



## LESSONS LEARNT: MHPSS RESEARCH

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### 1. Introduction to the topic of the webinar

#### Important Concepts/Frameworks of MHPSS:

MHPSS research is not just beneficial but essential in understanding and mitigating the psychological impact of emergencies, promoting resilience, and aiding in recovery. Research in MHPSS in Emergencies is significant in comprehending the unique psychological and social challenges people face during crises such as natural disasters, conflicts, or public health emergencies. Research emphasizes the need to understand the multifaceted nature of emergencies and for frameworks that account for the diverse social, cultural, and political landscapes within which these emergencies occur.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium (RC3) defines research as: *the scientific study of a question related to (or reflecting) humanitarian issues which leads to the generation of new knowledge, including new ways of understanding possible solutions to practical problems.*<sup>1</sup>

Research activities may include the collection and analysis of new data or the use of existing knowledge in new ways. The development of research includes interactions and partnerships between the academic world, humanitarian work, and specialists.

It includes, among other things, the discussion, publication, and dissemination of scientific knowledge within the RCRC Movement, as well as participation in strategic and policy debates to promote the uptake of research findings and evidence-based approaches.

#### Examples

There are different ways of doing research and designing research to contribute to the knowledge base of MHPSS. This spans from a thematic scope to the on-the-ground MHPSS needs of individuals.

#### Themes of MHPSS

*Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: Research Priorities for 2021–30*

We describe an effort to develop a consensus-based research agenda for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) interventions in humanitarian settings for 2021–30. By engaging a broad group of stakeholders, we generated research questions through a qualitative study (in Indonesia, Lebanon, and Uganda; n=101), consultations led by humanitarian agencies (n=259), and an expert panel (n=227; 51% female participants and 49% male participants; 84% of participants based in low-income and middle-income

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<sup>1</sup> [Mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings: research priorities for 2021–30 - The Lancet Global Health](#)



countries). The expert panel selected and rated a final list of 20 research questions. After rating, the MHPSS research agenda favored applied research questions (e.g., regarding workforce strengthening and monitoring and evaluation practices).

### *Review and Assessment of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Intervention Research in Humanitarian Settings*

This study conducted by Arthrological and the MHPSS Collaborative, commissioned by Elrha, reviews mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) research generated since 2010. Its purpose is to assess the extent to which new evidence generated through MHPSS research funded in the last 10 years has addressed the identified need for research that provides tangible benefits for MHPSS programming in humanitarian settings.<sup>2</sup>

## Interventions

### *Problem Management Plus (PM+): A WHO Transdiagnostic Psychological Intervention for Common Mental Health Problems*

Mental disorders are significant contributors to the global burden of disease (1). While they occur across all levels of socio-economic status, the majority of populations in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) do not have access to effective psychological and pharmacological interventions (2). Key barriers to the sustainable delivery of psychological therapies in LMICs include limited mental health funding and infrastructure, a chronic shortage of mental health professionals, a lack of treatments adapted to the local context, and challenges associated with training and supervision. Implementation of low-intensity psychological interventions by trained paraprofessionals is one potential solution to this problem (3,4) which is receiving significant attention as part of global mental health research agendas (e.g., (5)).<sup>3</sup>

## Approaches

### *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: A Public Mental Health Perspective*

The approach and associated terminology of this study can form a useful framework in the design and evaluation of MHPSS interventions and may contribute to reducing a divisive split between 'mental health' and 'psychosocial' practice in the humanitarian field. Many of the most commonly implemented MHPSS interventions in humanitarian settings can be described in terms of promotion and prevention terminology.<sup>4</sup>

## Needs

### *Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being of Syrians Affected by Armed Conflict*

Conflict-affected Syrians may experience a wide range of mental health problems including (1) exacerbations

<sup>2</sup> [MHPSS-research-review-2021.pdf \(elrha.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Problem Management Plus \(PM+\): a WHO transdiagnostic psychological intervention for common mental health problems - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian settings: a public mental health perspective | Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences | Cambridge Core](#)



of pre-existing mental disorders; (2) new problems caused by conflict-related violence, displacement, and multiple losses; as well as (3) issues related to adaptation to the post-emergency context, for example, living conditions in the countries of refuge. Some populations are particularly vulnerable such as men and women survivors of sexual or gender-based violence, children who have experienced violence and exploitation, and Syrians who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex. Several factors influence access to MHPSS services including language barriers, stigma associated with seeking mental health care and the power dynamics of the helping relationship. Trust and collaboration can be maximized by ensuring a culturally safe environment, respectful of diversity and based on mutual respect, in which the perspectives of clients and their families can be carefully explored.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Challenges with research in MHPSS

