

MIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES FORUM

The New Beginnings Project - sharing experiences of inequalities and opportunities for refugees with mental ill health

There are widespread misconceptions about mental illness in our societies. This is mainly because unlike the majority of all other diseases, in most cases mental debilitation cannot be seen. However, "mental illness is generally more debilitating than most chronic physical conditions" (Layard, 2012).

In the 2009 paper "A Civilized Society", MIND explores factors that exacerbate mental ill health among refugees and asylum seekers, who are considered to be the most likely group to suffer from mental ill-being. Lacking socio-economic conditions are one of the major causes that negatively affect the mental health of migrant communities. Legal status and other resettlement stresses, such as poor and short term housing, loss of status, inability to work, difficult access to education or denied engagement in the community (Pudelek, 2013) are known to further impact mental health of asylum seekers and refugees.

At the present moment, in order to tackle the issue of mental ill health for refugees and asylum seekers, medical treatment is provided by the NHS. Unlike the NHS, which relies heavily on the medical model of therapy, specialised services, such as the Helen Bamber Foundation, Freedom from Torture, The Forced Migration Trauma Clinic or the Trauma Clinic offer a more holistic and flexible assistance. However, difficulties, mainly related to the lack of funds and equipment, inevitably result in long waiting lists and reduced access for those-in-need, which hugely impacts the result of the work carried out by these organisations.

As demonstrated by relevant research (Cambridge and Williams 2004, MRCF 1999, Franks et al. 2007) refugees in Britain have exceptionally high needs for guidance and support. Extra help is particularly needed due to the government's approach of restricting immigration and services available to migrants, as highlighted in "A Civilized Society".

Our work and research (Medicine, Conflict and Survival, Volume 23, Issue 3, August 2007) highlight a need to shift from a medical model of the causes and effects of ill-health to a social model, which assesses the needs of the individuals from a holistic perspective. A deep awareness of how migrants, especially those vulnerable, find it difficult to seek help from both mainstream services and their own communities led to the creation of the New Beginnings Projects. In 2013, 310 participants, coming from 42 countries were referred to us by organisations that work with the most vulnerable (i.e. ex detainee services, the Helen Bamber Foundation, some legal firms, Freedom from Torture, Trauma Clinic, Forced Migration Trauma Service, etc.). Some of our clients also self-referred themselves for support.

Research and our work highlights how migrants, and in particular those with mental health issues, are the most vulnerable as they experience stigma and often find it difficult to seek help from their own communities and mainstream services. Language barriers present additional challenges. Our clients face additional barriers because most of them are still waiting for a decision on their asylum claim; some have been waiting for more than 10 years. Their status, or the lack of it, not only prevents them from working, but also accessing education or even travelling, because their only income is through vouchers for food and clothes. The closure of many services and the reduction of support by the mental health NHS

services have caused a steep rise in the number of referrals.

Our clients have often been denied a GP registration on the grounds of absent required documentation (usually passports) or because of numerous and complex problems they are suffering from: the very fact of being ill usually turns into a reason for being denied access to health care as GP practices declare they cannot take too many complex cases. We have often experienced the legal and mental consequences of a poor interpreting service: one of our mentees, for example, had to postpone a court hearing because his interpreter wasn't able to properly translate, resulting not only in further bureaucracy but above all, in greater distress for him and his very frail mental equilibrium.

As far as health and social care services are concerned we are constant witnesses of inadequate services due to lack of professionals' knowledge, often causing a denial in housing and benefits refugees are legally entitled to. Lack of proper training also means that authorities and social workers are unable to properly approach people that have particular needs or suffer from mental ill health, usually creating further problems. Home office employees asked one of our clients to show his documents to prove that he had refugee status during his ESOL class at the local adult education college. They also disclosed to his class that he was in detention for a long time. He felt really distressed about the experience and as a consequence of it left college.

