersonal conflicts and relationship stress can contribute to mental health problems. Young people who experience difficulties in friendships or romantic relationships may struggle with feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and stress. These challenges are particularly acute during adolescence, when social connections are a central part of identity formation and emotional well-being.

Gender-Specific Challenges in Mental Health (Particularly Among Women)

While both young men and women in Türkiye experience stress and anxiety, there are significant gender-specific differences in how these issues manifest and are addressed. Young women, in particular, face unique mental health challenges related to societal expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms.

Mental Health Challenges for Young Women

Young women in Türkiye often face a dual burden of academic and family expectations. While they are encouraged to succeed in school and pursue careers, they are also expected to fulfill traditional gender roles, such as caregiving and homemaking. This can create a sense of internal conflict, as young women struggle to balance their personal aspirations with the expectations placed upon them by their families and society.

Additionally, young women are more likely than young men to experience issues related to body image and self-esteem, particularly due to the influence of social media. The pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, and disordered eating behaviors. Studies have shown that young women are disproportionately affected by anxiety, depression, and eating disorders compared to their male counterparts.

Barriers to Mental Health Support

Despite these challenges, young women in Türkiye may face barriers to seeking mental health support. Cultural norms around gender roles and mental health can discourage women from openly discussing their struggles or seeking professional help. In some cases, mental health issues may be dismissed as "emotional" or "hormonal," rather than being recognized as legitimate health concerns. This can prevent young women from receiving the support they need and exacerbate their mental health problems over time.

Breaking the Cycle of Stress and Anxiety

To address the high levels of stress and anxiety among Turkish youth, it is essential to take a holistic approach that addresses both the individual and societal factors contributing to these issues. This includes improving access to mental health services, promoting mental health education, and addressing the cultural and economic pressures that drive stress and anxiety.

Mental Health Education and Awareness

Promoting mental health education and awareness in schools, workplaces, and communities can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and encourage young people to seek help when needed. Schools, in particular, can play a vital role in teaching students coping mechanisms, stress management techniques, and emotional regulation skills, helping them navigate the challenges they face in their academic and personal lives.

Improving Access to Mental Health Services

Expanding access to mental health services, particularly in schools and community settings, is essential for addressing the mental health needs of Turkish youth. This includes increasing the number of school counselors, psychologists, and social workers available to

support students, as well as providing affordable and accessible mental health care in both urban and rural areas.

Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities

Finally, addressing the root causes of stress and anxiety requires a broader effort to address social and economic inequalities in Türkiye. This includes creating more opportunities for young people to find stable employment, improving access to education, and promoting gender equality in both the workplace and the home. By addressing these systemic issues, Türkiye can create an environment where young people feel empowered to pursue their goals without the overwhelming burden of stress and anxiety.

8. Recommendations for Improving Mental Health in Turkish Youth

Policy Recommendations for Mental Health Care Expansion

To improve the mental health of Turkish youth, the Turkish government and relevant authorities must take significant steps to enhance the accessibility, quality, and reach of mental health care services. The following policy recommendations focus on expanding mental health care systems and ensuring that young people across Türkiye have better access to care:

1. Increase Funding for Mental Health Services One of the most critical issues in Türkiye's mental health care system is the lack of adequate funding. Currently, mental health receives a small percentage of the overall health budget, limiting the ability to expand services, hire more professionals, and improve care quality. Increased funding would enable the development of more mental health clinics, hire more trained professionals (psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors), and enhance the infrastructure needed to support youth mental health.

- **Budget Allocation:** Increase the national health budget specifically for mental health services, ensuring that at least 10% of the overall health expenditure is allocated to mental health care, as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).
- **Financial Incentives for Mental Health Professionals:** Provide financial incentives such as scholarships and student loan forgiveness programs for individuals training to become mental health professionals, encouraging more people to enter the field.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Foster collaborations between the government and private organizations to fund mental health initiatives, including clinics, awareness campaigns, and support services.

