

MENTAL HEALTH & PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELLING FOR PEOPLE ON THE MOVE IN SOUTH AFRICA: REFLECTIONS & EXPERIENCES



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SUMMARY

Mental health concerns among people on the move, range from traumatic experiences relating to entering the borders of South Africa, challenges relating to cultural assimilation, discrimination based on their legal status or nationality and separation from family. Left unprocessed these concerns or experiences could lead to several problems experienced by the migrant population which could include social consequences or mental health disorders. A lack

of knowledge of mental health as well as the services available leads to these experiences not being addressed.

This article aims to give feedback on the experiences of providing Mental Health and Psychosocial services to the migrant population, identification of the mental health services available and service delivery gaps that were identified in the process.

KEY TERMS

Migrant

For the purpose of this article the term migrant will refer to a person who has migrated across the border of the country where they hold citizenship to another country. This could be through immigration laws or the refugee system within a country.

Mental Health

Mental health is more than mental health disorders rather referring to our emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Furthermore, it is confirmed that there is a link between mental and physical health.

Psychosocial Services

The Papyrus Project confirms that traumatic experiences can deplete a person's resources and therefore creating a need for external support to rebuild a person's emotional wellbeing.

Acculturation

Acculturation is the process in which a person adopts a dominant culture's norms and values as if they were their own.

Trauma

There are different types of trauma that can be experienced ranging from single to continuous events, trauma that results from another person's trauma or even difficult challenges that children might experience before they have developed the necessary skills to cope with those challenges.

CONTEXT

Through a partnership with Unicef, Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town (SCCT) presented MHPSS to the client system. It was witnessed to be a great need when considering the number of clients that is making use of the service. The process followed was that the service was being promoted through all departments of SCCT to the clients that visited, furthermore referrals were being received from external organisations especially Social Workers. SCCT was in a unique position whereby the service could be presented in a variety of languages due to the diverse staff compliment. For the period 2021 – 2022 a total number of 117 families received a minimum of 6 counselling sessions. The presenting needs differed greatly, with the following being the most common:

- Gender Based Violence
- Grief / Bereavement (Death as well as separation)

- Discrimination based on legal status
- Cultural differences (Country of Origin vs South Africa)
- Mental Health Challenges

Through rendering the service not only was Counselling provided but internal referrals to other departments were possible as well as other resources available in the community, therefore it allowed practitioners the ability to work holistically with the clients and ensure that their needs are being met both psychologically as well as practically. The end goal being to ensure that the process of seeking refuge within South Africa could be made easier with the maximum amount of support being received by the clients.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Traumatic Experiences

It is a common understanding that people on the move experience complex trauma. This is a phenomenon that relates to how migrants not only experience trauma in their country of origin but that they are re-traumatised by the process of fleeing their country thus seeking Asylum in another country. In the African context this can relate to the trauma they experience in their country of origin being war, political persecution or even persecution due to their sexual orientation. The second instance of trauma can be described as the process of leaving their country, often they would leave their country in ways that could be deemed as unsafe due to the founded fear that they might be stopped by authorities of their own

country – those that do leave their country in an authorised manner might experience trauma through the interviewing process at the border. Further trauma is experienced through fear of the unknown, the guilt of the one's that were left behind or the loss of their culture/ traditions and in some cases, they are met with anti – migrant sentiments or a struggle to survive in the country of asylum. Therefore, the traumatic experience is not a once off incident that is only experienced in their country of origin but should rather be seen as a continuous process.

Challenges with acculturation

Migrants in South Africa must quickly adjust into society which has the potential to further traumatise them. This process could be made

more difficult due to several challenges / stressors, which may include:

- Differences in the culture – Old vs New
- Language Barriers
- Laws which might be against their cultural values / views

In South Africa migrants settle within the community among citizens and should they not have access to a network of support of other migrants that understand these challenges and specifically their culture they might not be able to successfully integrate into society.

Discrimination & Bullying

Migrants face several challenges with discrimination and/or bullying in the country of asylum, with the most common forms being:

- Race based (Anti-migrant sentiments)
- Language / Accent
- Clothing
- Religious views
- Legal Status

The discrimination might be experienced openly where the migrants are ridiculed, denied access to certain spaces or services or more subtle where they are being excluded from social

activities. All of this influence the mental well-being of migrants and their ability to thrive in the country of asylum.

Separation from family

During the process of fleeing migrants might lose contact with their family, either by fleeing the country of origin on their own or during the migration journey. This has a severe impact on their mental well-being and could lead to feelings of guilt that more should have been done to stay together or they might even feel guilt of being in a slightly better situation. Regardless of how the separation occurred there will be many unanswered questions in terms of the well-being of the family members that they have been separated from and they might even blame themselves for all that happens to the family members while they are not together.

Awareness of Mental Illness

Mental Illness has in recent years started to gain more attention and, in most countries, this has led to a better understanding and seeking of therapy or medical attention when mental-wellbeing is declining. In certain cultures, this might not be the case as mental illness may be viewed different i.e., the sentiment that mental illness occurs when the ancestors has been angered, guidance of ancestors was not accepted or even Witchcraft as such not everyone will seek assistance when mental illness occurs.

