

Providing MHPSS support for women in Afghanistan

A manual for service providers



Table of Contents

Page Section

01 About this manual

05 Before the consultation

11 Holding a consultation to support women

28 Practice exercises

30 Self-care for service providers

33 Listening to women's stories

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Section 1

About this manual

About this manual

What will be covered in this manual?

This manual will provide **service providers** with guidance on how to support the needs of women who use their services through offering supportive and non-judgemental consultations. In this manual you will:

- Understand the different ways women talk about the problems they are facing in their lives and how it affects their health.
- Learn how to create a safe environment for women to open up about their problems.
- Learn how to hold a consultation to support a woman including 1) how to effectively listen and respond to women who are sharing their stories of suffering; 2) techniques to help offer support to women who become distressed during a consultation; 3) how to help women set achievable goals that may improve their health
- How to take care of your own health as a service provider.

Who is this manual for?

This manual is for use by service providers to give guidance on how to support the needs of women facing difficulties who are using their services. The manual may be used as guidance on how to talk to someone about their problems in a sensitive way and also outlines some exercises you can do with women during a consultation or on your own to help if you are feeling overwhelmed.

How to use this manual

This manual uses key concepts from the World Health Organization Mental Health GAP Resources, the Garima Project by SNEHA, and the ENACT tool to provide a framework for service providers to help women who use their services to understand their feelings, identify their needs and develop strategies to help improve their mental health. The manual has been adapted for Afghanistan through extensive data collection and analysis conducted throughout 2019-20.

01

Prepare

This manual can be read before you begin holding consultations with women to help prepare and train you for the kinds of skills you need, as well as important background information and principles that are crucial for running an effective consultation.

02

Understand

The manual will help you understand why women experience emotional difficulties and the different ways this can impact their lives. By learning to understand each woman you see, you will be better able to support them.

03

Help

This manual will provide detailed guidance with examples to help you develop the competencies you need to carry out a consultation, with practical examples on how to provide effective support. There are also practice exercises available to help you feel confident speaking to women about difficult topics.

04

Support

This manual will help you to provide effective support to women who are experiencing difficulties in their lives. It will teach you how to help others problem solve, set achievable goals for themselves, and manage their emotions.

05

Reflect

Listening to distressing stories on a daily basis can take its toll on you emotionally. This manual offers advice on how to reflect on your own emotions and to take care of yourself if you start to feel upset or overwhelmed.

When you can read this manual

- **Before** consultations in preparation for the session and to practice different skills.
- **During** consultations if you would like to check through it to help guide you through the session.
- **After** consultations to help you reflect on the session and think about how it went. Each section can advise you on how to listen and respond to your peers in a supportive way. It also outlines some helpful techniques that you can use **if you are feeling upset or overwhelmed yourself.**

Section 2

Before the consultation

Before the consultation

In this section we will run through some of the most important things to know before you initiate a consultation with a woman. It is based on research that was done with women in Afghanistan and draws on their experiences, feelings and mental health concerns. This section will help you understand some of these fears and difficulties, and better understand how to help other women in need.

Understanding how she feels

Not all women describe how they feel in the same way or in the way that health providers often do. Women may use a variety of words and phrases to describe how they are struggling such as:

- Feeling stressed
- Having headaches
- Feeling weak
- Having trouble sleeping
- Having trouble eating
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling as if they have no future or that life has no meaning
- Isolating themselves
- Hating their lives
- Feeling sad
- Afraid of something bad happening to them
- Thinking a lot
- Feeling depressed
- Wanting to end their life
- Crying a lot

Why might she be feeling this way?

She may feel this way because of difficult things that are happening in her life or upsetting events that happened a long time ago. For example, she may have been hurt by a friend or family member, she may have lost a loved one or she may have witnessed something distressing. She may have experienced one harmful event or multiple across her life. These experiences can cause long-term psychosocial distress which can be hard to manage.

Examples of the challenges some women may be experiencing

There are many experiences that women may have had, which are making her feel distressed. Here are some examples of events that can happen to women, and may be upsetting, even if they happened a long time ago.

S lives with her husband and his mother. Her mother-in-law is constantly demeaning towards S and humiliates her in front of others. This makes S feel depressed and hopeless. She begins to lose interest in activities she once found pleasurable such reading and seeing friends. She begins to eat less and is tired all the time.