2. Integrate Mental Health into Primary Care Integrating mental health care into primary care systems is a proven strategy for making mental health services more accessible, particularly in rural and underserved areas. By training primary care doctors and nurses to recognize and treat mental health disorders, Türkiye can expand its mental health care network without relying solely on specialist services.

- **Training Programs for Primary Care Providers:** Develop training programs for general practitioners, nurses, and other primary care professionals to recognize early signs of mental health problems, especially among youth. These programs should cover basic counseling skills, mental health screening tools, and referral protocols.
- **Routine Mental Health Screenings:** Introduce mandatory mental health screenings as part of routine check-ups in primary care settings, particularly for adolescents and young adults. This would allow early detection of mental health issues and timely intervention.
- **Referral Networks:** Establish clear referral pathways between primary care providers and specialized mental health services, ensuring that youth with more complex mental health needs can be referred to psychiatrists or psychologists efficiently.

3. Expand Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs) Türkiye has made progress in developing Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), but the existing network of CMHCs is insufficient to meet the growing demand for mental health services, particularly among

youth. Expanding these centers would allow more young people to access mental health care in their communities without traveling long distances.

- **Establish More CMHCs in Rural Areas:** Focus on building CMHCs in rural and underserved areas, where mental health services are currently limited. These centers should provide a range of services, including counseling, rehabilitation, and psychoeducation for young people.
- **Specialized Youth Services at CMHCs:** Create youth-specific services within CMHCs, including counseling, peer support groups, and workshops on stress management, coping skills, and mental resilience.
- **Collaboration with Schools and Universities:** CMHCs should work closely with schools and universities to provide on-site mental health services, particularly during exam periods or in response to crises such as bullying or substance abuse.

4. Reduce Stigma Through Public Awareness Campaigns Stigma around mental health remains one of the biggest barriers to seeking help for mental health issues in Türkiye. Public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma can play a key role in encouraging young people to seek help when needed.

- **National Mental Health Awareness Campaigns:** Launch a nationwide public awareness campaign to educate the public about the importance of mental health and reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health care. This campaign should focus on reaching young people through social media, television, and school-based initiatives.
- **Peer-Led Mental Health Initiatives:** Encourage youth to participate in peer-led mental health initiatives, where they can share their experiences and provide support to one another. Peer support is often more relatable and accessible for young people, and can reduce the fear of judgment.
- **Promote Mental Health Literacy in Schools:** Integrate mental health education into school curricula, teaching students about common mental health issues, the importance of seeking help, and strategies for maintaining good mental health.

The Importance of Early Intervention and Youth-Focused Programs

Early intervention is critical in addressing mental health issues before they escalate into more serious problems. Developing youth-focused mental health programs that target prevention, early intervention, and education is essential to improving mental health outcomes for Turkish youth.

1. School-Based Mental Health Programs Schools are an ideal setting for early intervention, as they provide a structured environment where mental health education and services can be easily integrated. Schools can play a key role in identifying mental health problems early and providing support to students.

- **Mental Health Education:** Introduce comprehensive mental health education as part of the school curriculum, teaching students about mental health, emotional regulation, and coping strategies. This should include age-appropriate lessons that help reduce stigma and encourage students to seek help when needed.
- **School Counselors and Psychologists:** Increase the number of counselors and psychologists available in schools to provide on-site mental health services. These

professionals can offer individual counseling, group therapy, and workshops on topics such as stress management, self-esteem, and resilience.

- **Crisis Intervention Teams:** Establish crisis intervention teams in schools to respond to mental health emergencies, such as suicide attempts, self-harm, or bullying-related trauma. These teams should include trained mental health professionals who can provide immediate support and refer students to external services if necessary.

2. University Mental Health Support Services Universities must provide comprehensive mental health services to support students during the critical transition to adulthood, which can be a particularly stressful time.

