

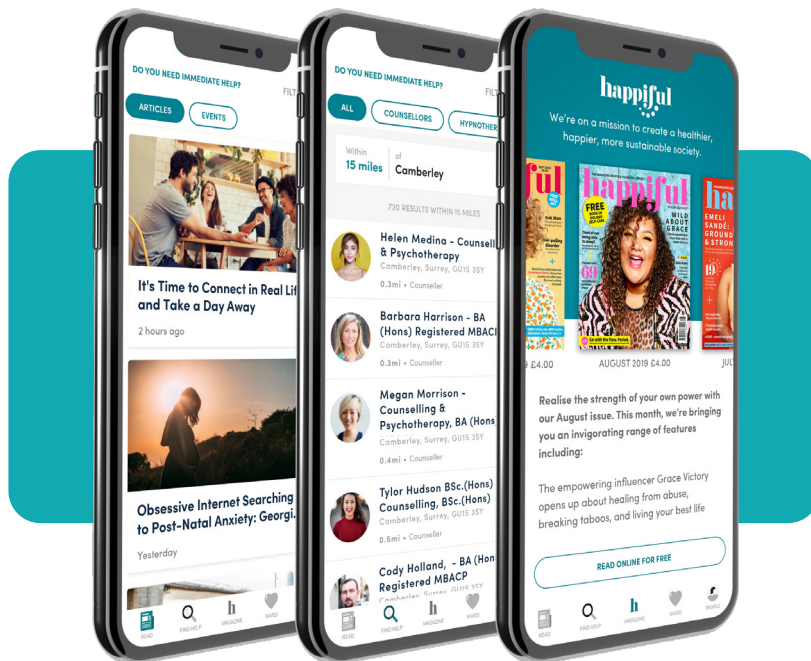


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Going global:

# Mental health around the world

We speak to six people from across the globe about their personal experiences with mental health, the options that are available to them, and the goals they are still working towards in their communities

Writing | **Kathryn Wheeler** Illustrating | **Rosan Magar**

**N**o matter where we're from or what we do, mental illness has the potential to touch us and our loved ones throughout our lives. According to the Global Burden of Disease, 13% of the global population lives with a mental disorder – that's approximately 971 million people.

It's something that unites us across borders, but no one person's experience with mental health will be the same as

another's – and that's especially true when we consider how the levels of support and stigma varies so drastically around the world.

It's time to escape our respective bubbles and get a fresh perspective on the state of mental health care across the continents. Here, we speak to six people from around the world to find out about their personal experiences, and to learn more about what it really means to live with mental illness in 2020. >>>



## Nigeria

“My experience with mental health issues has been

tough and sad – having family and friends not accept me for who I am during crisis, and an identity where I am seen as a ‘mad’ and ‘possessed’ human being,” **Anita Ikwue** explains.

For Anita, being open about her mental health came with challenges from those in her family and her wider community.

“Most of them are hearing something like this for the first time, and usually have a

negative impression of mental health problems,” she says. “Some would be interested to know more about mental health. Others would say terrible things like ‘mad people’. For me, this means people are speaking from an ignorant angle, and they just need to be more educated.”

Luckily, Anita was able to find support with local organisations, including the Gede Foundation, Global Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS, and Time to Change Global, where she is now a ‘champion’ – helping to reach out to others.

“The positive thing in my community is that some people are interested in learning more

from people with lived experience of mental health problems,” Anita explains. “Most people have little or no knowledge about mental health and its related challenges. But myths and misconceptions are being addressed, and sharing life stories is helping a lot, and will go a long way.”



## Sweden

**David Brudö** has experienced bouts of depression

since his teens, but it wasn’t until later in life – when things became unbearable – that he decided to reach out for help. David notes how, in recent years, more people in Sweden have been willing to talk about mental health openly – yet he still feared colleagues and family would view him as “weak”.