W has been married to her husband since she was very young. He beats her regularly and blames the beatings on her. She is not allowed her to see her family and feels completely isolated. She feels like her life has no meaning and is constantly afraid of the next beating. The anxiety makes it hard for her to relax, and she struggles to sleep well at night. When she is alone, memories of the beatings flood her mind, and she can't stop thinking about them no matter how hard she tries. She gets bad headaches frequently.

K lives with her uncle, who is often angry with her. He threatens to throw her out of the house or marry her off. She tells her father but is told that she should listen to her uncle and if she obeys him there won't be a problem. Her father tells her not tell anyone about how she feels. She feels ashamed and helpless. When she is alone, she cries a lot and thinks about killing herself to escape her situation.

How she may feel before meeting you

Before you meet with a woman using your services, it is important to remember the following:

- She may feel shame about the things she has gone through in her life and the way she is feeling now.
- She may be scared that you will judge her for the things she is going through.
- She may have had bad experiences opening up to people about her struggles in the past which may make her distrusting of others.
- She may be scared that other people will find out about the problems she is facing after speaking with you.

To help her feel safe opening up to you, it is important to make sure you provide a safe space for her to talk. This means offering her:

Safe space

Create a safe space for her to talk. This means hearing her story without interruption, judgement or blame, and showing that you understand her and her values.

Trust

It may be difficult for her to trust you because of how she had been treated by others. Trust can be built slowly by normalising and validating how she is feeling.

Setting boundaries

Explain that you will not tell her husband or relatives what she tells you. You may need to tell other who can help support her, but you will ask her first before sharing her story with someone else.

Support

Help her learn how to recognise her emotions and develop strategies for calming her thoughts so that she can find appropriate solutions and manage her health.

Empowerment

It is important that women feel empowered during your consultation. This means:

- Listening empathetically to what she has to say with minimal interruption.
- Giving her the freedom to talk or not talk about whatever she wants.
- Checking to make sure you have understood.
- Praising her for the ways in which she has coped with the problems she has experienced.
- Summarising what she has said so that she knows you have been listening.
- Explaining that how she is feeling is normal and that anyone in her situation would feel the same way.
- Collaboratively setting goals without giving advice.

Confidentiality

It is crucial that everything a woman tells you during your consultation is kept completely confidential. Maintaining confidentiality means you must not tell anyone their name or other information that could be used to locate them (e.g. address, names of friends or family members etc). You also must not share any of the stories she shares with you with other people unless she gives you permission to do so. This is crucial to ensure she feels she can trust you and that she will not be put at risk by talking to you about her life.

Although confidentiality is critical for creating trust, in some cases it may be necessary to tell others about a situation where someone is at risk of harm. For example, if a woman or a child's life is at risk. However, this should be explained to the woman before she shares any personal information with you.

Stigmas around mental health

There are many stigmas around experiencing mental health problems which can stop people from getting support out of fear they may be blamed, judged or misunderstood for the difficulties they experience. We have addressed some common stigmas and misconceptions below that are important to remember before you enter a consultation with a woman.

- Feeling anxious, depressed, overwhelmed, scared or angry because of the problems someone is facing in life does not mean they are mentally ill or possessed. These emotions are perfectly normal and do not mean a person cannot function or participate normally in society.
- If a woman needs to use MHPSS services to help her overcome the difficulties she is facing, it does not mean there is something wrong with her. MHPSS services are here to support women who face a variety of difficulties and help manage them.
- Difficult emotions can arise from a range of harmful events such as war or losing loved ones. Anyone can suffer from emotional difficulties, not just women. Men, women, young people and the elderly can all struggle with their emotions.
- Experiencing difficult emotions is a natural response to experiencing distressing life events, and people should not be ashamed of feeling them or brush them aside. It is far better to acknowledge one's feelings, understand that they are natural and seek help to manage them if they can.
- Many people experience difficulties that can affect their daily lives. Just because these feelings are common, it does not mean that their feelings are invalid or that they shouldn't seek help. Sometimes, negative feelings do not go away by themselves, and people need some support to help manage them.



