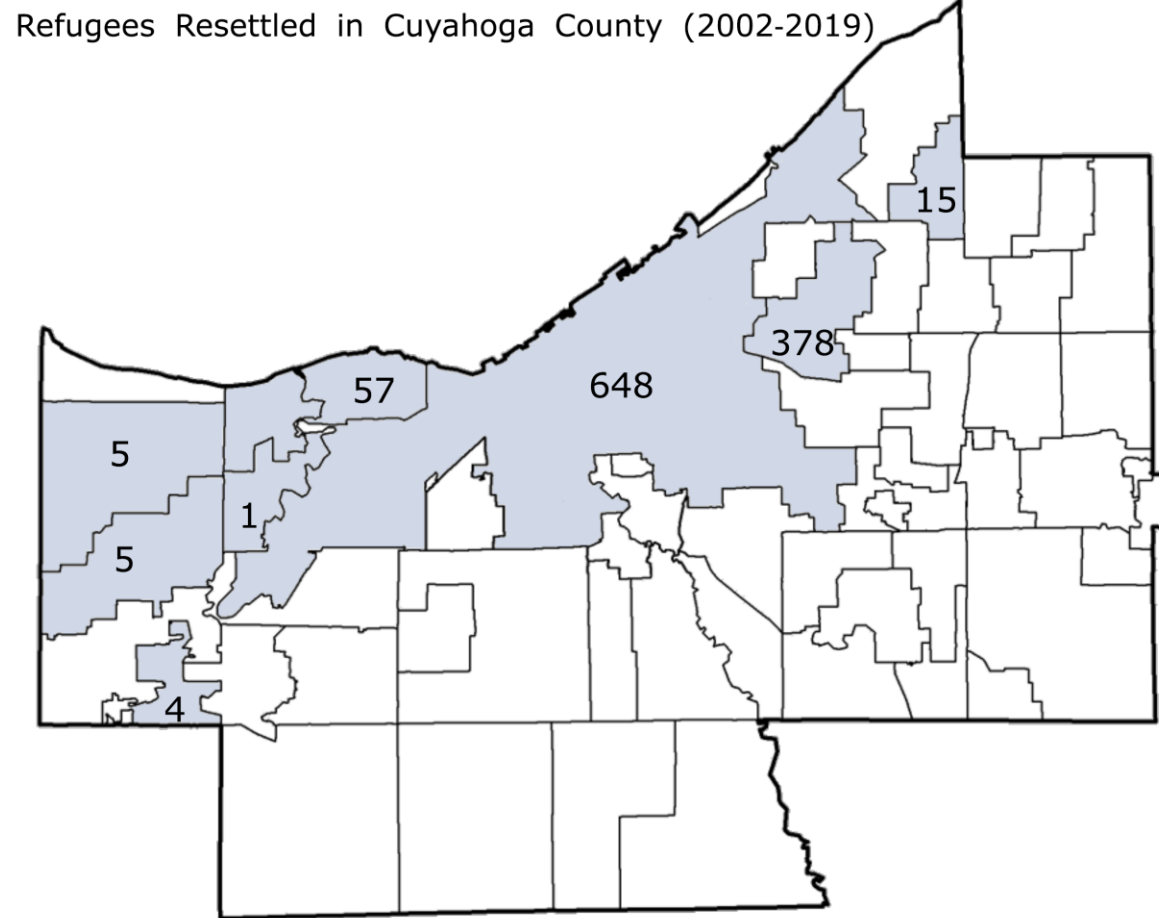


Idioms of Distress in Muslim Refugee Communities: A Literature Review and Training Project

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Refugees Resettled in Cuyahoga County (2002-2019)



Abstract

Based on five years of volunteer work with refugee agencies and their clients in the Midwest and a six month project including training agency staff about idioms of distress from refugee clients, this poster explores the ways that health care providers often misunderstand the mental health needs of Muslim-identifying refugees. Given the paucity of literature about this population, this poster sheds light on idioms of distress for this community.

