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1 About the author

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This research paper was written by an Afghan citizen with expertise in this field.

For security reasons, his identity is concealed and not disclosed. Information on his person is available to the Staatendokumentation.

The information provided is, if not specifically referenced, personal expertise and observations of the author who is involved with various people and organizations on a daily basis. He assures of the accuracy and takes the responsibility for the content.

2 Introduction

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Afghanistan has experienced more than five decades of successive wars and major political, economic and humanitarian crises. This has led to the destruction of cities, the migration of millions of Afghans, and the country's isolation. These crises, alongside other problems, have had a profound impact on the mental health of Afghans. Stress, anxiety, hopelessness, worry about the future, distrust, violence, and lack of motivation have caused Afghanistan to rank among the countries whose people are the most hopeless and affected by mental illnesses.

This has affected the mental health of all age groups in Afghanistan, but young people, women, and children are considered the most vulnerable groups. UNICEF findings in Afghanistan show that more than 24 % of children between ages 5 and 17 experience anxiety - a rate 10 times higher than the global average. Nearly 15 % experience depression.[1]

At the same time, stress, depression, anxiety, mental disorders, substance-induced mental disorders, and trauma-related disorders are among the most common mental illnesses in Afghanistan. Among Afghans, these disorders have led to suicide (especially among young people and women), murder, criminal offences, domestic violence, school dropout, drug addiction, family breakdown, and children being left without a future.

Successive wars are among the most important and largest causes of mental illness among Afghans. Military conflicts have caused thousands of Afghans to lose their loved ones, be forced to migrate, see their household economies collapse, and even become involved in enmities. These factors have exposed family members to mental illness and chronic anxiety for years.

The second largest cause of mental illness in Afghanistan is the economic crisis and unemployment, which affect millions of young Afghans. Unemployment has caused young people to worry about the future, lose motivation, and lose their creativity.

This report will show that in addition to these factors, family tensions, worries about the future, and drug use have contributed to the rise of mental illness. However, in response, attention and investment in mental health in Afghanistan remain negligible. Because of successive wars and

1 UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (8/7/2024): Hugs, happiness and healing, https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/stories/hugs-happiness-and-healing, accessed 4/5/2026

the abrupt suspension of global aid to Afghanistan, the health sector is under severe pressure. Afghanistan's hospitals have very limited human, technical, and operational capacity, and in many of these hospitals psychiatric departments do not exist at all. At present, across all of Afghanistan, only eight centres for the treatment of mental illness are active. These centres operate at the regional level and function only within hospitals rather than independently and separately.

In addition, 'in the entire country there are fewer than 200 specialists in the mental health field, and the number of mental health counsellors reaches 1,100, while Afghanistan's population exceeds forty million, nationwide, there are only 300 female mental health counsellors, while the female population of Afghanistan reaches twenty million' said the spokesperson of the Ministry of Public Health.[2]

The deputy minister of public health of Afghanistan said that this ministry provides only 3.3 % of mental health services. Foreign organizations provide only 19.3 % of mental health services, and these are mostly concentrated in major cities, while millions of other Afghans living in villages and remote provinces are deprived of these services.[3]

In Afghanistan, according to experts interviewed for this report, mental health treatment services are focused more on counselling, which is provided in a scattered manner, while hospitalization and long-term treatment are far less common. Due to the severe shortage of beds, the limited capacity of mental health treatment centres, economic problems, and the lack of specialists, care for mental health patients is minimal, and for this reason mental health has not received adequate attention.

Below, the factors affecting mental health, treatment capacity, the way society and the government deal with mental health patients, and other related issues are examined in detail.

3 Factors affecting mental health in Afghanistan

3.1 Five decades of continuous war

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The first and largest factor affecting mental health in Afghanistan is the country's successive wars. An Afghan psychologist said: 'Fifty years of war in Afghanistan have caused the deaths of family members, loved ones, children, and spouses. The psychological impact of this has remained with the surviving family members for years and has turned into mental disorders. In some cases, the wars have caused people to grow up permanently bitter and obsessed with revenge.'[4]

In Afghanistan, ongoing violence has caused Afghans to live in constant fear and chronic anxiety. A professor of psychology stated: 'Because of the wars, Afghans have experienced persistent

2 Interview with the spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 10.3.2026 in Kabul (second interview)
3 Interview with Deputy minister of Public Health conducted by the author on 12.2.2026 in Kabul
4 Interview with an Afghan psychologist conducted by the author on 30.1.2026 in Kabul

psychological distress'.[5] This anxiety includes the loss of family members, arrest, and being targeted.

War has directly and indirectly affected every family in Afghanistan, and over time this has placed Afghan minds under pressure. A mental health specialist said: 'On average, three to five patients come to me every week who suffer from anxiety and even depression due to having participated in past wars, losing family members, losing their homes, losing their assets, or facing war-related enmities.'[6]

A professor of psychology added: 'In terms of time and the nature of their impact on Afghans mental health, the wars can be divided into two categories: The wars before 9/11 and during the presence of the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan and the twenty-year war resulting from the presence of NATO forces. In the battles before 9/11, more than one million Afghans were killed and millions of others were forced to leave the country. That period led to years of migration, poverty as well as unemployment and psychologically pushed Afghans toward chronic restlessness and anxiety. But the wars of the past twenty years, resulting from the presence of NATO forces, have harmed Afghan mental health even more. As a result of bombardments in Afghanistan's villages, thousands of innocent people were killed, and the consequence was the strengthening of feelings of revenge, hatred, and severe psychological disorders among the surviving family members of the victims.'[7]

A mental health counsellor stated: 'My work is mostly with the forces of the former republic government who served in Afghanistan over the past twenty years. With the Taliban's return to power, thousands of these forces have fallen into anxiety because of humiliation, abuse, dismissal from their jobs, threats, arrest, and suspicion. One of my patients has completely lost his psychological balance; he cannot speak properly and suffers from depression.'[8]

Long-term conflict in Afghanistan has destroyed the sense of peace and security among Afghans. Most Afghans think that their country will once again come under attack, that the government will collapse, that armed groups will emerge, and that war will start again. This has caused their mental health never to return to a normal condition, and they continue to experience chronic anxiety. In the provinces of Afghanistan located along the Durand Line with Pakistan, people spend their days and nights in very poor psychological condition.