Section 3

**Holding a
consultation to
support women**



Holding a consultation to support women

In this section we will run through some key points to consider when running a consultation with a woman including

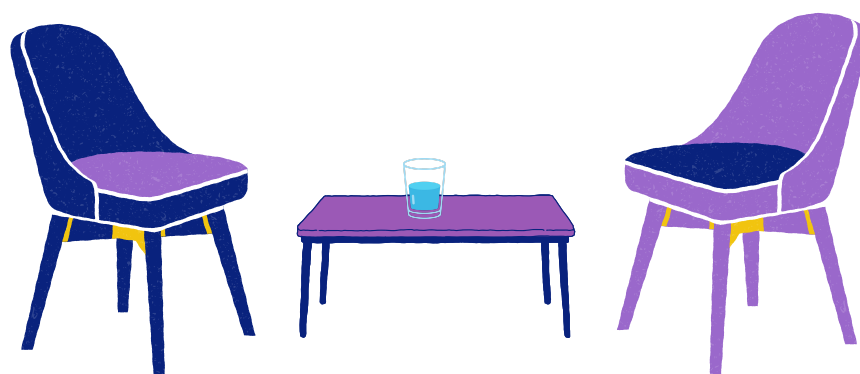


How to greet her

When you first meet a woman using your service, you should make her feel safe and welcome. You can do this by:

- **Introducing** yourself.
- Taking her to a **private** space.
- Offering her a glass of **water**.
- Asking her if there is anything you can do to make her feel **comfortable**.
- Show her you are listening by using **open and relaxed body language**.

It won't always be possible to find a quiet, comfortable space and you may need to adapt to what is available to you. The most important thing to consider is that the space is private and safe.



You can start the conversation with phrases that establish trust and safety such as:

- “Is anything you would like to tell me before we begin.”
- “I am here to help and support you.”
- “Everything we speak about will be private. I will not share any details about you or the things we talk about with anyone unless you give me permission to do so.”
- “What would you like to speak about today?”

How to listen to her when she opens up about her difficulties

Focus on her

- **Let her talk** without interruption. You can say things like "yes, please continue" to let her know you are listening.
- **Pay attention** to what she is saying, her tone and her body language.
- **Listen** with the aim of **understanding** what she is saying. Don't give examples of time when you have easily solved similar problems.
- Look at her and nod while she speaks to let her know you are **interested** in what she has to say.
- **Give her time** to talk about what she is going through. Don't interrupt, or dominate the conversation with your own ideas.
- **Summarise** and repeat key points to show you are listening e.g. "You mentioned you feel very sad, what makes you feel sad? How would you describe the sadness you are feeling?"
- **Repeat** things she has said in your own words to ensure you understand what she is saying and to check if you have missed anything.

Communicate calmly

- Ensure you speak in a **calm** and clear voice. Try not to be too quiet or too loud.
- Try not to get her to talk about particularly distressing parts of her life too quickly as this may overwhelm her.

Show support and compassion

- Understand that she is distressed and that **opening up to you is difficult for her**.
- Be **patient and supportive** by reassuring her that you are here to help and that she can take her time to talk.
- Offer to hold her hand, put your arm around her or hug her to comfort her if both you and her feel **comfortable** with this.

Normalising and validate her feelings

Let her know that what she is feeling is natural and that she is not to blame for feeling this way. You can use the phrases in the box below to help do this.



- “I know this must be very difficult for you to talk about. Thank you for sharing this with me.”
- “I can understand that you feel upset/frustrated/sad. These situations are very hard to deal with.”
- “Anyone in your situation would feel this way.”
- “What happened to you is very hard to deal with. It is not your fault, and you are not to blame.”



Reassure her and empathise with her

Let her know you are here to support her and try to understand her situation from her perspective. You can use the phrases in the box below to do this.



- “I am here to help you.”
- “You are not alone.”
- “Everything we talk about will be shared with your husband or family members. Is there anyone you could do to help or to ask for advice?”
- “What happened is not your fault.”
- “You did not deserve this.”
- “You are not alone. I am here to listen and support you.”



Be aware of your own biases

We all have preconceived ideas of how people think and how the world works. However, it is important that you recognise what your biases are and ensure you do not allow them to affect your consultations.

Reflect on what she has said



- It sounds as if you feel upset about...
- It sounds like you may need support with...
- It sounds like you are worried about...
- It sounds like you are saying...
- Overall, it seems like you are saying... Does that sound correct to you?