- **University Counseling Centers:** Expand the capacity of university counseling centers to meet the growing demand for mental health services. These centers should offer individual and group counseling, mental health workshops, and stress management programs, particularly during exam periods.
- **Peer Support Programs:** Encourage universities to develop peer support programs where students can provide emotional and mental health support to one another. Peer support groups have been shown to reduce feelings of isolation and provide a sense of community among students.
- **Mental Health Resources:** Ensure that university websites and student portals include comprehensive mental health resources, such as information on common mental health issues, how to seek help, and coping strategies for stress and anxiety.

Encouraging Mental Health Awareness in Schools and Communities

Creating a culture of mental health awareness in schools and communities is essential to normalizing conversations about mental health and encouraging young people to seek help. By integrating mental health education into everyday life, schools and communities can play a central role in supporting the mental well-being of young people.

1. Mental Health Awareness Workshops Schools and community centers should regularly offer mental health awareness workshops that educate students, parents, and community members about mental health. These workshops can cover topics such as understanding mental health conditions, how to support someone experiencing a mental health issue, and the importance of seeking help early.

- **Parent Education Programs:** Offer mental health education programs for parents to help them recognize the signs of mental health issues in their children and provide support. Parents often play a critical role in identifying problems and encouraging young people to seek help.
- **Community Mental Health Ambassadors:** Train community members, particularly youth leaders, to serve as mental health ambassadors who can raise awareness about mental health issues and provide information on where to find support.

2. Peer Support and Mentorship Programs Peer support programs provide young people with an opportunity to discuss their mental health challenges with others who have had similar experiences. These programs can be particularly effective in reducing feelings of isolation and stigma, as young people often feel more comfortable talking to their peers about mental health issues.

- **Youth Mentorship Programs:** Establish youth mentorship programs where older students or young adults mentor younger peers, providing guidance and support on mental health and well-being. Mentors can offer advice on coping with stress, navigating academic pressures, and managing social relationships.
- **Online Peer Support Platforms:** Develop online platforms where young people can connect with peers for mental health support. These platforms should be moderated by trained professionals to ensure that they provide a safe and supportive environment.

Potential Collaborations Between Türkiye and Europe on Youth Mental Health

Türkiye can benefit from collaborating with European countries on youth mental health initiatives. Europe has made significant progress in reducing stigma, improving access to mental health care, and promoting mental health in schools and communities. By working together, Türkiye and Europe can share best practices and develop joint initiatives to address youth mental health challenges.

1. Exchange Programs for Mental Health Professionals Encouraging exchange programs between Türkiye and European countries can help mental health professionals in Türkiye learn from European models of care. These exchange programs can focus on areas such as community-based mental health care, school-based mental health programs, and early intervention strategies.

2. Joint Research and Development Projects Collaborating with European researchers on joint research projects related to youth mental health can help Türkiye better understand the unique challenges facing its youth population and develop more effective interventions. These research projects could focus on topics such as the impact of social media on mental health, strategies for reducing stigma, and the role of schools in promoting mental well-being.

3. European Funding for Mental Health Initiatives Türkiye can also seek funding from European organizations, such as the European Union or the Council of Europe, to support mental health initiatives aimed at improving youth mental health. European funding could be used to expand mental health services, develop public awareness campaigns, and train mental health professionals.

9. Conclusion

The mental health of Turkish youth is a critical issue that requires immediate attention and sustained effort from policymakers, educators, healthcare providers, and communities. As Türkiye undergoes rapid socio-economic changes, the pressures on young people continue to grow, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. This research has explored the various factors contributing to these issues, including societal expectations, economic instability, academic pressures, and the pervasive influence of social media.

By comparing Türkiye's mental health landscape with that of Europe, it is evident that while significant strides have been made in raising awareness and expanding services, Türkiye still lags behind in terms of infrastructure, accessibility, and cultural attitudes towards mental health. Europe, with its well-established mental health systems, offers valuable lessons for Türkiye, particularly in the areas of community-based care, school-based mental health services, and public awareness campaigns.

