



AN OVERLOOKED BARRIER TO RESILIENCE

How Mental Health Links to the Poverty Trap—and What Social Protection (SP) Can Do About It Based on Lessons from the Senegal Pilot

1 WHY IS MENTAL HEALTH IMPORTANT TO SP PROGRAM OUTCOMES?

When mental health suffers, it quietly blocks progress on livelihoods, learning, and long-term resilience—especially for the poorest and most vulnerable populations. Mental disorders undermine the ability to work; time spent working; and education levels. Disorders also affect parents, impacting child health and development, key predictors of future human capital.

3 WHAT TESTED SOLUTIONS SHOW PROMISE FOR THIS CHALLENGE?

Self-Help Plus (SH+) is a cost-effective, group-based, and scalable stress management program developed by the World Health Organization (WHO). During 5 weekly 2 hour sessions, up to 30 people are led by 2 trained community workers under the supervision of a mental health professional. Culturally adapted versions have shown it can reduce psychological distress and prevent the onset of mental disorders—making it a strong fit for SP programs reaching high-risk populations.

5 WHAT ARE THE KEY STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION?

Based on the Senegal pilot lessons:

1. Engage with clients to present SH+ and assess interest.
2. Identify mental health professionals for supervision and community-level SP staff as facilitators.
3. To support the adaptation, conduct a small-scale qualitative study of mental health perceptions/experiences among beneficiaries, community-level SP staff, and community leaders.
4. If needed, translate, adapt, and test at small scale SH+ material (i.e. audio files).
5. Develop referral procedures for individuals presenting or developing clinical needs.
6. Train facilitators, supervisors, and SP staff to support implementation.

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HOW DOES MENTAL DISTRESS RELATE TO POVERTY?

80% of people with mental disorders live in low and middle income countries, contributing to a USD\$2.1 trillion annual economic burden. Poverty increases vulnerability to mental disorders through stress, insecurity, and limited service access. In turn, mental health challenges raise the risk of entering or remaining in poverty due to difficulties in employment and higher medical costs, affecting resilience to shocks and reinforcing the poverty cycle.

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CAN SH+ BE PART OF ANY SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAM?

Yes, SH+ is designed for low-resource settings and can be delivered through existing SP platforms. It uses pre-recorded audio, requires limited infrastructure, and is delivered by community-level staff. All guiding materials in various languages are available in the below QR. The Human Capital team at the Sahel ASP program tested it in Senegal, localizing resources into a local language (Wolof).



Senegal pilot materials



WHO original resources