Respect her choices

Remember that she is her own person, and she should feel empowered to make her own decisions. Never try to tell her what to do or force your own opinions onto her. Avoid making suggestions on what she should do and endeavour to only support her own decisions. Your role is to help her think through her own feelings in a safe and trusting space.

Ending the session

As the session draws to a close, you should summarise what you have discussed. This will make it easier to set targets and goals with her, which will discuss how to do shortly.

Don't

- Interrupt her.
- Push her to share more than she wants to.
- Dominate the conversation with your own ideas.
- Assume you know how she feels.
- Dismiss how she is feeling as not important.
- Blame her for how she is feeling or what has happened to her.

Questions to help guide the conversation if needed

During the consultation you should allow her to talk freely without interruption or too much input from you. However, if she is struggling to know where to start or what to talk about, you may want to ask some questions to help her along. However, if she is reluctant to talk or answer any of these questions do not push her or press her to respond.



- "Would you like to tell me more about your situation? I am here to listen and support you."
- "How do you feel about that?"
- "When did you start feeling this way?"
- "How does this problem impact on your daily life?"
- "Did anyone help you when this happened?"
- "Is there anything else you are worried about?"
- "Would you feel comfortable to tell me a little more about that?"



If she starts to feel overwhelmed during the consultation

If she starts to feel overwhelmed or anxious whilst talking to you, you can try some exercises to make her feel calmer. These could be either grounding or calm breathing. We explain how to use these techniques in the next few pages.

Grounding

Grounding can be used to help someone feel connected to the present moment when they are having trouble keeping away upsetting thoughts. It involves asking a series of questions about the environment around her.

Tips for using grounding

You can use Grounding during a consultation if she appears to become overwhelmed or panicked. You can also suggest that she uses Grounding at home by herself. This is useful to advise when you are setting goals with her.

Below are some tips to communicate to her when advising her to use Grounding at home by herself:

- Grounding isn't always easy. It may take some time before the techniques work well, but don't give up on them.
- You can practice Grounding even when you are not experiencing distress, so you feel more confident to use it when you do need it.
- Start using Grounding as soon as you start to feel bad – don't wait until your distress becomes too severe.
- Don't be discouraged if you don't feel better at first, sometimes it can take a while for the techniques to work.
- If it is not too distressing, reflect on how you felt before the Grounding exercise and after. Ask yourself whether you feel better. This can help you find out whether it is working for you overtime.
- Keep your eyes open so that it is easier to remain connected to the present. You can practice Grounding anytime and anywhere.
- Feel free to experiment with different questions and different methods if you find something else works better for you.

On the next page we run through how to use Grounding during a consultation using an example in the text box.

How to use Grounding

- 01** Begin by acknowledging and validating her reaction.
- 02** Ask her whether she would like to take a break from talking about the topic.
- 03** Inform her that you will try the Grounding exercise with her to help her feel calmer. Let her know that this involves her answering some questions.
- 04** Ask her to name:
 - 5 things she can see
 - 4 things she can feel
 - 3 things she can hear
 - 2 things she can smell
 - 1 thing she can taste

- 05** Ask her how she feels now.



If she says she feels better, ask her if she would like to continue talking or if she would like to talk about something else.



If she says she does not feel any better, you can try the deep breathing exercises on page 20.

To help you understand how to use this during a consultation, you can read through the box on the next page. The coloured text inside the box corresponds to the numbers of each step on this page so you can see how each step has been implemented.

An Example of Grounding

Woman A is talking to Service Provider B about some distressing events she has experienced in her life. She describes an incident where she was beaten badly by a family member. She begins to feel intensely afraid and panicked at recounting the story and struggles to continue talking.

Service provider B says **“I can see that you are feeling quite upset talking about this. That is very understandable. It is normal to feel overwhelmed when talking about these things. Would you like to take a short break from talking about this and come back to this topic later?”**

Woman A nods but is still visibly overwhelmed. She struggles to stop thinking about the incident she was talking about. Service provider B says **“Shall we try a brief exercise that might make you feel better? I will ask you some questions now and you can do your best to respond.”** Woman A agrees.

Service provider B asks the following questions.

“Can you tell me where you are right now”. Woman A responds “I am in your office right now”

“Thank you. **Please could you name 5 things you can see right now?”** Woman A responds, “I can see a clock, a chair, a table, a pen and a notebook”.