“While people are more willing to speak about, for example, stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness, mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are still not spoken about as openly,” David explains. “But

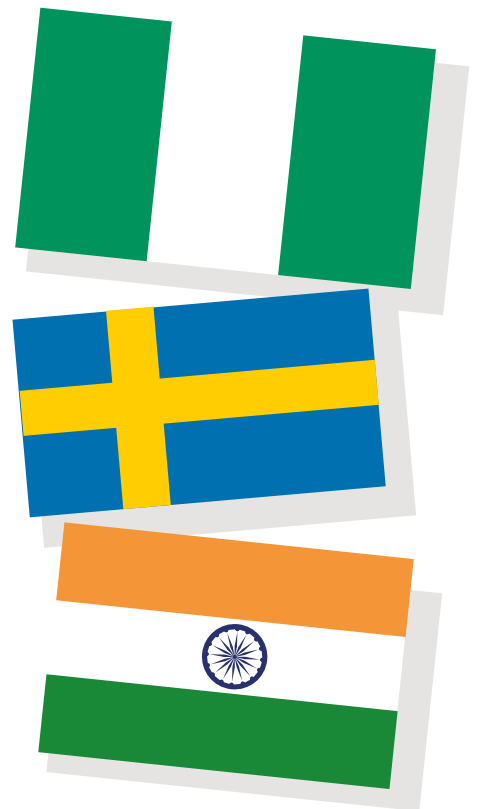
it’s not unusual to see Nordic countries topping the World Happiness Report. And while Sweden has historically been concerned with one of the highest suicide rates since the 1960s, it now has one of the lowest suicide rates in the world.”

As way of explaining these stats, David points to the introduction of the Psychiatric Emergency Response Team – a dedicated mental health care ambulance that is being piloted in Stockholm – as well as Swedish values such as ‘fika’ which is a midday pause to socialise with friends and colleagues, and ‘friluftsliv’, the value of spending time outdoors.

Today, David is the CEO and co-founder of mental health and self-development app Remente, and he sees prevention rather than

treatment as the key to better overall health.

“We will not be able to solve all mental health issues overnight, but it is important to make sure that all walks of life are provided with the right attention and support, to ensure that we continue to see the numbers of suicides decrease, and happiness rates increase.”





## India

**Venkatesh N.** was living with his wife and three children in

Doddaballapura when depression gradually began taking over his life. After his brother died, things took a turn for the worse and Venkatesh started to isolate himself, and eventually stopped going to work.

"I was getting older and losing strength, which added to my worries," says Venkatesh. "Owing to my mental illness, I was struggling to find work. Finally,

when I got in touch with medical assistance, my life improved."

Venkatesh reached out to a local organisation called GASS (Grameena Abyudaya Seva Samsthe), a community-based rehabilitation service. "They helped me in raising my confidence, finding work, and leading a good life. I opened a shop and managed to educate my children well."

While Venkatesh notes that reactions to his experience have ranged from pity to apathy, today he writes poems to express the things that he has been through, and to engage his community in the mental health conversation.

## Time to Change Global

A global anti-stigma campaign that works in low and middle-income countries, Time to Change Global is working with Christian Blind Mission UK, local partners, and people with experience of mental health problems to challenge damaging stereotypes and discrimination. Inspired by the power of personal stories, 'Champions' are people who are speaking up about their experiences in the hope they will inspire, and bring comfort to, others in their communities.

Find out more at [time-to-change.org.uk/global](http://time-to-change.org.uk/global)



## Mexico

In January 2019, **Raquel Contreras Soberanis** was

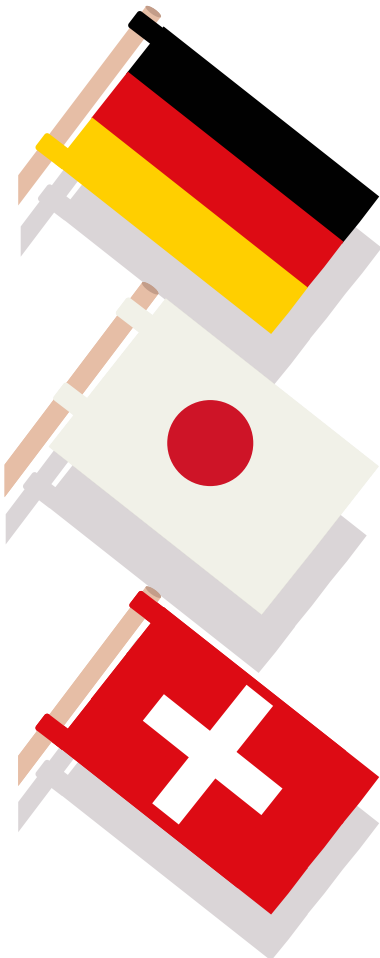
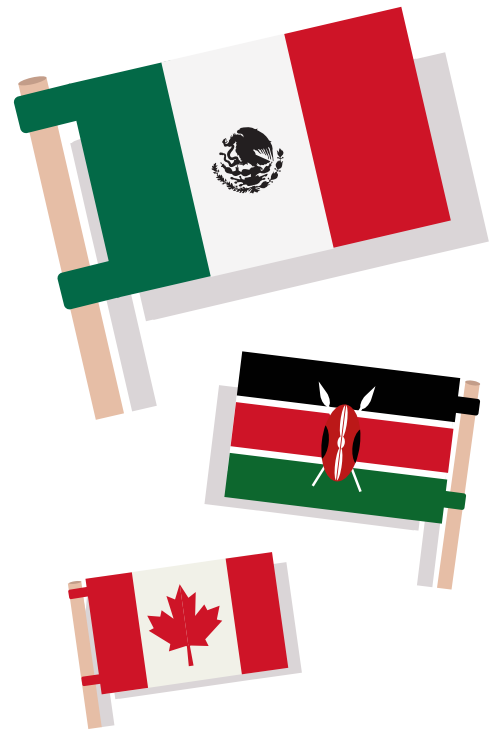
diagnosed with anxiety and depression. But her journey to find support wasn't an easy one.