A psychologist in Afghanistan's Paktika province mentioned: 'Most of the patients here who come from border areas suffer from depression and chronic anxiety because of fear of bombardment and airstrikes.'[9]

A mental health counsellor in Nangarhar province remarked: 'Recently, one patient suffered from depression after losing 17 family members, and he did not even recognize his close relatives properly. Every hour he would cry out that an attack was coming.'[10]

5 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 1.2.2026 in Kabul
6 Interview with a mental health specialist conducted by the author on 6.2.2026 in Kabul
7 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 1.2.2026 in Kabul
8 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 30.1.2026 in Kabul
9 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 22.2.2026 in Paktika province
10 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 3.3.2026 in Nangarhar province of Afghanistan

A female psychologist stated that because of the wars, women suffer from mental disorders more than anyone else, and in addition to being worried for themselves, they are deeply worried for their children and husbands, which has intensified their psychological distress.[11]

War in Afghanistan has also left behind millions of wounded and disabled people, and these individuals feel powerless and helpless, and they have also been pushed from the centre of society to the margins. A professor of psychology declared: 'People who have lost limbs because of the wars consider themselves alone, withdrawn, and ineffective. These people have very limited chances of employment in Afghanistan, cannot easily marry, their economy is fragile, and society sees them as incapable.'[12]

These factors have caused tens of thousands of wounded and disabled people to struggle with mental disorders, and many also suffer from depression and anxiety. A psychiatrist at the Kabul Mental Health Treatment Center added: 'Afghans harmed by war suffer from the highest levels of mental disorders, a major part of which includes distress, anxiety, fear, depression, social withdrawal, and suicide.'[13]

3.2 Economic crisis

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Afghanistan is a third-world country whose economy is fragile, dependent on foreign aid, consumer-based, and unstable. Wars have destroyed economic infrastructure and driven capital out of the country.

A professor of psychology assessed: 'Afghanistan has a large young labour force, but unemployment has caused this force to go to waste, and because of unemployment young people turn to drugs and illegal migration, which ultimately causes mental disorders among them.'[14]

The lack of work and income has caused thousands of young people in Afghanistan to lose their normal psychological condition and to worry about the future. A mental health advisor at the Ministry of Public Health stated: 'Afghanistan's younger generation has the ability to forget wars and political instability, but unemployment and economic crisis have caused them to feel like strangers in their own country. This first creates psychological disorders and ultimately leads to violence.'[15]

The head of a psychological services office in Kabul added: 'Limited job opportunities and lack of income have caused young Afghans to lose motivation for study, effort, and innovation. In the end, they become isolated and think about fleeing the country. At first they turn to drugs, and then, with the worsening of mental disorders and depression, they even think about suicide.'[16]

11 Interview with a female psychologist conducted by the author on 4.2.2026 in Kabul
12 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 1.2.2026 in Kabul
13 Interview with a psychiatrist at the Kabul Mental Health Treatment Center conducted by the author on 24.3.2026 in Kabul.
14 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 1.2.2026 in Kabul
15 Interview with a mental health advisor at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 4.2.2026 in Kabul
16 Interview with the head of a psychological services office conducted by the author on 8.2.2026 in Kabul

A member of the labour administration mentioned: ‘At present, recruitment in government offices is based on connections, and expertise does not matter. I see many young people who are educated, specialized, and experienced, but because they lack connections they are not hired. This has made young people hopeless, and even when they are told that there is open competition, none of them believes it any more. They have lost their trust, and this has caused frustration among young people and driven them out of Afghanistan.’[17]

A professor of psychology mentioned: ‘90 % of young Afghans who intend to migrate legally or illegally have economic motives, because they are worried about their future, their family income, and their lives. Due to the absence of work and job opportunities, these young people lose their peace of mind and constantly think of leaving Afghanistan, even at the cost of their lives.’[18]

Long-term unemployment has slowly and steadily moved thousands of young Afghans from anxiety into depression. A psychologist explained: ‘Lack of work has caused young people to feel powerless, and this has made them worried about the future. The most important effects of this unemployment are increased domestic violence, crime, and migration. I have spoken with hundreds of unemployed young people suffering from mental disorders, and all of them think they have been pushed out of society and that there is no opportunity for life and happiness for them. This is one of the worst mental disorders among Afghan youth, and it can become worrying and even dangerous in the medium and long term.’[19]

But it is not only unemployment that has placed a segment of society in poor psychological condition; Afghanistan’s overall fragile and unstable economy has negatively affected people’s mental state. A professor of psychology stated: ‘Lack of job security, rising prices, low incomes, international economic and banking restrictions on Afghanistan, the suspension of 75 % of international aid, limited work opportunities, capital flight, and high taxation have caused Afghans to live in constant anxiety and even worry about tomorrow. Everyone thinks: what will happen if I lose my job or work? The lack of an answer to this question leads to mental disorders.’[20]

A psychologist at the Ministry of Public Health said: ‘The most important mental disorders caused by economic issues include anxiety, fear, turning to drugs as a refuge and source of relief, desire to leave the country and submit to illegal migration, depression, hopelessness, and chronic worry.’[21]

3.3 Restrictions on Freedom and Individual Rights

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This factor may receive less attention in other countries, but in Afghanistan over the past four years one of the most important factors affecting mental health has been the restrictions imposed by the government, through law, on people’s personal freedoms and rights. An Afghan

17 Interview with a member of the labour administration conducted by the author on 16.2.2026 in Kabul
18 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 3.2.2026 in Kabul
19 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 19.2.2026 in Kabul
20 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
21 Interview with a psychologist at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 6.2.2026 in Kabul

psychologist explained: ‘For twenty years, the people of Afghanistan witnessed women’s education, personal freedom, freedom of expression, elections, freedom of movement, and many personal liberties as a result of democracy. After the political change and the Taliban’s return to power, these freedoms were suddenly taken away from the people, and millions of young people became hopeless. I saw hundreds of young people who came to my clinic suffering from depression, they did not even want to leave the house and go into the city, and they were suffering from mental disorders. When I asked them, they would say that they no longer had the free life they once had and that they felt trapped.’[22]

The Taliban have a completely different approach toward society, individual freedoms, and social life, one that does not correspond at all with the ideas of democracy. A university professor added: ‘The Taliban have a religious government, and they also direct society toward rigid religious thinking. Personal freedoms are forbidden. Women’s presence outside the home is severely restricted, and young people must avoid socializing with girls and women without marriage ties. You cannot even take your family to a park for recreation, and in this way people feel as though they are living in prison, which more than anything else destroys mental health.’[23]

Over the past four years, Afghanistan has witnessed the highest number of suicide incidents, while the country traditionally has had a very low suicide rate. A university professor in Khost province remarked: ‘In this province of Afghanistan, the suicide rate among young people is higher compared to other provinces. Most of these young people no longer have the personal and social freedoms they once had; as a result, they develop mental disorders. These disorders continue to worsen, and in the end, because of the lack of treatment and psychological counselling, they commit suicide.’[24]