“Thank you. **Now please can you name 4 things you can feel right now”**

Woman A responds “I can feel the breeze from through the window, the material of my clothes, the soles of my shoes and the ring I am wearing”

“Thank you. **Please can you name 3 things you can hear”** Woman A responds “I can hear the traffic outside, the birds singing and the sound of our breathing”

“Can you name 2 things you can smell?” Woman A responds “I can smell the soap I have used and the petrol from outside”

“Can you name 1 thing you can taste?” Woman A responds “I can taste the tea I drank earlier”

Service Provider B says **“Thank you. How do you feel now after answering those questions?”**

“I feel a little calmer” Woman A responds.

“Would you feel comfortable continuing with your story, or would you prefer to talk about something else for a while?” Service Provider B says. “I think I’d like to continue talking” Woman A responds.

Calm breathing

Calm breathing exercises can be used to help with relaxation through guiding the breathing. You may wish to use calm breathing exercises when you notice she is becoming panicked, overwhelmed or having difficulty regulating her own breathing. You can use calm breathing exercises before Grounding, after Grounding or by itself.

Tips for using calm breathing

- Calm breathing works by deepening the break and ensuring that the exhale is longer than the inhale.
- It can be helpful to exhale and inhale along with her as you guide her through the exercise. You can also count to three every time she inhales, exhales and holds her breath so she knows how long to do this for.
- You can repeat the calm breathing cycles three times or more depending on how long she needs.
- You can also recommend that she tried calm breathing exercises at home when she feels anxious or overwhelmed.

The next page shows how you can use calm breathing exercises in a consultation if you notice she has started to feel panicked or overwhelmed.

How to use calm breathing

START HERE

"I can see that you are feeling upset talking about this. That is very understandable. It is normal to feel overwhelmed when talking about these things. "

"Let's start by slowly exhaling all the air out of your body. Relax your shoulders and let go of any tension in your body."

"We can try a deep breathing exercise to help you feel more relaxed. To do this I'll guide you through what to do."

"Now lets gently inhale through your nose while counting slowly to 3"

When she fully exhales say "now let's hold our breath here for 3 seconds."

As she reaches the top of her breath say "now let's hold our breath here for 3 seconds"

"Now we will gently exhale through our mouth for 6 seconds"

Repeat up to 3 cycles of deep breathing or more until you feel she is calmer. Then ask her how she is feeling.

Goal setting

Once you have discussed the problems she is experiencing, she may want to think of some solutions that may help. It is important that she feels fully in control, and she is completely happy with any solutions you discuss. You can guide her through this process by...

01 Identifying her needs

Draw on the things she has told you throughout the conversation and summarise the key issues. Ask her if this is a good summary, and if there is anything else she would like to add.

Ask her what happiness looks like to her. This will help you understand what she wants. She may describe happiness as:

- "Having the freedom to do whatever I want without fear."
- "Being able to see my friends and family more."
- "Feeling like life has purpose and meaning."

02 Help her to prioritise 1 or 2 goals to work on

Ask questions that can help prioritise what she wants to achieve such as "What are the things you feel as if you are struggling with the most?" and "What is the most important thing you would like to focus on today?" She may say she is struggling with specific emotions or situations. For example, she may want to stop feeling sad, stop feeling ashamed, or feel less overwhelmed. Suggest that the two of you identify one or two goals for her to work on. If the goals that she chooses are changes to her situation, this is fine, but she may also want to choose a second goal that is about her emotions.

Help her think about goals that are achievable. If you set goals that are too high, she may give up or get frustrated. After talking with her, you may be able to help break down her needs into achievable goals such as:

- "I want to be able to sleep better and feel less anxious before bed."
- "I want to feel as if I have more purpose in my life."
- "I want to get fewer stress headaches."

03 Generate a list of possible goals

You can ask her whether there is anything in her life that ever makes her feel happiness – even if for a short time. This could be:

- Spending time with her children
- Hobbies such as reading, sewing, cooking etc.
- Exercising at home
- Going to your neighbour's home and talking to female members of the household
- Praying or reading the Quran
- Talking to friends or family such as her mother or sister.

Generate as many possible goals as you can at this stage. Do not evaluate them. The aim is to think about as many possibilities as you can, no matter how difficult or challenging they may be for her.

04 Discuss the pros and cons of each goal

Discuss the pros and cons of trying to achieve each of the goals she has identified. The pros are good things that will happen if she chooses to pursue this goal. The cons are the negative or unhelpful consequences that might happen.