CONSEQUENCES

Anxiety

Anxiety is a common emotion among all people, in small amounts anxiety can be helpful to a person as it places the person in a state of hyper alertness to ensure that an appropriate response can be provided to a stressful situation. Prolonged exposure to anxiety can be very

harmful and lead to anxiety disorders. Migrants experience several stressors that leads to anxiety on all levels of their migration journey. Particularly the stressors during travelling to another country and challenges with adapting to the new environment has been seen as major contributors to anxiety among the migrant

population – specifically fear of the unknown while enroute to the country of asylum.

Depression

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses worldwide. It is known as the ‘silent killer’ as often depression is not easily observable by anyone outside the person’s inner circle. Depression is categorised as the prolonged exposure to stressors without the necessary support. Depression affects a person’s thoughts, moods and behaviour, such a person will withdraw from social activities and lose interest in activities that they previously found joy in. Finally, depression has been cited as the major contributor to suicidal thoughts or acts. The migrant population is particularly susceptible to depression due to the prolonged exposure of stress during the migration journey and they often lack the support system that could assist in successfully addressing these emotions or feelings.

Substance Misuse

Substance Misuse is a worldwide concern. The effects on the mental health of a person misusing substances have not yet been fully researched,

however it is a known fact that often persons that are experiencing mental illness misuse substances as a coping mechanism. This is particularly true among the migrant population as they have experienced a multitude of stressors and complex trauma and they could often resort to substances to lessen the emotions experienced. In addition, there is also the cultural aspects where certain substances may form part of rituals or traditions and is not viewed as substances by the persons participating in this use.

Social Consequences

As previously mentioned, with many mental illnesses a person might withdraw from social activities, which creates further challenges as they withdraw from the very system that could assist them. This withdrawal leads to further stressors and becomes a cycle. The migrant population to an extent are already excluded from certain social gatherings due to anti-migrant sentiments (whether perceived or real) and this reduces the support system that they could be building up for themselves to help them adjust to the new life that they are trying to build for themselves.

PRACTICES

Individual Therapy

Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town’s main response to the mental wellbeing of the migrant population have been through the provision of individual counselling sessions. A contract was set up with each client to attend a minimum of six sessions of 1 hour each. During the presentation of the sessions, it was found that often these sessions became their main source of support. Several clients spoke about the loneliness experienced when not attending the sessions. One of the clients stated that were it not for these sessions

she would have had no one to talk to or share her experiences. This created a risk of dependency on the organisation and often during the sessions time was spent on identifying possible support systems within the community. For many migrants this was religious institutions or migrant community organisations such as South African Somali Association etc. The reasons for seeking counselling sessions varied as mentioned previously however the main reasons being Gender Based Violence and Grief / Bereavement. The last mentioned was not only the loss of loved

one's but also the loss of their culture, country of origin and friends. Economic challenges have also been a motivator to attend the sessions, however these tended to be more difficult sessions to navigate as the persons had certain expectations on the counsellor to provide to their needs. Although the improved mental wellbeing of the migrants was the main outcome, they also became aware of support networks available to them as well as other resources. Towards the end of the counselling relationship, the organisation has seen the development within the client system where they have exercised their self-determination and attempted to identify resources to address their own needs. There were however clients that were so focussed on their immediate dire situation that they struggled to create a vision for their future.

Mental Health Education for migrants

As previously mentioned, an increased awareness of the importance of mental health is needed to ensure that clients actively seek assistance when their mental wellbeing is impacted. This was done through the presentation of workshops focussing on different themes identified either through interactions with the clients in a broader sense as well as information gained from the counselling sessions. Specifically, the presentation of an Emotional Support Group has been a service

during which an increased awareness of mental health needs was seen among the client system.

Gaps in service delivery

Very few organisations deliver a counselling service to the migrant population, this was particularly witnessed with the number of requests for counselling sessions. The need for this service arises particularly as there is a distrust in generic service providers due to the fears of anti-migrant sentiments as well as a perceived lack of understanding of the stressors related to their migration journey.

Due to the complex nature of the stressors experienced by the migrant population often services are needed on a longer term. The number of clients needing the service places strain on the ability to conduct a session with each of the clients on a fairly regular basis and therefore the number of counsellors needed is increased.

There have been instances where clients approached counselling with a certain objective in mind and once this objective has been reached, they terminate the sessions prematurely as there is still trauma that they have not discussed or processed which leads to re-victimisation at a later stage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the presentation of Mental Health and Psychosocial Services to the migrant population the following recommendations can be made for future consideration or service delivery:

- Counselling services should be readily available to the migrant population as often it is their only source of a support system.
- Counsellors should receive training not only

in terms of providing basic counselling but also an increased awareness of the migration process and laws that govern migration and cultural values or perceptions in terms of mental health.

- Increased efforts to be made towards presenting Mental Health Awareness among the migrant community is essential for

future success in motivating clients to seek assistance as the challenges arise.

- Counselling should be provided in a holistic manner: Often the need for counselling may stem from other needs that is identified through the counselling sessions i.e., Lack

of documentation, unemployment etc. and therefore the model utilised by Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town was effective as several internal referrals could be made to address these needs and allowing the counsellors to focus on the emotional needs of the clients.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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