The Taliban have created forces to control the moral conduct of the people, and this is distressing for the public. A Kabul resident says: ‘I cannot even go into the city and market peacefully with my wife, because the Taliban’s Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice forces may stop me and ask me who this woman is. If I face such an incident, my mental state may not recover even after months.’[25]

The greatest impact of this situation falls on women, and it can be said that women’s psychological condition is extremely severe because of it. A women’s rights activist explained: ‘Women are the main victims of the social restrictions imposed in Afghanistan. Education, higher education, and work have been banned for women, and they are not even allowed to leave the house without a male guardian. This has placed them in the worst possible psychological condition.’[26]

A female psychologist remarked: ‘All the young girls who come to my clinic and suffer from poor mental health have certainly been either school students, university students, or employees of offices and organizations. But suddenly they lost everything, and now they suffer from de-

22 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 19.2.2026 in Kabul
23 Interview with a university professor conducted by the author on 17.2.2026 in Kabul
24 Interview with a university professor conducted by the author on 24.2.2026 in Khost province
25 Interview with a Kabul resident conducted by the author on 3.2.2026
26 Interview with a women’s rights activist conducted by the author on 1.3.2026 in Kabul

pression, mental disorder, chronic anxiety, and deep hopelessness. Some of them have even thought about suicide, while others have turned to sedatives, drugs, and fleeing the country.'[27]

There are also thousands of young women who were close to graduating from university, but because of the Taliban's restrictions on women's education they were immediately deprived of continuing their studies, and after 16 years of continuous education and learning, all their efforts have now become futile. There are also girls who, after graduating from medical school and completing seven years of higher education, were prevented from taking the licensing exam and were told at the last moment that they had to remain confined to the home. In terms of vulnerability in the mental health sphere in Afghanistan, women can be considered the most vulnerable group.

A a former female employee said: 'In the past, I worked with a foreign organization. Now I am unemployed and sitting at home. I do not even have the courage to leave the house and walk freely in the market. I have become withdrawn, I feel fear and insecurity, my mind is constantly disturbed, I have become very hopeless about my life, and sometimes I even say to myself: I wish I were not alive.'[28]

A psychologist explained: 'Severe restrictions on individual freedoms, especially the right to women's education, have caused families to be in poor psychological condition. Women have become depressed, and fathers constantly experience worry and anxiety for their daughters.'[29]

This factor played only a very minor role in mental disorders over the past twenty years, but after the Taliban's return to power and the imposition of strict religious laws, it can be said that this factor has become the most influential cause of mental disorders among Afghans. A professor of psychology added: 'Most people in Afghanistan think they have no power to make decisions about their personal and social lives. Determining their life course, education, freedom, and movement is somehow beyond their control, and this creates mental disorders and leads to discouragement, hopelessness, and alienation, gradually paving the way for deep depression, long-term anxiety, and even suicide.'[30]

3.4 Migration

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One of the important and influential factors affecting the psychological condition of Afghans is repeated migration over recent decades. Afghans have been forced to leave their homeland, families, friends, spouses, and children, and this has pushed their mental health out of a normal state. A migration expert explained: 'From the Soviet invasion to the twenty-year presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan, millions of Afghans were forced by war to leave their country. In other countries they faced humiliation, economic hardship, uncertainty, and lack of education for their children, and this made them depressed, hopeless, and restless. At the same time,

27 Interview with a female psychologist conducted by the author on 27.2.2026 in Kabul
28 Interview with an former female employee of a foreign organization conducted by the author on 3.3.2026 in Kabul
29 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
30 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 10.3.2026 in Kandahar province

they spent their days and nights worrying about the fate of the family members left behind in Afghanistan, because many others were unable to migrate. In this way, the whole migration experience for Afghans has been full of distress, worry about the future, and grief, and this has turned migration into a long-term pain.'[31]

After the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, Afghan migrants were once again exposed to psychological stress and chronic anxiety. According to the UNHCR, in the past two years, close to five million Afghan migrants have been expelled from Iran and Pakistan, and these expulsions, alongside the economic crisis, have also created a psychological crisis.[32]

A returnee from Pakistan said: 'As soon as the Pakistani government announced that it would deport Afghan migrants, all the members of our family lost their peace of mind and anxiety gripped us. We could not go outside and we felt fear. In the end we were arrested and deported, and now that we have returned to the country we are living in tents and everyone is depressed and distressed. No one knows what the future will be, where we should go, or how we should continue life. These issues have made most migrants who live in temporary camps worried and depressed, and everyone has lost hope and motivation.'[33]

A psychologist in Herat province explained: 'I went to Islam Qala at the border with Iran to provide psychological treatment and counselling. At that time, when thousands of families were being expelled from Iran to Afghanistan every day, women and young people were severely worried and restless. They were depressed and sad, felt alone and helpless, and were anxious about their future. Women were the most worried of all, because among the families I saw women who had only a few children with them and whose male family members had either remained in Iran or who had no male family member at all. They were under acute stress and felt they had nothing and had become completely alone and helpless, because in Afghanistan's patriarchal society a woman without a man is almost considered nothing.'[34] A mental health counsellor in Nangarhar province added: 'Although we provided psychological counselling for migrants, the intensity of their anxiety and stress was much greater, because suddenly they had lost everything and had been expelled with only their clothes and worn-out household items. They felt they had been driven out of social life and saw themselves as worthless. The mental disorders among some migrants were so severe that they even avoided speaking with us and expressing their psychological condition; they had become withdrawn and isolated.'[35]

4 Common Mental Illnesses in Afghanistan

4.1 Acute Stress Disorder

31 Interview with a migration expert conducted by the author on 15.3.2026 in Herat province
32 UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (13/2/2026): UNHCR seeks support for solutions as 5.4 million Afghans return since late 2023, https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-seeks-support-solutions-5-4-million-afghans-return-since-late-2023, accessed 5/5/2026
33 Interview with a returnee from Pakistan conducted by the author on 25.2.2026 in Nangarhar province
34 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 26.3.2026 in Herat province
35 Interview with an Afghan psychologist conducted by the author on 4.2.2026 in Kabul