To help her think about what is achievable, you can ask her questions about existing areas of support in her life and any coping strategies she uses that make her feel better. You can ask:

- “How do you cope with these problems day by day?”
- “Is there anything you currently do that helps with these feelings?”
- “Do you have any support at the moment?”
- “What kind of support do you have?”
- “Do you get help from family, friends or people in the community?”

Go back and forth with her about the pros and cons of different goals, weighing up the possibilities together. Let her drive the conversation and follow her lead about what is important to her.

05 Discuss how to manage her mental health

After you have run through steps 1-4, you can reflect on her answers together and think collaboratively about what might help her to achieve her goals moving forward. Help her find specific strategies for achieving her goals. Ask questions about **what** she is going to do to achieve her goal, including **who** might be able to help her, **where** she does what she needs to do, and **when** she can do it most easily.

You can do this by:

- Discussing whether the things that make her happy can be used as helpful coping strategies. Think about when the best time might be to do these activities depending on how she feels. For example, if she feels worse in the morning she may want to try going for a walk if she has mentioned she enjoys exercise. If she feels worse after certain distressing experiences, she may want to try talking to a friend if she has mentioned she feels better after talking.
- Exploring whether she can access support from friends or family. You can discuss whether she thinks getting support from them may be beneficial and how it might help.
- Emphasising that physical health is important to help with mental health. If she has spoken about losing her appetite, feeling weak or feeling tired, you may want to recommend she eats and drinks more and exercises where possible.
- Teaching her the Grounding and deep-breathing exercises to allow her to manage her emotions when she has spare time.

If you are struggling to identify coping strategies

It may be that she cannot think of anything that makes her happy. In this case, you can:

- Ask her what kinds of things she would like to do more of, or that she would like to try.
- Ask her how much alone time she has and whether she can use this time to do things that make her feel happier.
- Ask her whether she has any support from friends or family. You can discuss whether she thinks getting support from them may be beneficial and how it might help.
- Teach her the Grounding and deep-breathing exercises to allow her to manage her emotions when she has spare time.

One time vs multiple consultations

The number of consultation sessions you will have with a woman may affect how you will want to run the consultation. Ideally, you would be able to hold at least 2-3 sessions with a woman so that she has plenty of time to talk through her needs and for you both to think about goals and support. However, you may only see a woman for one session. We have outlined a structure on the next page to help guide you decide what to talk about depending on the number of sessions you have with her.

Structuring consultations

If you can only see her for 1 consultation

Session 1

1. Discuss her feelings and what difficulties she is facing at the moment.
2. Ask her what she would like to prioritise in the session. What difficulties or emotions are affecting her the most and what would she like to get out of the session?
3. Run her through some deep breathing or Grounding techniques that she can try.
4. Set goals and provide support that are tailored to the priorities she has laid out.
5. Reassure and validate her so she leaves understanding that what happened to her is not her fault and that there are things she can do to manage her negative emotions.

If you can see her for 2 consultations

Session 1

1. Discuss her feelings and understand what difficulties she is facing at the moment.
2. Reassure and validate her feelings.
3. Provide support.
4. Discuss and set goals. Understand how she would like to proceed with managing her emotions.
5. Discuss deep breathing or Grounding techniques that she can try.

Session 2

1. Review what you discussed in the previous session
2. Continue to explore her feelings
3. Continue to provide support and reassurance
4. Discuss and set goals. Review the goals you previously set and ask her about whether she has tried the Grounding or deep breathing techniques you discussed.

If you can see her for 3 consultations

Session 1

1. Discuss her feelings and understand what difficulties she is facing at the moment.
2. Reassure and validate her feelings.
3. Provide support.
4. Begin setting goals and identify how she wants to proceed.

Session 2

1. Review what you discussed in the previous session.
2. Continue to explore her feelings.
3. Continue to provide support and reassurance.
4. Discuss and set goals.

Session 3

1. Review your discussions from the previous session.
2. Provide support and reassurance.
3. Check-in on her progress with the goals and strategies you previously set. Ask if she is happy with them. If she isn't discuss alternatives.



Section 4

Practice exercises for service providers



Practice exercises for service providers

Now that you've read about how to run a consultation with a woman, it's time to practice some of these skills so that you feel confident delivering support and conducting these techniques.

