

# Perceptions and Health-Seeking Behaviour for Mental Illness Among Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Community Members in Wadi Khaled, North Lebanon: Qualitative Study



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## Background

- Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has had a huge impact on its population, many of whom are now displaced
- The Syrian crisis has not only affected the physical health of refugees, but has also had a drastic effect on their mental health
- Wadi Khaled, a rural district in the north of Lebanon, hosts about 36,000 displaced Syrians, and is one of most under-served and marginalized areas of Lebanon
- Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been providing mental health services to Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host population in Akkar, Wadi Khaled since 2016

## Objectives

- 1) To understand perceptions of mental health disorders and subsequent health seeking behaviour among Syrian refugees and the Lebanese population in Wadi Khaled
- 2) To explore factors, including socio-cultural beliefs and other factors that influence health seeking behaviour for mental illness amongst both populations

## Methods

A qualitative research study using focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) was conducted between March and April 2018. Key informants and Syrian refugees seeking mental health care at the MSF clinic were purposively selected. Members of the Lebanese community were selected using convenience sampling. Eight interviews were conducted with key informants; 5 Lebanese (a female teacher, 2 school principals, a mayor and one Sheikh) and 3 Syrian informants (one Sheikh, one Rake Sharee and one Mayor).

This study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to tackle mental illness in relation to cultural beliefs amongst Lebanese and Syrian refugees in the Wadi Khaled region. It illustrates how the mental health-seeking behavior in this population is influenced by religious leaders and cultural perceptions.

## Main themes identified:

1. Participants' perceptions of mental illness
2. Perceived causes of mental illness
3. Barriers to seeking mental health services
4. Alternative health seeking behavior

Focus group discussion	Number of participants aged ≥ 18 years old
Syrian women	N= 18
Syrian men	N=5
Lebanese women	N=21
Lebanese men	N=7

## 1. Participants' perceptions of mental illness

All participants, including those who had accessed mental health services themselves, repeatedly referred to people with mental illness as "stupid", "crazy", "complicated" and "weird"

"People think that those who are receiving mental health services are crazy and they used to stay away from them. Some sympathize with them and others might say they are crazy." 30 year old Syrian man

## 2. Causes and Origin of Mental illness

Participants in our study had differing perspectives relating to the causes of mental illness, which can be grouped under 3 categories:

- Western mental health Interpretations of psychological symptoms and disorders
- Traditional, religious beliefs and the socio-cultural context, which was similar between the two populations
- Contextual factors: Syrian crisis, displacement and trauma

## 3. Barriers to seeking mental health services

- Association of mental illness with stigma, shame and fear among both populations
- Lack of knowledge about mental illness and services
- Beliefs surrounding mental illness strongly linked to religious beliefs, including *Jinn* (possession by evil spirits);
- Lack of financial support and poverty
- Religious healers were the first-line for people with mental illnesses, and were perceived as culturally acceptable and less stigmatizing than mental health professionals

## 4. Health-seeking behaviour and role of religious healers

- Mental illnesses were perceived by several Syrian and the Lebanese participants to be linked to *Jinn*, including their description of care pathways and the role of religious healers
- Study participants discussed how the first step in seeking medical or mental health services would often be to go to a religious leader



*They use very harmful techniques to try expelling the "devil" from the body; they harm the person physically and make him feel even worse. School principal*

## Policy implications

- There is vital need for an adapted awareness campaign about mental health symptoms and services in the region, focusing on households and schools
- There is still a need to integrate certain concepts when introducing mental health, relating psychotherapy to socio-cultural and religious beliefs in such contexts
- Engaging community leaders and raising their awareness about mental illness is fundamental
- Schools could be the gateway to accessing the community through identifying and supporting the mental health needs of children and their parents
- The government is currently launching mental healthcare centres across Lebanon, and it is important to ensure attention is given to Wadi Khaled

## Ethical statement

- This study was approved by the MSF Ethics Review Board (ID 1648) and the Institutional Review Board of Balamand (IRB/O/050-17/1417) University in the North of Lebanon.

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