Introduction

This project had human subjects research approval from Case Western Reserve University and included a literature review and training intervention capstone project from June to December of 2016. After eliciting idioms of distress in the communities served, agency staff received training presentations to better support their refugee clients in their mental health care seeking behaviors.

Research Setting

1118 Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees resettled in Cuyahoga County between 2002 and the end of October, 2019.¹

Refugees were resettled through three agencies including Us Together, Inc. Run by refugees for refugees, its Cleveland location also worked with Bhutanese and Congolese refugees at the time of this project.

Methodology

- 1 Literature review on idioms of distress among communities served.
- 2 Survey to ascertain knowledge about barriers to care and confidence level in working with clients.
- 3 "Barriers to Care" and "Idioms of Distress" presentations to staff. Creation of one-page primers.
- 4 Post survey to gauge knowledge about barriers to care and belief that the presentations would help respondents to work with clients.

Idioms of Distress

As defined by Mark Nichter in 1981, idioms of distress are adaptive responses or attempts to resolve a pathological situation in a culturally meaningful way.² They can present as somatic complaints, possession, or other significant culturally bound experiences.

Since they reflect and influence the stigma associated with illness, and stigma worsens the experience of an illness, it is important to know how to respond to these idioms for both agency staff and healthcare providers.

First Survey Results

Respondents identified transportation, language, and different cultural contexts as barriers to accessing care. They also stated that in their belief, Iraqi and Syrian refugees refused to seek mental health care due to fear of being considered "crazy."

The range of confidence in recommending options to clients was "unconfident" to "very confident" which highlighted a need to provide basic options to staff for working with clients reticent to accessing mental health care.

Presentations

Both presentations were held onsite at the UST Cleveland office. The first "Barriers to Care" outline barriers to care from the literature using a case study of Lia Lee, whose experience was depicted in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. This presentation ended with a discussion of the ways that UST is uniquely prepared to help their clients discuss their mental health concerns.

"Idioms of Distress" followed the first presentation and defined the term and outlined idioms commonly found among the communities that UST Cleveland served at the time. One page primers were provided to the staff (right).

Post Survey Results

After the presentations, UST staff responded to a survey to ascertain their new level of knowledge of barriers to care and idioms of care, as well as new confidence level with working with their clients.

The respondents were all extremely satisfied with the presentations, were able to explain what an idiom of distress is, and were more confident in discussing clients' concerns.

One Page Primers

IDIOMS OF DISTRESS IN AFGHAN REFUGEES

What is an idiom of distress? (1)
-an adaptive response or attempt to resolve a pathological situation in a culturally meaningful way
-this can manifest as somatic complaints, possession, or other significant experiences bound to a specific cultural understanding of health
-idioms of distress reflect and influence the stigma associated with illness

Idioms of Distress (2)
-Asabi, overwhelmed by major life stressors
-Jigar khun, form of sadness including grief following interpersonal loss
-Fisnar-e-bala: internal state of emotional pressure and agitation
-Fisnar-e-payin: low energy and motivation
-Delam naram hast: my heart is noisy tied to feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and loss of honor (izzat)

Six Key Cultural Values (3)
Elicited by research in Kabul, Bamyan, and Mazar-e-Sharif, these values underpin everyday life and create resiliency in Afghan refugees.
-Iman (faith) plays large role in how refugees interacted with trauma and mental health issues, strong religious conviction was source of strength and should continue to be used in helping refugees cope with their past.
-Wahdat (family unity) and Ittifaq (harmony) is necessary for achieving consensus in decision making, resolving disputes, and sharing a household without conflict.
-Khidmat (service) to others, family, and community. The value of service lay at the core of interviewees future aspirations. Students want to serve others. Failure to serve can be a major source of shame.
-Korbeh (perseverance and effort) can only help make refugee's life better. By working hard, refugees feel that their lives will improve.
-Akhlag (morals) or the codes governing appropriate behavior. Having good akhlag marks worthiness and character and losing it can be a consequence of economic hardship or conflict.
-Izzat (respectability and honor) of a single person, their family. If children are mashour (prominent) then the family does better and by fulfilling family honor, refugees can feel that they are recovering.