Summary of Key Challenges

Throughout this research, several key challenges have emerged as significant barriers to improving youth mental health in Türkiye:

- 1. Stigma and Cultural Barriers:** Despite growing awareness, stigma around mental health remains deeply ingrained in Turkish society. This stigma prevents many young people from seeking help and contributes to the underreporting of mental health issues. Cultural expectations, particularly around gender roles and family honor, further exacerbate the reluctance to address mental health openly.
- 2. Limited Access to Mental Health Services:** The availability of mental health services in Türkiye is insufficient to meet the growing demand, particularly in rural and underserved areas. While urban centers may offer more comprehensive services, rural youth often struggle to access care. The shortage of mental health professionals and the concentration of services in major cities create significant disparities in access to care.
- 3. Economic Pressures and Youth Unemployment:** Economic instability and high youth unemployment rates are major stressors for Turkish youth. The fear of financial insecurity, combined with the pressure to succeed academically and professionally, contributes to high levels of anxiety and depression. These economic pressures are further compounded by the challenges of transitioning from education to the workforce.
- 4. Academic Stress and Educational Pressures:** The Turkish education system, with its emphasis on high-stakes exams, places immense pressure on students to perform well academically. This focus on academic achievement often comes at the expense of mental health, leading to stress, burnout, and anxiety among students. The competition for university spots and the uncertainty of future job prospects only add to this stress.
- 5. Social Media and Technology:** While technology and social media offer benefits, they also contribute to mental health problems, particularly among young people. The constant comparison to others, cyberbullying, and the pressure to maintain an idealized image can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression. Social media has also been linked to body image issues, especially among young women.

Key Solutions and Recommendations

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy reform, expanded access to mental health services, education, and community engagement. This research has highlighted several key recommendations that, if implemented, could significantly improve the mental health outcomes of Turkish youth:

1. **Expand Access to Mental Health Services:** Increasing the number of Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs), particularly in rural and underserved areas, is critical to ensuring that young people can access the care they need. Integrating mental health services into primary care and school settings will also help reach more young people and provide early intervention.
2. **Reduce Stigma Through Education and Awareness:** Public awareness campaigns, educational programs, and peer-led initiatives can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and encourage young people to seek help. Schools should play a central role in promoting mental health literacy and providing resources for students to manage stress, anxiety, and other challenges.
3. **Support for Education and Employment Transitions:** Providing more robust career counseling, vocational training, and job creation programs for young people can help alleviate the economic pressures that contribute to mental health issues. Schools and universities should also offer mental health support during key transitional periods, such as the transition from school to work.
4. **Promote Responsible Use of Social Media:** Educating young people about the potential risks of social media and promoting responsible use of technology is essential to mitigating its negative impact on mental health. Schools should offer digital literacy programs that teach students how to navigate social media in a healthy way, avoid cyberbullying, and build resilience against negative online influences.
5. **Early Intervention and School-Based Mental Health Programs:** Early intervention is crucial in addressing mental health problems before they become more severe. Schools and universities should provide mental health services, including counseling and peer support programs, to ensure that students have access to care when they need it most. Mental health education should be integrated into school curricula to equip students with the tools to manage their mental well-being.

Final Thoughts

Improving youth mental health in Türkiye requires a collective effort that spans government policy, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and the community. By learning from European best practices and adopting a holistic approach to mental health care, Türkiye can create a more supportive and inclusive environment for its young people. Mental health is not just an individual concern but a societal one, and addressing the mental health challenges of Turkish youth will have long-term benefits for the country as a whole.

Ultimately, investing in the mental health of young people is an investment in Türkiye's future. By expanding access to care, reducing stigma, and promoting mental health education, Türkiye can empower its youth to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives. The mental health of Turkish youth should not be viewed as an isolated issue but as a critical component of overall public health and well-being. With the right interventions and support, Türkiye has the opportunity to create a brighter, healthier future for its youth.

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