

AN ITALIAN CONSENSUS CONFERENCE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES FOR ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

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(on behalf of the Working Group “Consensus on Psychological Therapies for Anxiety and Depression” www.iss.it/documents/20126/0/Consensus_1_2022_EN.pdf)

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In 2022 the Final Document of a “Consensus Conference on psychological therapies for anxiety and depression” (Working Group “Consensus on Psychological Therapies for Anxiety and Depression”, 2022) has been published in the web site of the *Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (Italian National Institute of Health), which is the main governmental agency for research and scientific advice on public health in Italy. This document was prepared by a working group that followed the consolidated Consensus Conference model, which involves formulating questions, creating a document authored by experts in the field, and then assessing the experts’ work through a Jury composed by representatives of social groups and professions. This Consensus Conference was established after a meeting organized in Padua (Italy) in 2016 by Ezio Sanavio (Research Group for Treatment for Anxiety and Depression, 2017), where the English program *Improving Access to Psychological Therapies* (IAPT), led by David Clark together with the economist Richard Layard and launched in 2008 by the National Health Service (Layard & Clark, 2014; Clark, 2017, 2018, 2023), was presented. The IAPT program originated from two key premises. Firstly, it drew upon the evidential support provided by the *National Institute for Health and Care Excellence* (NICE), which indicated that psychotherapy, as opposed to medication, is frequently more effective in treating common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, resulting in fewer relapses and sustained positive outcomes. Secondly, the *London School of Economics* (LSE)

calculated, based on empirical evidence, that improving access to psychological therapies within mental health services could not only increase patient well-being but also yield economic benefits for the nation, such as reduced work absences and lower indirect costs.

For many common mental disorders, therefore, psychotherapy – as shown by the main international guidelines reviewed by the Consensus Conference – should be considered as a first-choice treatment, while physicians often limit themselves to prescribing medications. To this regard, the Final Document of the Consensus Conference emphasized the importance of delivering empirically supported psychological interventions through the adoption of a stepped care approach (i.e., structured around levels of treatment intensity). This approach not only involves the identification of anxiety and depressive disorders by health professionals but also requires an assessment of their severity to facilitate the provision of appropriate interventions of varying intensity. The initial level involves guided self-help and low-intensity psychosocial support, typically administered in primary care settings. Subsequent levels entail referrals to clinicians for structured individual, group, or couple psychotherapies. When deemed suitable, these interventions can be complemented by other psychosocial approaches or pharmacological treatments within specialist settings.

Regrettably, these therapies are not adequately represented within the Italian health system. It is thus imperative, in the broader public interest, to increase

accessibility to psychological therapies within mental health and primary care services. Consequently, there is a need to invest in the recruitment of psychotherapists, currently in scarce supply within the Italian National Health Service, and to arrange comprehensive training in empirically supported treatments for physicians and psychologists operating in the public sector. In Italy there are thousands certified psychotherapists who completed a full 4-year psychotherapy training after graduation in psychology; in these psychotherapy schools, psychologists receive dedicated personal supervision and 400 hours of internship in the public Mental Health Services, according to a specific national law (no. 56/1989), and are included in the National Board of Psychotherapists. Psychiatrists also receive psychotherapy training and are included in the National Board of Psychotherapists. Today patients who need psychotherapy are forced to resort to the private sector, with unacceptable wealth discrimination and disrespect for the Italian Constitution (Sanavio, 2022, p. 17).

The final document of the Consensus Conference, of 117 pages, is both in Italian and in English and includes the report of the experts and recommendations of the Jury. Within its recommendations, the Jury suggests: fostering the creation of analogous initiatives with a particular focus on childhood and adolescence; promoting the dissemination of accurate information among the general population, media, and healthcare professionals; advocating for more rigorous criteria for the accreditation of professional training schools specializing in psychotherapy; supporting the possibility of securing ample funding for medium to long-term trials in diverse contexts and locations across the country.

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