



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
the opening of
the 41st Congress of
European Association for Behavioural and
Cognitive Therapies
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Ladies and gentlemen

It is a profound pleasure to welcome you all to Iceland, to address you in this splendid new concert and conference hall where the artist Ólafur Elíasson has created a glass masterpiece which not only embraces the entire building but also continually calls the ocean and the mountains into play, conducts the ever-changing light into a symphony of colours.

In other countries the following question is sometimes posed: What was Iceland's response to the financial crisis? Here, today, you can witness one of the answers. Although some had their doubts, it was decided to finish this large work of art and put a concert hall inside it in order to host conferences on important issues; thus enriching our souls with music and culture, dialogues on science and social reforms, inviting people from all over the world to explore in this visionary setting avenues to a better world, healthier life, more harmonious communities.

In times of crisis people should seek comfort from an inner balance, from interaction with nature, from creative culture – that is the message of this new building, a response of a nation which three years ago came close to an economic collapse but is now well on its way to recovery sooner and more vigorously than anyone would have expected in those dark December days, a few months after the financial tsunami.

It is highly appropriate that the Congress of the European Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies should, after the inauguration, be among the first gatherings here – an international assembly dedicated to exploring the nexus between our minds and our actions, to prevention of mental problems, seeking to enable people to be fully active in the company of others.

Iceland is in many ways illustrative of a national dedication to a comprehensive healthcare for all, that through the institutional framework we call society we should be responsible for one another. But Iceland also signifies that even the smallest of nations can contribute to the advancement of science, help to cure challenging diseases, test new methods, map out roads to recovery.

In many ways our country has served as a laboratory where the interplay of variables can be more easily observed, where the access to data is faster because it is unhampered by over-complicated bureaucratic machinery, where individuals are so strongly linked to the community that most of us see it as our moral duty to participate in programmes or projects aimed at furthering the success of medical and behavioural science.

We can draw on significant historical examples of how, through public debate and democratic dialogue, sustained information campaigns, the active involvement of the population and strong cooperation between specialists and community leaders, a dramatic transformation was brought about in social policies and public attitudes; how this paved the way for real changes that substantially improved our public health.

We can cite lessons from the campaign against tuberculosis in the 1930s to the 1950s, the campaign against cardiovascular diseases in the 1960s to the 1970s, the campaign against alcoholism in the 1980s to the 1990s and in recent decades the nationwide monitoring aimed at reducing the threat of breast cancer as well as examples from campaigns with respect to many other diseases. In each and every case the linking of public involvement to the best available expert knowledge was the key to success.

In the Nordic countries, serving the health of others has always been seen as a noble profession; our societies have felt that they were responsible for the care and treatment given to those in need. The nature of our health service has created a strong culture of trust which enables doctors and scientists to engage freely in different types of research, and combine it with access to universities and research institutes in other countries for further results.

All these characteristics are highly relevant in furthering progress and therefore it is truly inspiring that your Association now holds its annual congress for the first time in Iceland.

Modern societies, especially in times of deep economic crisis, experience an increasing challenge to mental health, making more difficult for citizens, young and old alike, to remain sane in the face of shocks, setbacks, continuous disappointments.

How should we organize our healthcare, our schools, our workplaces so people can more comfortably enjoy the richness of a healthy life, resolve mental challenges which modernity keeps on enhancing?

How can people be both active and balanced in times of ever increasing uncertainties and difficult financial situation?

How can we reach out to all those in need without exceeding the financial resources of our economies?

Your congress, your dialogue and scientific endeavours are a significant contribution to these crucial tasks, providing directions towards a society that gives everyone the opportunity to be treated.

It is indeed a noble goal – some would even say a vision beyond our reach.

When reflecting on such doubts look again through the windows which come together in this magnificent structure or take a stroll outside the building and observe how it reflects the sea, the sky, the palette of the mountains.

If a nation can, during one of its most profound economic crises, finish a cultural landmark of this kind we surely should be able to reform our societies to serve those who need a new and more harmonious balance in their lives.

That should be the concern of us all and thus I thank you again for assembling in our country and wish you success in your important endeavours.