In Afghanistan, because of fifty years of war, deadly natural disasters, bombardments, mass killings, and severe insecurity, this mental disorder affects millions of Afghans more than any other. An Afghan psychologist explained: 'Close to 90 % of the patients who come to me fall into the category of acute stress disorder. They have lost family members in wars, feel restless, and the moment of their family members' deaths has created chronic depression in them. Because the wars were especially intense in southern, southeastern, and eastern Afghanistan, this mental disorder is also seen more among people living in those provinces.'[36] A mental health counsellor in southern Afghanistan added: 'Young people and women who come for psychological counselling often have fear, restlessness, and chronic worry. Some of them also have severe stress and even feel uneasy inside the health centre itself. Most of them reached this condition after bombardments, seeing people killed with their own eyes, and brutal wars, and even now that the war has stopped they are still living in fear.'[37]

An Afghan psychologist remarked: 'In most of the patients who come to me, the stress disorder is advanced and controlling it is not easy. This is because they have been continuously exposed to violence. Most of these patients have been unable to forget an incident that happened even ten years ago. Most of them are people who witnessed war, lost loved ones, had their homes destroyed by bombardment, and were forced to leave their place of residence and move to big cities.'[38]

Meanwhile, thousands of others suffer from chronic and advanced stress due to deadly natural disasters. In 2025alone deadly earthquakes occurred for example in Paktika,[39] Herat,[40] and Kunar provinces.[41] More than three thousand people were killed and thousands of others were injured. But what many people overlooked was the psychological impact of these natural disasters on the population, especially because of the deadly floods and earthquakes in Afghanistan. One survivor of the recent earthquake in Kunar province said: 'At night we stay awake out of fear that another earthquake will happen. Our sleep has disappeared. The moment the earthquake struck and I lost members of my family, especially my mother, never leaves me in peace and comes before my eyes at every moment.'[42]

A psychotherapy counsellor at the Ministry of Public Health explained: 'Our findings show that in the Kunar earthquake alone, more than 300,000 people lost their psychological peace and

36 Interview with an Afghan psychologist conducted by the author on 4.2.2026 in Kabul
37 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 12.3. 2026 in southern Afghanistan
38 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 29.1.2026 in Kabul
39 BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation (1/9/2025): Afghanistan earthquake: What we know and what we don't, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwye0lpj9z6o, accessed 5/5/2026
40 BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation (5/9/2025): Afghanistan: Third quake strikes Afghanistan as deaths rise, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly1wy7v9yyo, accessed 9/10/2025
41 CNN - Cable News Network (4/9/2025): Taliban calls for foreign help after deadly Afghanistan earthquake. Here's what we know, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/02/asia/afghanistan-earthquake-taliban-us-intl-hnk, accessed 5/5/2026
42 Interview with a survivor of the earthquake in Kunar province conducted by the author on 27.2.2026 in eastern Afghanistan

developed stress. Even those whose homes were in safer areas would go outside at night and sleep in the open air, and fear had gripped everyone.'[43]

The psychological impact of natural disasters has affected women more severely than men. A female mental health counsellor remarked: 'After the recent deadly earthquake in 2025, I went to Kunar province for psychological counselling. Men, because of travel, going outside the home, and obtaining treatment in different places, have suffered less psychological harm, but women have extraordinarily lost their peace of mind. Losing small children, a husband, a brother, and even an entire family has caused women to develop advanced stress and long-term anxiety because of this earthquake. They live in restlessness and fear.'[44]

A professor of psychology at Kabul University said: 'In Afghanistan it is hard to find people who do not suffer from stress, because the people of this country have been directly and indirectly affected by wars and violence for five decades, and the psychological impact of these wars on people will remain permanent. Among them, families whose members were directly killed or harmed in war live in anxiety, hopelessness, and stress, while others suffer from stress because of the indirect effects of war.'[45]

A psychologist at the regional hospital in Paktia province added: 'Distrust and restlessness are among the main psychological effects of acute stress among people in Afghanistan. Many of the patients who come to us are constantly distressed, and despite psychological counselling they still have no confidence in the future and believe that another tragic incident may happen at any moment. The reason for this condition is chronic stress and the lack of advanced clinical mental health services, and such a condition cannot be treated with simple counselling alone.'[46]

4.2 Major Depressive Disorders

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This disorder mostly affects Afghans who live in war zones, economic crisis, direct bombardment, and social crises. Geographically, it can be said that the southern and southeastern provinces of Afghanistan struggle with this mental disorder more than anywhere else.

A psychologist in southern Afghanistan explained: 'People in the five provinces of this region suffer more from this illness, and its main effect is that they are deeply hopeless and unmotivated, because in childhood or in the peak of youth they were exposed to shocking events such as losing family members, failing to achieve their wishes, living in chronic fear, and living in constant worry.'[47] A mental health counsellor in Helmand province added: 'Here, depression in some patients is so deep that they even consider treatment and fighting it worthless, and life has become very meaningless for them. They think they are only alive, and that things such as life,

43 Interview with a psychotherapy counsellor at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 8.2.2026 in Kabul
44 Interview with a female mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
45 Interview with a professor of psychology at Kabul University conducted by the author on 9.2.2026 in Kabul
46 Interview with a psychologist at the regional hospital conducted by the author on 22.2.2026 in Paktia province
47 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 12.3.2026 in Zabul province

hope for the future, change, and motivation have lost their colour within them. This is because military conflict and deprivation of education took everything from them.'[48]

Although the war in Afghanistan has now ended, the country is in relative stability, and there is currently no military conflict in the country, in major cities young women suffer widely from this mental illness. A female psychologist explained: 'After the Taliban took power and imposed severe restrictions on women's personal and social freedoms, educated girls and female employees now strongly see themselves as worthless and have lost their motivation. Some of them, who previously studied freely or continued working, have now developed severe depression because they are confined to the home and deprived of work.'[49]

In Afghanistan's major cities, women have now been pushed from the centre of society to the margins, and this is described as one of the main causes of depression. A female mental health counsellor remarked: 'The war ended and women emerged from the intense worry they had for the lives of their male family members, but they fell back into depression, and this is because at the same time that the Taliban took power, women were pushed from the centre of society to the margins. Women and girls were deprived of education and higher education, they have largely been prevented from working with offices and organizations, and they have lost the freedom to move around. Given these factors, women see themselves as worthless, hopeless, unmotivated, and powerless, and this creates the conditions for depression. Because there have been no positive changes over the past five years, this depression among women becomes more severe, and they lose even the smallest hope for change.'[50] A female social activist added: 'In today's Afghanistan, women have less access than men to public and government services. The right to education and work has been taken from them, and for this reason women are the most psychologically vulnerable group in Afghan society.'[51]