"In my country, it is very normal to feel discriminated against," Raquel explains. "People with mental health problems, instead of seeking medical attention, try all sorts of things – such as trying harder, going out, even turning to witchcraft – anything but going to a psychiatrist."

"In my country, we don't have access to free mental health treatment or support," Raquel continues. "You need to pay for your own psychologist. Although there are a lot of good doctors available here, the average person on a normal salary, unfortunately, can't afford it."

As Raquel sees it, stoicism when it comes to mental health is something that is ingrained in her culture.

"We have a saying here that's the definition of the way that Mexican people battle problems: 'Los Mexicanos lloramos riendo' – the Mexican people cry laughing."



## Canada

The first time that **Sany Guest** experienced a major

depressive episode was when she was travelling abroad in early adulthood – though reflecting on her childhood, she now realises that the things she was going through were directly linked to undiagnosed attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Sany sought professional help at a walk-in clinic in 2018. After speaking about what she had been going through, Sany was prescribed antidepressants and referred to a free therapist, though at the time of writing she still hasn't had an appointment. "I may be a typical Canadian because I can't afford

anything but a free therapist without coverage, but I am also different because at least I can afford the wait," Sany comments.

"Positive movements and groups reducing stigma and promoting community support, inclusivity, and tolerance have been emerging – from Kids Help Phone, Bell Let's Talk, and Get Real, to #MeToo. To me, this is proof of a society sobering to the fact that mental health is largely responsible for overall health, and must be treated with seriousness.

"But none of these points of hope would be possible without free speech and democracy," Sany notes. "Canadians are privileged to freely debate and vote on how society must improve without fear of serious negative legal and social repercussions."

“It makes me realise the power of sharing experiences, and gives me hope that the stigma attached to mental health issues is being broken, brick by brick”



## Kenya

“I took my first drink in 2003 – there were these cheap sachets

of alcohol that were available back then,” **Edwin Mburu** explains. “My first drink turned into an addiction for 12 years, yet I was oblivious to the fact I was self-medicating two mental illnesses.”

In 2011, Edwin attempted suicide. Four years later he was admitted to rehab where he was eventually diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression. Since then, Edwin has been on the road to recovery, driven by his personal support system as well as local support groups. He also notes a supportive employer where he works as an accountant, and points to a blossoming art community in

Kenya, who are speaking up about their mental health, as well as positive amendments to the mental health bill.

Overall, Edwin says, the reaction to his mental health problems has been a “mixed bag”.

“People listen and ask questions, and some even share their own experiences with mental health issues,” he explains. “This is usually very motivating – it makes me realise the power of sharing experiences, and gives me hope that the stigma attached to mental health issues is being broken, brick by brick.”

“However, at times the engagements are stigmatising and very negative. I have realised that mostly this happens because of ignorance with regards to mental health issues. It can be demoralising, but it reminds me of the bigger picture, and gives me the courage to continue talking about mental health.”

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From small, localised movements empowering people to reach out to others, to national initiatives that put policy in place to support those who are struggling, there’s a lot we can learn from taking a step back and considering a different way of doing things.

But there’s still a long way to go, and it won’t always be an easy journey. But we all benefit when everyone in our community is supported, and so often compassion ripples out further than we anticipated. We’re in this together, and united we *can* make a change.

Read more personal stories from around the world on [happiful.com](https://happiful.com) 