The presentation identified several key challenges in MHPSS research, particularly in emergency contexts:

- **Diverse Social Landscapes:** One of the primary challenges lies in understanding and adapting to the varied social dynamics and structures of affected populations. Factors like family dynamics, social stigma, and pre-existing social issues significantly influence mental health needs and access to care.
- **Cultural Barriers:** The cultural diversity of emergency-affected populations poses another challenge. Cultural beliefs and practices significantly impact how people express and manage psychological distress. Therefore, cultural sensitivity and competence are crucial in MHPSS research.
- **Political Complexities:** Research in MHPSS often unfolds in politically sensitive environments, especially in conflict zones. Navigating these political landscapes requires careful consideration of ethical implications, access issues, and the overall impact of political factors on mental health.

## 3. Opportunities with research in MHPSS

The benefits of MHPSS research for National Societies (NS) and other stakeholders were discussed extensively:

- **Enhanced Intervention Effectiveness:** By understanding the specific needs and contexts of affected populations, MHPSS research can lead to more effective and tailored interventions.
- **Building Resilience:** MHPSS research contributes significantly to building resilience at individual and community levels, which is crucial for long-term recovery from emergencies.

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<sup>5</sup> [Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict | Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences | Cambridge Core](#)



- Policy Development: Research findings can inform and shape mental health policies, ensuring that they are responsive to the needs of those affected by emergencies.

#### **4. Learnings from case studies**

The webinar included case studies from various National Societies, offering valuable insights:

- Real-world Application: The case studies provided practical examples of how MHPSS research can be applied in diverse emergencies.
- Take-Home Messages: Key takeaways included the importance of community engagement, the need for cultural sensitivity, and the efficacy of integrating traditional practices in MHPSS interventions.

#### **5. Building blocks in research**

The presentation outlined the foundational steps for initiating MHPSS research:

- Starting Point: Identifying the specific mental health and psychosocial needs of the emergency-affected population.
- Systems/Tools/Support: Emphasized the need for robust systems and tools for research, including capacity building and training for researchers and practitioners.
- Guiding Framework: The IASC MHPSS intervention pyramid was recommended as a guiding framework, offering a structured approach to understanding and addressing the varied needs in emergencies.

#### **6. Advocating for MHPSS research**

Strategies for promoting MHPSS research were discussed:

- Building Relationships: Establishing connections with key actors in the field of MHPSS, including policymakers and other stakeholders.
- Inclusion in Funding Proposals: Guidance was provided on how to incorporate MHPSS research into funding proposals effectively.
- Organizational Advocacy: Tips on advocating for the importance of MHPSS research within one's own organization were shared.



## **7. Recommendations**

1. First identify what is the aim of the research, to contribute to the knowledge of MHPSS needs, cultural understandings of well-being, and/or to inform approaches and practice.
2. Following this do a small scoping review of what is already available on the topic. This is to ensure that there is no duplication, to build on the current evidence and knowledge base, and to help other studies and research to guide the approach of the study.
3. Based on the preliminary findings of the scope design research questions, objectives, and aims.
4. A literature review should be done in more depth to support a context analysis and to help answer the research questions while promoting the need for the research.
5. The literature review will also help in the identification of tools and methods that can help in the research design. This can identify what tools to use to best to answer the research questions. The literature review will also identify experts in the area of the research; reaching out to these people is always recommended to have guidance on how to conduct research on the same topic.
6. When conducting research, keep in mind who the research is targeting, and consider the people that may be directly or indirectly impacted when gathering and designing the research.
7. When researching people's mental health and psychosocial well-being it is important to reflect with those you are working with to ensure they agree with how they are being portrayed.

## **8. Helpful tools and resources**

- [MHPSS-Evidence-Building-Toolkit\\_2024.pdf \(pscentre.org\)](#)
- [Tools & Research - Home - Elrha](#)
- [Intervention Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas \(lww.com\)](#)

## **9. Webinars, trainings, and podcasts**

- [Operational Research for Humanitarians | Coursera](#)
- [Training Centre | International Committee of the Red Cross \(icrc.org\)](#)