

## Virtual psychological support in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake in Syria

On Feb 6, 2023, a seismic event with a magnitude of 7.8 Hz and 7.6 Hz hit both Syria and Turkey, leading to widespread destruction, loss of life, and injuries. The disaster left many individuals without shelter as it devastated buildings and infrastructure. Syria, in particular, was unprepared for such a catastrophe as the country had already been ravaged by a decade-long war.<sup>1,2</sup> The psychological trauma caused by the earthquake was likely to impair the mental wellbeing of affected residents. However, psychological support through specialised organisations was only available on a small scale owing to the difficulty of physically reaching the affected population, a shortage of qualified health-care professionals, financial costs, and the social stigma associated with visiting a mental health professional.<sup>2</sup> Remotely delivered or digital mental health interventions have not yet been implemented in Syria.

In response, a team of psychiatrists, general physicians, and psychotherapists volunteered to launch a free-of-charge virtual psychological clinic, with free access to psychological support services to be delivered in Arabic language, for those affected by the earthquake. This initiative was started by two psychiatrists on February 7, was quickly expanded to eight volunteers by February 12, and finally reached 20 health-care professionals by Feb 20, 2023. Those additional volunteers were only accepted after undergoing a competency-based assessment through interviews with the primary psychiatrists of the team. The primary goal of this service was to enhance access to mental health services for people affected by the

earthquake by reducing common barriers and allowing them to choose the treatment and therapist, whether male or female, doctor or counsellor, and the time that suited them best. Our team provided follow-up care and treatment for mental disorders according to The European Network for Traumatic Stress Guideline for psychosocial care following disasters and major incidents.<sup>3</sup>

Internet and telephone services were provided rapidly to shelters, and affected individuals were able to schedule appointments on a new dedicated mental health platform. Each session was conducted via WhatsApp calls and lasted around 30 min. After receiving extensive feedback, the website was further modified to allow beneficiaries to choose their psychological counsellor, schedule their meeting using emails, and prolong their session to 60 min instead of 40 min. In total, by March 30, 2023, we were able to treat more than 100 people between the ages of 17 and 35 years. Due to the high demand, we tried to give equal opportunities to everyone who made an appointment, and we gave priority to new cases. Our experience shows that when access to areas affected by disasters is limited, immediate psychological support services can be provided online if internet access is available, instead of waiting for the necessary conditions for implementing face-to-face interventions. Our initiative helped individuals of different ages to express their concerns and find a safe space, promote positive behaviour and thinking, and reduce the symptoms of panic attacks, anxiety, depression, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

We declare no competing interests and received no financial support for this letter or its publication.

*\*Carla Jammal, Ahmad Alkhaledi,  
Mohammad Bashar Izzat  
dr.carlajammal@gmail.com*

Faculty of Medicine, Damascus University,  
Damascus, Syria

- 1 Kakaje A, Al Zohbi R, Hosam Aldeen O, Makki L, Alyousbashi A, Alhaffar MBA. Mental disorder and PTSD in Syria during wartime: a nationwide crisis. *BMC Psychiatry* 2021; **21**: 2.
- 2 Hamza MK, Hicks MH. Implementation of mental health services in conflict and post-conflict zones: Lessons from Syria. *Avicenna J Med* 2021; **11**: 8–14.
- 3 Juen B, Warger R, Nindl S, et al. The comprehensive guideline on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in disaster settings. Innsbruck: OPSIC, 2016.

For the **Obstan mental health platform** see <https://obstan.org>