Young people, too, have become depressed because of economic problems and lack of opportunities. A professor of psychology mentioned: 'Because of economic and social crises, Afghan youth carry the greatest psychological burden in society, and when they cannot find solutions, they become hopeless and depressed, which gradually leads to severe depression.'[52] A psychologist at the Ministry of Public Health added: 'In Afghanistan, depression has become a major psychological problem because of the severe lack of mental health treatment facilities. This is because simple psychological stress, in the absence of treatment, counselling, and social support, turns into depression.'[53]

4.3 Anxiety Disorder

48 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 16.3.2026 in Helmand province
49 Interview with a female psychologist conducted by the author on 4.2.2026 in Kabul
50 Interview with a female mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 2.2.2026 in Kabul
51 Interview with a female social activist conducted by the author on 18.2.2026 in Kabul
52 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
53 Interview with a psychologist at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 6.2.2026 in Kabul

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This is a relatively more common disorder among all Afghans, and the reason is social, economic, political, and personal instability. A psychologist explained: 'In Afghanistan nothing has lasting stability; even people's basic rights can be taken away from them at any moment. There is no political stability, and the security situation is not trustworthy, which is why chronic anxiety has gripped people and Afghans continuously suffer from fear and anxiety.'[54]

The head of the mental health department at the Ministry of Public Health stated: 'Our surveys show that anxiety is one of the illnesses that exists among the majority of Afghans, and thousands of Afghans struggle with it continuously.'[55]

Anxiety affects young people and women more than others in Afghanistan, and among women it turns into depression more quickly. An Afghan psychologist said: 'Many patients in Afghanistan are initially affected only by anxiety and fear, but in the absence of psychological counselling this condition turns into depression and eventually into severe mental disorders.'[56]

Based on the interviews conducted, it can be assumed that among Afghans, anxiety is mostly caused by social, economic, and political crises, while migration and restrictions imposed on women's rights and personal freedoms also intensify it.

4.4 Substance-induced mental health disorders

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For years Afghanistan has remained known as the country producing the most opium in the world. Over the past twenty years, the southern provinces of Afghanistan have seen the cultivation and production of thousands of kilograms of opium, and this has intensified drug use in the country. This situation had reached such a level that in major cities such as Kabul, hundreds of thousands of drug addicts were present and had become a major problem. The number of drug addicts in Afghanistan is reported to be in the seven-figure range.

A specialist from the psychology unit of the Ministry of Public Health explained: 'According to statistics collected and surveyed by our ministry, more than three million Afghans suffer from mental disorders due to drug use, most of which include hallucinations, deep depression, chronic fear, suicidal tendencies, withdrawal from society, and alienation. Most addicts do not consider themselves members of society; rather, they feel expelled from their families and like strangers among people, and for this reason the level of mental disorders among addicts is high.'[57]

A mental health counsellor at a drug treatment centre in Kabul stated: 'Our team works with nearly 3,000 addicts in Kabul through counselling classes in an effort to restore their peace of mind, but because of long-term drug use, mental disorders among them are very deep. They

54 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 29.1.2026 in Kabul
55 Interview with the head of the mental health department at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 12.3.2026 in Kabul
56 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 12.2.2026 in Kabul
57 Interview with a specialist from the psychology unit of the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul

have been rejected by society and strongly feel alienated and like harmful human beings, and for this reason they cannot easily overcome mental illness.'[58] Another counsellor at the same centre added: 'The use of opium and heroin causes addicts to lose self-confidence, self-respect, and social status. These people first lose friends, then family, and finally society, and in this way life becomes meaningless for them. At the drug treatment centre we keep them under close control, because most of them try to escape or commit suicide, and some of them even lose their lives because of the severity of their psychological condition and lack of access to drugs.'[59]

But it is not only addicts who suffer from mental disorders; their families are also indirectly affected, and in many cases this impact turns into mental illness.

An Afghan psychologist explained: 'In Afghanistan, family standing is very important, and if one family member does something wrong, the other family members are also affected in society. For this reason, when someone becomes addicted to drugs, people look down on the rest of that person's family, and over time this brings hopelessness, stress, and social withdrawal to family members, which itself is a mental disorder.'[60] An Afghan woman elaborated: 'My husband became addicted to drugs, and my children and I were forced to return to my father's house. I feel very weak and hopeless, because everyone says that your husband became addicted and abandoned you. Even my sons cannot comfortably go outside the house, and everyone sees us as weak and helpless, and this has caused me to live with chronic fear.'[61] Thousands of families in Afghanistan are worried, anxious, and hopeless because of addicted family members, and this causes them to live in chronic worry.

In Afghanistan, drug addicts used to live mostly under bridges or by roadsides, and their family members would wander in distress, confusion, and hopelessness searching for them, which also disturbed the families' peace of mind.

One of the major challenges is that drug addicts suffer from advanced mental disorders. A psychological specialist at the Ministry of Public Health said: 'Our reports show that the depth of mental disorders among drug addicts is great, and this is because of heavy use of heroin and opium together with being cast out of society. What distinguishes Afghan society from others is that in this country, use of high-dose drugs such as heroin causes people, instead of being treated, to be thrown out by their families, humiliated by others, to lose their social standing, and to find that there is no real desire for their treatment. All of this causes addicted individuals to face deep depression and chronic anxiety.'[62]

Although the Taliban have banned the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics and Afghanistan no longer produces as much opium as before, in contrast the production and use of synthetic

58 Interview with a mental health counsellor (A) at a drug treatment centre conducted by the author on 12.2.2026 in Kabul
59 Interview with a mental health counsellor (B) at a drug treatment centre conducted by the author on 12.2.2026 in Kabul
60 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 8.2.2026 in Kabul
61 Interview with an Afghan woman conducted by the author on 13.2.2026 in Kabul
62 Interview with a psychological specialist from the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 3.3.2026 in Kabul

drugs have increased and this phenomenon has created a new wave of mental illness among young people.[63]

A psychologist explained: 'Lately, some of the patients who come to my clinic admit that they use intoxicating pills. We have found that because of these pills, these patients have developed hallucinations and extreme distrust, which has damaged their family and social relationships. In addition, forgetfulness, irrational fear, distrust, restlessness, and loneliness have affected most of them. These patients feel constant danger, distrust their surroundings, and because of anxiety they are unable even to organize their simple daily affairs.'[64]

Synthetic drugs are used more in major cities, mostly by young people, and this has led to the spread of a new wave of mental illness. A psychologist mentioned: 'Because mental health treatment services are limited, most young people use synthetic drugs for psychological relief, but these pills have caused mental illnesses to increase and deepen, and in that case treatment is not possible through short-term counseling alone.'[65]

In Afghanistan, in addition to causing other problems, drugs are one of the major factors behind the spread of mental illness, cognitive disorders, and the disturbance of social peace.