Given their migrant or refugee backgrounds, the mentoring programme can be understood as supporting survivors of adversity to make positive changes, so that they are better able to cope with life and its challenges. Positive results are demonstrated also by the fact that, after taking part in the Project, 40% of mentees engaged more and better with social and healthcare services; 80% of mentees and ex-mentees have established links outside of the home and joined activities of interest to them; and finally, 20% of the participants have started other volunteering or education programmes. One of the ways through which many mentees decide to be active and put in place their new skills in the community, is by deciding to become mentors and give time and share personal experiences to support and encourage new mentees. We help our mentees celebrate their diversity and assure them that it is not 'bad to be different'. As a result, one service user volunteered to teach other mentees Arabic while another, who wants to be a mathematics teacher began to teach Mathematics. This was their way to not only give back but also left them feeling empowered and provide hope for a future livelihood. Still other mentees find strength by telling their stories via music, art, poetry and photography.

The wide range of services along with the mentoring enables them to overcome their insecurities, gain self-confidence and the courage to tackle their mental as well as physical problems. The Forum represents, therefore, their hope for a better future and gives them a space to put into practice their existing skills and newly acquired abilities. In this we see our greatest triumph.

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Mental illness and asylum seeking: A never-ending struggle for survival

The interviewee arrived in the UK from Nigeria in October 2007. Shortly after his wife arrived, they both applied for asylum and have lived in London together since that time. Their daughter was born and diagnosed with Down's Syndrome in 2012. From the very beginning the interviewee had to face countless challenges and discrimination.

His negative experiences started from the time he arrived. His money and passport were stolen by a person he thought was a solicitor. He then ended up in detention, where he was refused medical assistance despite his severe mental ill health. He has received very poor or no service and support from his GP or social workers. At present, he and his family are supported by Section 4 NASS and thus live on around £36 per person a week, insufficient to meet even the most basic needs.

Due to their asylum application still pending, the access to specialist services for the child has been fragmented and not very effective. Medical appointments and treatments have been difficult to access, particularly because of lack of money for transportation. Obviously, this impacts negatively on the mental health of a parent who is already struggling. "That affected my health again. I did not know what to do. I was confused, demoralised and very worried. I do not know whom to talk to. The only thing that I know is that I have to face it." Apart from charities, he receives no support for his child.

Initially, the attitude towards the necessity to migrate away from his home country was defined as a very positive one; "Something is worrying you or someone is after you in your own country, and you know that there is a safe place where to stay, at least. A place where there is nobody who is going after your life and your family, where you are not under pressure and you have a moment of respite." However, arriving in the UK and trying to settle down is a completely different experience. "By the time you come you think everything will be easy for you, but after few months or when your visa expires is an entire other story."

Difficulties the interviewee has to face as an asylum seeker are numerous, particularly when it comes to his medical problems. Shortly after coming to the UK, he began to develop serious heart problems. Despite his severe health situation, however, he was denied a GP registration and was not given any medication. "The first time I wanted to register to a GP they asked me very intrusive questions: 'how long have you been in this country? What is your status?' I had to wait for years before I was allowed to register to a GP. My problems started in 2008 and I was registered only in 2011." Inevitably, this affected negatively both his mental and physical health. Further negative experiences, especially the lack of support from social services, detention and stress over the years, added more strain to his physical and mental ill health.

When it comes to describing his experience, however, the interviewee does not think the challenges he faced differ from the majority of all the other asylum seekers. "They still face the same problems many of them do not have still registered to a GP. Is not the problem that is peculiar to me alone, it is a general problem to all the asylum seekers. They discriminated against us and the system does not recognise you. It is worrisome and you feel you do not exist." It is thanks to organizations like Medical Justice, Dover Detainees Support Group, The Forum and other charities that he feels to have been rescued: "They have saved

us from a lot of pressure and embarrassment. I received a lot of assistance and I benefited a lot from them, particularly in health terms.

However, all these challenges have not destroyed his hopes. "I want to live and not to die. That is why I ran away. I am hopeful and optimistic that one day we will be set free. Even if they will confine us physically, they cannot tie down our spirits. "

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