

The Middle East has one of the highest rates of major depression



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Mental illness is a condition which can impact a person's mood: the way they think and how they feel. It occurs in people of all walks of life, including all classes, race, ethnic and religious divisions. Disorders such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and psychosis, are all part of the wide and varied spectrum of mental illness. It was surprising to hear that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated that there are around five hundred million people on the planet affected by a mental illness. It also saddens me to learn that these conditions are generally not treated with the same sense of urgency as physical illness, and that in many areas the resources to provide the care needed are often not available.

Research by *PLOS Medicine* found that globally, depression is the second highest cause of disability – more than 4% of the world's population has been diagnosed. A recent study by WHO found that the Middle East has one of the highest rates of major depression compared to the rest of the world – almost 7%. October 10 marked the annual global Mental Health Awareness day – the day originated in 1992 as a

plan to focus more attention on the range of mental illnesses and the effects that they can bring to people's lives worldwide. This year addresses the subject of 'Dignity in Mental Health'. According to the Social Care Institute for Excellence, this can be divided into three focus areas: stigma and discrimination, acute inpatient care, and human rights violations.

An untreated mental illness can prevent someone from living their everyday life. To illustrate this, WHO created a televised campaign: 'I had a black dog, and his name was Depression'. The metaphor reflects the frightening condition, describing the heavy burden felt by sufferers and aimed to open people's eyes to how distressing and consuming depression can be.

The organisation, Embrace, is an awareness support network for mental health in Lebanon and the Middle East. They also came up with a campaign to help abolish the stigma surrounding mental illness and to encourage people to speak openly and learn about mental health. The campaign in Arabic translates as 'untie the knot', referring to the often confused and limited understanding of mental health by Middle Eastern societies.

Despite an increase in mental health awareness at a national level in the Middle East, it is still unlikely that an affected person will know where to go, who to talk to and how to access care. Conditions such as depression and anxiety affect every country and society in the world, however these illnesses often remain stigmatised with sufferers feeling afraid to talk about their struggle and unable to know where to turn for help. Many people are still afraid and ashamed to seek help for a mental illness, whether for themselves or their loved ones. Some families still believe that mental health is a taboo subject and expect that by shutting it away and not addressing it, the issue will just disappear. In some cases,

people have felt more comfortable diagnosing a family member with demons and calling a religious healer to perform an exorcism than to admit they are in a psychiatric hospital or being prescribed medication for a mental illness. This is the type of misunderstanding that needs to be abolished.

I applaud the many charities and organisations which are pushing to ensure that those who need it are under-going treatments, receiving the best care and ensuring patients' human rights are always protected, especially at times when their own judgement may be compromised. Often these mental illnesses are largely preventable and treatable and this is usually easier the earlier they are recognised and diagnosed. We must continue to support those who strengthen communities by educating people about mental illness in a bid to extinguish the shame associated with, and negativity surrounding this subject. I once read a great quote by Michelle Obama which sums this up well: "At the root of this dilemma is the way we view mental health. Whether an illness affects your heart, your leg, or your brain, it's still an illness, and there should be no distinction." MEH

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