4.5 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders

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Afghanistan has experienced years of war, destruction, and crises. Although these wars have now largely ended, their psychological effects still afflict the people of Afghanistan. Not only war, but also natural disasters, migration, and the loss of family members have caused Afghans to suffer from various mental illnesses. A psychologist explained: 'The occurrence of repeated wars and political and social crises has weakened peace in Afghan society, and people think they are not living but merely surviving. Many others have also lost hope in life, and this has made the psychological impact of events even greater.'[66]

In Afghanistan, it is not only war and crisis that have caused mental disorders. Natural disasters[67] have also exposed hundreds of thousands of people in this country to psychological insecurity. In2025, the country has witnessed multiple earthquakes and deadly floods in which thousands of people lost their lives and thousands more were injured.[68] Even after several years, people

63 UNODC - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (11/5/2026): UNODC report finds drug use in Afghanistan is shifting toward synthetic drugs and the misuse of pharmaceutical drugs, https://unama.unmissions.org/en/news/unodc-report-finds-drug-use-afghanistan-shifting-toward-synthetic-drugs-and-misuse, accessed 11/5/2026

64 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 2.3.2026 in Kabul

65 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 2.3.2026 in Kabul

66 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 7.3.2026 in Kabul

67 UNOCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (5/10/2024): Natural Disasters Dashboard - Afghanistan, https://response.reliefweb.int/afghanistan/natural-disasters-dashboard, accessed 21/10/2024; cf. KaN - Kabul Now (28/6/2025): Flash Floods Kill and Displace Residents in Several Provinces in Afghanistan, https://kabulnow.com/2025/06/flash-floods-kill-and-displace-residents-in-several-provinces-in-afghanistan, accessed 16/7/2025, UNOCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (6/7/2025): Afghanistan: Overview of Natural Disasters, https://response.reliefweb.int/afghanistan/natural-disasters-dashboard, accessed 16/7/2025

68 BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation (1/9/2025): Afghanistan earthquake: What we know and what we don't, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwye0lpj9z6o, accessed 5/5/2026; cf. BBC - British Broadcasting Corporation

in earthquake-affected areas have still not recovered from the psychological suffering caused by these natural disasters and continue to live in fear, pain, and hopelessness. A psychologist in western Afghanistan assessed: 'More than two years have passed since the deadly earthquake in Herat province, but the residents of those earthquake-stricken areas still do not have healthy psychological conditions. They still carry the grief of lost family members in their minds, their happiness has disappeared, they live in constant anxiety, and they have no hope for the future.'[69]

Hopelessness and anxiety are among the most important mental disorders affecting people harmed by natural disasters in Afghanistan, especially in the eastern, southeastern, and western provinces. An Afghan psychologist said: 'Five decades of continuous war in Afghanistan have caused every Afghan, in one way or another, to struggle with mental health problems, or at least to have experienced a mental disorder once in life.'[70]

5 Mental Health Services in Afghanistan

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Although the demand for mental health services in Afghanistan is extraordinarily high, the provision of these services is far lower and minimal. Many of the limited services are concentrated in major cities, are less specialized, and rely mostly on psychological counselling. The spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health explained: 'In Kabul there is only one specialized centre for the treatment of mental health patients, and in regional-level hospitals there is only one small unit for mental health patients. In the hospitals operating at the regional level, there are only four to eight beds for mental health patients. There are 200 mental health specialists in government hospitals and 1,100 mental health counsellors working, of whom 300 are women.'[71]

If we explain these statistics a little, it becomes clear that the provision of mental health services in Afghanistan is extremely limited. For example, in Kabul there is only one specialized mental health centre, while the population of Kabul city exceeds seven million. Afghanistan has five zones, and in each zone only one small mental health services unit operates, while more than 30 million people live across these five zones. A mental health specialist at Kabul's specialized mental health centre elaborated: 'More than 250 patients come daily to the specialized mental health centre, while the capacity to deal with them is very limited. Close to 100 patients each day need inpatient treatment, but because of the shortage of beds, we hospitalize only those patients whose psychological condition is completely out of control and poses danger. In addition, the distribution of medicine is very limited, and in most cases patients' families are told to wait their turn.'[72] Another mental health specialist at the same centre added: 'One of the most basic

(5/9/2025): Afghanistan: Third quake strikes Afghanistan as deaths rise, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cly1wy7v9yyo, accessed 9/10/2025, CNN - Cable News Network (4/9/2025): Taliban calls for foreign help after deadly Afghanistan earthquake. Here's what we know, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/02/asia/afghanistan-earthquake-taliban-us-intl-hnk, accessed 5/5/2026

69 Interview with a psychologist in western Afghanistan (an area affected by the earthquake) conducted by the author on 15.3.2026

70 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 26.2.2026 in Khost province

71 TN - Tolonews (19/2/2026): Two Million Sought Mental Health Treatment in 2025, Says Ministry, https://tolonews.com/health-198047, accessed 11/5/2026

72 Interview with a mental health specialist (A) at Kabul's specialized mental health centre conducted by the author on 17.3.2026 in Kabul

problems in providing mental health services is the shortage of health personnel and mental health counsellors. The number of patients referred is far greater, but because of the shortage of specialists and counsellors, dozens of patients return home every day without receiving mental health services or counselling.'[73]

The spokesperson for the Ministry of Public Health explained: 'Our mental health services are implemented in two sections: inpatient and outpatient services. Inpatient services are limited, because in each zone, which includes five provinces of Afghanistan, we have only four beds for mental health patients. For this reason, we hospitalize only the most severe cases and treat the remaining patients through medication and psychological counselling.'[74]

A mental health specialist at the Ministry of Public Health said: 'Mental health treatment services in the country are minimal because a large part of the budget is spent in other health sectors, and in addition Afghanistan's health sector faces a severe shortage of mental health specialists. For this reason, most of our mental health services are only simple psychological counselling.'[75]

A member of the Department of Mental Health Services in the Ministry of Public health stated: 'Meanwhile, the provision of mental health services in the provinces is far lower than in the capital.'[76] As the Ministry of Public Health statistics indicate, only five hospitals in five provinces of Afghanistan have small mental health departments, while the remaining 29 provinces lack mental health services.[77]

A mental health counsellor in Paktia province mentioned: 'In the southeastern zone of the country, we have one small mental health department in Paktia province with only five beds, and if a mental health patient is in Khost province, they must travel 100 kilometres to reach this treatment unit. Even then the chance of being admitted is low, because equipment is minimal and medicine is very scarce, and for that reason we rely mostly on counselling.'[78] A mental health specialist added: 'A large number of mental health patients in Afghanistan need hospitalization, continuous care, and medication, but these services are far too limited in mental health centres, and for this reason mental health services in Afghanistan have come to mean nothing more than psychological counselling.'[79]

A specialist at Kabul's specialized mental health centre explained: 'For inpatients, psychological care, medication, and counselling are provided, and depending on the severity of the illness this care lasts from three days up to one or two weeks. But because of limited resources, efforts are

73 Interview with a mental health specialist (B) at Kabul's specialized mental health centre conducted by the author on 17.3.2026 in Kabul

74 Second interview with the spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 10.3.2026 in Kabul

75 Interview with a mental health specialist at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 4.3.2026 in Kabul

76 Interview with s member of Department of Mental Health Services in the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 8.2.2026 in Kabul.

