



Mental Health in the Somali Community

By: Fatma Affey and Ayni Muse

* TRIGGER WARNINGS: RAPE, KILLINGS, BEATINGS, TORTURE

According to some people in the Somali community, mental health does not exist. It's not always considered as important as physical health because people don't consider issues that aren't physical problems in our community. That's completely different from the reality, of course. In this article, we are going to address the issue of mental health that is very present in the Somali Community. We will discuss the post-traumatic stress disorders that came after the war in Somalia, challenges of seeking mental health care, and generational trauma. We are both Somali girls and believe that these issues are not talked about enough, and in this article, we want to bring attention to these issues that are harming our community.

PTSD from War:



In the world, Somalia is one of the countries that struggles the most with mental health due to many reasons like the civil war. When the civil war broke out in 1991, many people in Somalia saw and experienced traumatizing events. Whether it was events that happened to them or their relatives, seeing such horrifying inhumane things definitely left a huge impact on their mental health. Some Somali people are "good" at hiding their illness, while others might show and seem "crazy" to

others. Mental illness is something that is not always recognized in Somalia and even in Somali communities in MN. The lack of mental health education makes people assume that a mentally ill person is "crazy" or not normal. In Somalia, "one in three people are burdened with psychological disorders" (PPHR, 2017). Even among Somalis living in Minnesota, the number of people who have mental illnesses like PTSD, depression, and anxiety is high (Jaeger, 2014). Most of those came from the trauma some experienced during the civil war, after the civil war, and the stress of relocating (Jaeger, 2014). A person who experienced the war might feel guilty, have flashbacks, and feel worthless. During the war, women were raped, and family members were brutally beaten and killed. If someone lived through that, they would feel guilty that they didn't try their best to stop the militiamen who were doing that to their loved ones. Having to go through that much, many would obviously have trauma which would also lead to other mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Jaeger, 2014).

Challenges of Seeking Mental Health Care:



To this day, mental illness is something that is hard and confusing for our community. There is a need for more understanding of what mental illnesses are and how they could affect someone's life. More awareness is also needed about seeking treatment and stigma. There's a real problem with resorting to confinement and sending kids with mental health problems back home to avoid having to deal with the mental health struggles people in our community are facing.

When people don't have proper knowledge of what's happening to their loved ones, they can assume that they are sick and crazy.

There are a lot of barriers when it comes to mental health back home in Somalia and here in MN. Back home, it is often not possible for people to even get the knowledge and treatment they need due to Somalia's lack of mental health facilities available to help people. There is also a significant lack of mental health providers. However, one well-known doctor in Somalia, Dr. Abdirahman Ali Awaale, helps people suffering from mental illness (Rivelli, 2010). Dr. Awaale has left a huge impact on Somalia since he established a mental health hospital in Mogadishu.

Even after relocating to MN, we continue to face challenges when trying to seek care for mental health. The stigma around mental health is real. People are scared to be labeled crazy. As a community, we need to talk about mental health more and make it easier for people to get help for their mental health.

Generational Trauma:

Somali immigrants directly experienced extremely traumatic events like the war, but first-generation Somalis still feel the impact through generational trauma. Generational trauma is trauma that is passed on from one generation to the next. For example, let us say someone went through slavery, and the trauma they went through caused them to become more anxious and frequently depressed. Those symptoms get passed down to the next generation when it comes to generational trauma. In the Somali community, generational trauma is something that's very prevalent because of the civil war that broke out in Somalia. Many families were tortured and abused, and the trauma they got from that had passed down to their children.

There was a study that looked at and found generational trauma between Somali mothers and their children. The study consisted of over 200 Somali mothers and their children. The mothers had fled the war and spent several years in refugee camps, mainly in Kenya, and came to the US in the 90s. While fleeing the war and in refugee camps, the mothers suffered through about 24 traumatic events like forced family separation, some form of torture, and not having basic things for survival like water and a home (USCD, 2015). Those mothers were experiencing PTSD, depression, and anxiety, and that experience was "strongly associated with their children's outcome of depression" (USCD, 2015). The study found that mothers that experienced

torture were related to mothers experiencing depression, “which in turn, then was related to their children’s own depression” (USCD, 2015). Generational trauma could also cause mothers to have separation anxiety from their kids and feel overprotective of them, especially when raising them in a new country and culture. The generational trauma has a huge impact on our community, and without more education and awareness about mental health and help, this generational trauma will just continue.

In conclusion, awareness surrounding mental health brings us a step closer to breaking the stigma around it. Mental health has been and continues to be a big issue in our community, and we need to discuss it more openly. We should not dismiss mental health and hide it. It starts by setting an example for the kids in our community by showing them that talking about mental health is not a bad thing. Being young Somali girls, we want to assure other young Somali girls that seeking help is not crazy and that we should all start talking about mental health more. There are so many resources for mental health, and you can ask for help by talking with your school counselor, teacher, doctor, mentor, friend, older sibling, or any other person you trust. If you need help, don’t be afraid to get help, and know that it is a marker of strength to get help when you need it!

References

- Jaeger, Kristopher S.. (2014). Addressing Mental Health with the Somali Population in the Twin Cities Area. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website:
https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/333
- Rivelli, F. (2010, October). A SA of MH in Somalia – mental health innovation network. A SITUATION ANALYSIS OF MENTAL HEALTH IN SOMALIA. Retrieved July 1, 2022, from
<https://www.mhinnovation.net/sites/default/files/downloads/innovation/reports/A-SA-of-MH-in-Somalia.pdf>
- PPHR. (2017, August 24). One thought on "an overlooked consequence of Civil War: Mental Illness in Somalia". Princeton University. Retrieved July 1, 2022, from
<https://pphr.princeton.edu/2017/08/24/an-overlooked-consequence-of-civil-war-mental-illness-in-somalia-and-the-somali-diaspora/>
- USCD. (2015, October 28). The passage of trauma – generation to generation. UCSD Center for Community Health. Retrieved July 1, 2022, from
<https://ucsdcommunityhealth.org/news/somali-refugee-mothers-and-their-children-how-trauma-is-passed-from-one-generation-to-the-next/#:~:text=While%20in%20Somalia%2C%20or%20in,mothers%20had%20also%20experienced%20torture>