



WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY 2008

The World Federation for Mental Health has adopted “**Making Mental Health a Global Priority: Scaling up Services through Citizen Advocacy and Action**” as the theme for 2008. The World Federation for Mental Health believes that the best way to create change is through concerted action and advocacy in each community of the world and that each of us has the power to change, the ability to help, and the dedication to see a different world for mental health care, treatment, and promotion.

Mental disorders affect nearly 12% of the world’s population. Approximately 450 million people, or one out of every four people around the world, will experience a mental illness requiring diagnosis and treatment. Mental health and mental illness are a part of every country, culture, age group and socio-economic status. So why haven’t mental illnesses, mental health services and the promotion of mental well-being received the attention and funding that other disorders and health issues have over the years? Informed, targeted and consistent advocacy with clear and coordinated messages are increasingly needed to make mental health and mental illnesses a priority and to afford those living with mental illness the services and respect they deserve.

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CRITICAL ELEMENTS IN BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE

Family self-help and advocacy organisations for mental health have grown over the past two decades to become a formidable advocacy force internationally. They are accepted in many countries as a legitimate source of advice about the needs, concerns and practical problems faced by families/carers and mental health service users and consumers.

Yet, in many other parts of the world, family members and carers of people living with mental illnesses are still not accepted by policy makers and professionals as valued sources of information or as informed advocates for improving mental health policies and services.

Family/carer and consumer/service user mental health organizations may carry out a range of activities and functions, depending on their size, capacity and resources.

Some are small and informally organised groups that lend mutual support to members, while others are formally organised and chartered non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with elected officers and paid staff. Functions and activities may include:

- Providing services to people living with mental illness
- Providing education programs to families and carers
- Providing awareness and education programs to mental health professionals and the community
- Serving as sources of information for government departments, politicians and policy makers.

Whatever their size and scope, an important role of family and carer groups and organisations is providing informed advocacy for the needs and concerns of their members and for the mental health movement. Being a change agent by speaking out from the unique basis of personal experience, working in partnership with service user/consumer groups and citizen advocacy organisations, and engaging with government agencies and elected government leaders are crucial to achieving the aims of improved public policy and enhanced service systems.

Adapted from material supplied by the World Federation for Mental Health: www.wfmh.org