77 This data was provided to the author during an interview with a spokesperson for Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health on 10.3.2026

78 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 27.2.2026 in Paktia province

79 Interview with a mental health specialist conducted by the author on 16.3.2026 in Herat province

made to discharge patients sooner. In another section, we provide psychological counselling, which is short and quick and is not delivered continuously for a patient.'[80]

Meanwhile, the provision of mental health services for women is in the worst condition. A female mental health counsellor elaborated: 'The number of female psychologists in all of Afghanistan does not even reach one thousand, while the female population of this country is twenty million. Even in major cities there is no special treatment centre for women, and small private clinics do not have the capacity to care for them.'[81]

In Afghanistan's provinces, however, care for female mental health patients is an extremely serious challenge, because in the provinces there is far less medical staff and very few health treatment centres for women. A mental health counsellor in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan mentioned: 'In the southern zone, which includes four provinces, there is no female psychologist specialist at all, and only two female mental health counsellors work in the government hospital. Mental health services are mostly in the form of counselling, and there are no inpatient services for women.'[82]

A senior specialist in the Ministry of Public Health's service delivery department stated: 'In Afghanistan, 95 % of health services are concentrated on primary care, internal medicine, emergency care, and other sectors, and only 5 % are concentrated on mental health services, which include one specialized mental health services centre in Kabul. A large part of mental health services consists of psychological counselling, while other sections include inpatient care and medication. These services are mainly for illnesses such as acute stress, anxiety, depression, mental disorders caused by wars and deadly incidents, substance-induced mental disorders, and trauma, and the main focus is on patients whose condition is extremely severe. Patients whose conditions are not very severe are given psychological counselling. Because of the shortage of beds, medical equipment, and medicine, these mental health services are not long-term, and after a few days of hospitalization we are forced to send patients back home. The private sector and the World Health Organization are also active in providing health services, and overall the government has the ability to provide only a small portion of mental health services in Afghanistan, while the budget approved for this sector is also small.'[83]

One of the senior mental health counsellors at the Ministry of Public Health added: 'If deadly incidents such as severe earthquakes occur and have long-term psychological effects, then the government health sector sends only mental health counselors for treatment, and this is only for treating or relieving anxiety and fear and preventing depression. Overall, the government health sector does not have the capacity to deploy highly specialized mental health teams, nor is this given much consideration.'[84]

80 Interview with a specialist at Kabul's specialized mental health centre conducted by the author on 3.3.2026 in Kabul
81 Interview with a female mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 9.3.2026 in Logar province
82 Interview with a mental health counsellor conducted by the author on 16.3.2026 in Helmand province
83 Interview with a senior specialist in the Ministry of Public Health's service conducted by the author on 6.2.2026 in Kabul
84 Interview with one of the senior mental health counselors at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 19.3.2026 in Kabul

However, in Afghanistan a large portion of mental health services is provided by private institutions, foreign organizations, and UN-related agencies. The head of a private mental health institution explained: 'Our institution provides counseling and to some extent mental health treatment in war-affected areas, and we receive the required budget from UN offices. We hire mental health counselors and specialists until the end of the project and provide free services by setting up mental health clinics. Usually our services are more specialized and better equipped than government mental health services because we allocate larger budgets and hire specialized staff.'[85]

One of the basic challenges in Afghanistan in the provision of health services is lack of budget.[86] A member of the Ministry of Public Health's deputy office for health service delivery stated: 'Because of budget shortages, providing mental health services has always remained on the margins, and we focus on services in other areas of health. In the mental health sector too, the focus is mostly on counseling, especially for illnesses such as stress, anxiety, and trauma. But providing inpatient services and continuous, professional treatment requires a larger budget, which is beyond the capacity of the government health sector.'[87]

In terms of cost, mental health treatment in Afghanistan can be divided into two parts: free treatment and paid treatment.

A psychologist at the Quick Response team at the Ministry of Public Health in Kabul said: 'Free treatment is mostly provided by the government health sector, which is limited, short-term, and mostly based on counseling. In addition, UN institutions and related organizations also provide free treatment, whose quality is higher than government treatment. Meanwhile, the private sector, which includes private hospitals, specialized clinics, and private organizations, provides mental health services in exchange for payment. These services are of good quality and include different branches of mental health care, but they charge money for every part of the service, and paying for them is beyond the means of many people in Afghanistan, with only a limited class able to afford them.'[88]

6 How Do Society and the Government Treat People with Mental Illness?

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The spread of mental illness, the shortage of mental health services, the lack of health budget in this sector, and the fact that thousands suffer from mental illness are one side of the issue; but how Afghan society treats mental health patients is one of the major challenges in controlling mental health.

85 Interview with the head of a private mental health institution conducted by the author on 13.3.2026, Kandahar province
86 TN - Tolonews (31/12/2025): In 2025, Afghanistan's Health Sector Saw Notable Changes, https://tolonews.com/health-197288, accessed 11/5/2026
87 Interview with a member of the Ministry of Public Health's deputy office for health service delivery conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
88 Interview with a psychologist at the Quick Response team at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 15.3.2026 in Kabul

What is clear is that Afghan society is not very familiar with mental illness, and the lack of public awareness in this field has caused these illnesses to spread more while their treatment receives less attention.