(1) Nichter, M. *Cult Med Psych* 1981; 5: 379. doi:10.1007/BF00054782
(2) Miller, Kenneth F., Patricia Omidian, Abdul Samad Qureshi, Nasirna Qureshi, Mohammed Nader Nasir, Sema Nasir, Nisar Mohammed Karim, and Abdul Aziz Zangal. "The Afghan Symptom Checklist: A Culturally Grounded Approach to Mental Health Assessment in a Conflict Zone." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76, no. 4 (2006): 423-33. doi:10.1002/ajop.20029.429
(3) Eggerman, M. *Patner-Rick C. Suffering, hope, and estrangement: Resilience and cultural values in Afghanistan.* *Social Science & Medicine* 108(2015): 291-301. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.01.028

IDIOMS OF DISTRESS IN IRAQI AND SYRIAN REFUGEES

What is an idiom of distress? (1)
-an adaptive response or attempt to resolve a pathological situation in a culturally meaningful way
-this can manifest as somatic complaints, possession, or other significant experiences bound to a specific cultural understanding of health
-idioms of distress reflect and influence the stigma associated with illness

Research on Arab Refugees (2)
-Refugees generally do not want issues to become public since treatment and interventions can be stigmatizing
-communication styles are usually formal, impersonal, and restrained
-Worry that psychologists/psychiatrists do not see religion as genuine source of solace and healing
-issues are attributed to jinn, evil eye (naza'ayn al hasud)

Terms used by many Arab refugees include: "a dark life" for depression which can cause "thinking too much" and is not a positive aspect of life. Negative feelings manifest in physical ways like "oppression in the chest."

Iraqi Idioms of Distress (3)
Research in Iraqi immigrant and refugee community of Dearborn, Michigan elicited 5 specific idioms.
-Dayg: encompasses symptoms of rumination, poor concentration, sleep issues, somatic complaints of backache, muscle aches, numbness. Insecurity and uncertainty
-Qalbak maqoud: labels condition associated with heart being squeezed, sadness, anxiety
-Asabi: condition associated with heart being squeezed, sadness, anxiety
this can also be when people get suddenly angry
-nafak deeyega: constriction in chest
-maknoon: choking sensation

Syrian Idioms of Distress (4)
ana ta ban literally translating to I am tired, and nafitzi i bana, my psyche is tired.
Habit qalbi: somatic reaction of sudden fear "falling or crumbling of heart"
Hazan: depression, sadness, difficulty in adjustment to an acute stressor
Al ayn hassira wal yadd hassira: "eye sees but hand is short or cannot reach" (lack of resources)
Majnoon: those with severe mental disorders or directly translated as crazy, mad, or insane

(1) Nichter, M. *Cult Med Psych* 1981; 5: 379. doi:10.1007/BF00054782
(2) Eggerman, M., and J. B. Crayth. "Culturally Sensitive Social Work Practice With Arab Clients in Mental Health Settings." *Health & Social Work 23*, no. 1 (2008): 9-22. doi:10.1080/104398907015118
(3) Nichter, M., M. Wazwani, and B. Miller. "The Harmed Trauma Organization: Adapting a Crisis Cultural Instrument for Measuring Trauma, Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Iraqi Refugees."
(4) Nichter, M., et al. "Cultural and Psychological Wellbeing of Syrian Refugees: A Review for Mental Health and Psychological Support staff working with Syrian Affected by Armed Conflict." *Canada UNHCR*, 2015

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1. "Refugee Processing Center Data." n.d. Refugee Processing Center. Accessed September 9, 2019. https://ireports.wrapsnet.org/Interactive-Reporting/EnumType/Report?ItemPath=/rpt_WebArrivalsReports/MX%20Arrivals%20by%20Destination%20and%20Nationality
2. Nichter, M. *Idioms of distress: alternatives in the expression of psychosocial distress: a case study from South India.* *Cult Med Psych* (1981) 5: 379. doi:10.1007/BF00054782

Nationality of Refugees Resettled

Afghanistan	122
Iraq	671
Syria	325