A professor of psychology at Kabul University explained: 'The majority of people in Afghanistan think that individuals with mental illness are mad and untreatable, and they only want such people to remain isolated and away from society so that they do not harm others. But they do not know that this condition is actually a mental disorder that can be treated and controlled. The biggest challenge is that the media, the government, aid organizations, and UN agencies have not done enough awareness-raising in this field, and people have limited and incomplete information about mental illness.'[89]

In Afghanistan's provinces, people often take those with mental illness to religious clerics so that prayers can restore their health, which itself shows the lack of information about mental illness. A professor of psychology elaborated: 'Afghan society suffers severely from lack of information about mental illness, and the farther you go from the capital toward the provinces, the greater this ignorance becomes, to the point that in villages people take mental health patients to religious figures so that they will seek forgiveness from God for them. In many cases, people try to keep individuals with severe mental conditions locked inside houses and prevent them from going outside, which in many instances even leads to suicide.'[90]

In remote provinces of Afghanistan, people with mental illness turn only to religious figures, and people believe that religious figures have the ability to treat patients. This belief has become deeply rooted over the years, and removing it is difficult. A psychologist added: 'People's beliefs in the provinces are such that religious figures are regarded as healers for mental illness, and mental illnesses are linked to religious, doctrinal, and faith-related matters, to the extent that people trust religious figures more than psychologists.'[91]

One of the reasons for the rise in suicide in Afghan society is the unhealthy way people treat mental health patients, and this narrows the social space for them and eventually leads to absolute hopelessness. A psychologist in Khost province explained: 'Here, a mental illness can progress all the way to suicide, and the main reason is the unhealthy attitude of the family and society. Patients move from stress into depression, and immediately, because of the lack of health services and because they do not go to hospitals, their illness deepens and eventually ends in suicide.'[92]

Meanwhile, the use of words such as 'mad' and 'crazy' has become a simple everyday practice among people, and they do not know that such words can contribute to the deepening of mental illness and to neglect of it. Many people consider those with severe mental illness to be insane and incapable, and they try to avoid helping them or involving them in social activities. The word 'mad' has become so simple and insignificant for people that even children use it. A former patient who recovered from a severe psychological condition said: 'What deeply hurt and

89 Interview with a professor of psychology at Kabul University conducted by the author on 3.2.2026 in Kabul
90 Interview with a professor of psychology conducted by the author on 14.3.2026 in Kandahar province
91 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 18.3.2026 in Kabul
92 Interview with a psychologist conducted by the author on 25.2.2026 in Khost province

discouraged me was the way people treated me. Even close relatives said that I had gone mad and that there was no chance I would ever get better, and that I should be locked in the house so I would not harm others. For that reason, with every passing day the illness took more and more control over me. But by using counselling, medicine, and family cooperation, I was able to recover. Even so, those same hurtful words still torment me.'[93]

A social psychologist assessed: 'The way the family treats and supports mental health patients is extremely important and beneficial, and this can be considered the first step in treatment. In the capital and major cities of Afghanistan, because of the activities of the media, health organizations, and clinics, families to some extent play a supportive role for the mental health patient. But in the provinces, because of lack of awareness and fear of family disgrace in society, families try to lock sick family members inside the house or take them to religious figures for treatment.'[94]

An adviser at Ministry of Public Health said: 'As for the government, its treatment of mental health patients is not at the level one would expect, and the main reason is lack of facilities and shortage of personnel to care for mental illness.'[95] A member of the Ministry of Public Health's service delivery department explained: 'For several years the ministry has tried to activate a specialized cancer hospital, but it still has not been able to do so. This is a clear example of the weak and limited capacity of the health sector in delivering services. Mental health has never been a main focus of the Ministry of Public Health, because the budget, human resources, and financial aid in this field are limited.'[96]

A health advisor in the Ministry of Public Health added: 'What is clear is that the government does not have a specific health policy for mental health that includes long-term plans and specific goals. This is never officially confirmed, but the reality is that such a policy does not exist, and more attention is given to simple plans for dealing with patients.'[97]

Overall, it can be said that people do not have enough information about mental illness, ways of protecting mental health, or how to treat mental health patients, and the government, because of limited budget and the small size of the health sector, is unable to provide full care for mental health patients and instead deals with them in a superficial, short-term, and careless way.

7 Key findings

93 Interview with a former patient who recovered from a severe psychological condition conducted by the author on 16.3.2026 in Kabul
94 Interview with a social psychologist conducted by the author on 6.2.2026 in Kabul
95 Interview with an adviser at the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 22.2.2026 in Kabul
96 Interview with A member of the Ministry of Public Health's service delivery deparment conducted by the author on 10.2.2026 in Kabul
97 Interview with a health advisor in the Ministry of Public Health conducted by the author on 7.2.2026 in Kabul

In this section, we would like to mention in general several important points that summarize this research report and the findings of interviews with dozens of psychologists and officials:

1. Mental illness in Afghanistan is expanding and becoming a major health challenge in the country.
2. Five decades of war, the economic crisis, Taliban restrictions on individual freedoms, and drug use are the most important and largest causes of mental illness in Afghanistan.
3. Stress, chronic anxiety, hopelessness, depression, substance-induced disorders, alienation, and severe distrust are among the main types of mental illness in Afghan society.
4. The government health sector does not have the capacity to deal with mental illness in Afghanistan, and there is only one specialized centre in Kabul and one small unit at the level of every five provinces for mental illness.
5. Psychological counselling is the health sector's main response to mental illness in Afghanistan, while medication, inpatient services, and long-term counselling are highly limited and insufficient.
6. In Afghanistan, compared with men, women suffer more from mental illness, mainly because of social crises, deprivation of basic rights, the Taliban's severe social policies, and the customs and traditions of Afghan society.
7. Because of lack of public awareness and insufficient information about mental illness, people do not take these illnesses seriously, and their treatment of mental health patients in the provinces is degrading.
8. In rural areas, people take mental health patients to religious figures and consider these illnesses to be caused by religious issues and religious failings.
9. At present, no clear health policy and no precise surveys regarding mental illness in Afghanistan have been conducted.
10. In Afghanistan, mental illness can quickly progress from simple stress to depression, absolute hopelessness, and even suicide.
11. Because of mental disorders, the suicide rate in Afghanistan is higher particularly among adolescents, both young women and men.
12. Social acceptance of mental health patients in Afghanistan is low, and these individuals quickly lose their social standing and others' trust because society sees them as weak and even insane.
13. Since the Taliban returned to power, the rate of mental illness has been rising, and one of the main reasons is the Taliban's severe policies restricting individual freedoms.

14. The use of synthetic drugs has caused young people to damage their mental condition even more, and disorders caused by synthetic drug use are increasing in Afghanistan's capital and major cities.

15. The Taliban government refrains from providing clear information about mental illness, and the information mentioned in this report was obtained from sources inside the Ministry of Public Health through personal connections and on condition of anonymity.

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