Grounding: Practice Exercise 1

For this exercise you will practice running a Grounding session with someone else. Find a colleague or friend and ask them to role play as a woman in distress. Follow the guidance in the last box, starting with points 1 through 5. As you speak throughout this exercise:

- Think about your tone and voice. Try to communicate in a soothing and calm way.
- Ensure you are giving her enough time to think and respond without interrupting.

If she struggles to think of enough answers for a certain question e.g. she can only think of 1 thing she can smell instead of 2, you can ask her to name a smell she likes instead.

Practice advising her how to use Grounding when she is alone.

When you are finished, ask your friend or colleague what they thought of the session and if they have any feedback.

Grounding: Practice Exercise 2

Some women may prefer to use questions other than the questions about the 5 senses we use here. If this is the case, she may want to think about other questions she would prefer to use. To get you thinking about the kinds of questions these may be, use the space below to write 5 more questions that could be used during Grounding. Remember – they should help her to stop thinking about the past to help her feel connected to the present moment.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Deep breathing: Practice Exercise 3

Now it is time to practice running a deep breathing session with someone else. Find a colleague or friend and ask them to role play as a woman in distress. Follow the guidance to run through 3 cycles of deep breathing. As you are running through the exercise you should:

- Think about your tone and voice. Try to communicate in a soothing and calm way.
- Ensure you are following the deep breathing steps yourself and counting to 3 out loud so the woman can copy your actions.

Then practice advising her how to use deep breathing when she is alone. When you are finished, ask your friend or colleague for feedback on the session.



Section 5

Self-care for service providers



Self-care for service providers

As a service provider, you will listen to many stories that you may find troubling or distressing. Over time, this may start to affect your own emotional health. It is important that you are able to take care of your own emotional needs. You may start to feel:

- Overwhelmed.
- Stressed.
- Exhausted.
- Negative about your job.
- Distant from the people who use your services, or people in your personal life.
- Unfocused.
- Mood swings.
- Detached from your surroundings.
- Reduced sleep or appetite.
- Self-blame.
- Unable to stop thinking about your work.

It is very normal and understandable that you may start to feel this way. If you find yourself struggling, remember to:

01 Be kind to yourself

Understand that the pain you feel is normal and natural. Some people find it helpful to recite positive mantras to themselves. Things like “I am safe”, “I am ok”, “I have felt joy in my life, and I can feel it again”, “I am not to blame for feeling this way”. You may also want to recite poems or quotes that you find particularly inspirational or helpful to you.

02 Look after yourself

Make sure you are taking care of your body. You should try to move your body, eat properly and try to ensure you get enough sleep.

03 Do things that bring you joy

Identify the things in your life that make you happy and give you purpose or joy. These could be hobbies and interests that you enjoy, spending time with friends or family members, cooking, praying etc.

04 Reach out for support from others

If you have friends, neighbours or family members that you enjoy spending time with, talk to them about your feelings and the things you are going through.

05 Find a calm environment

Find a quiet place or room in the house that makes you feel calm and safe. If you can't access a quiet space, think about happy memories or a place where you felt safe in your past.

06 Monitor your feelings

Think about the times when you feel the most happy and the most low. You may find patterns in your emotions that could make you feel some control over how you are feeling. Be aware of what makes you feel energised and happy and what doesn't. Then when you feel low, you will understand why you feel this way.

07 Grounding and deep breathing exercises

You may find it helpful to practice the Grounding or deep breathing exercises outlined on pages 18-22.

Section 6

How to listen to women's stories of suffering

How to listen to women's stories of suffering

This manual is for use by service providers, whose job it is to support women with difficult life experiences. However, we have included this section which can provide guidance to anyone on how to listen to stories of suffering in a supportive way, whilst taking care of your own health. However, it is not anyone's responsibility to do this.

If a friend or family member discloses something about their personal life or mental health that is distressing to them, you can offer support by using some of the phrases in the box below.



- "What happened to you is not your fault."
- "Thank you for telling me."
- "I'm so sorry that happened to you."
- "I'm so sorry you are feeling this way."
- "You don't deserve this."
- "You are not alone."
- "I am here to listen to you if you would like to talk more about this."



While listening...

Do

- Reassure them that their feelings are normal and understandable.
- Reassure them that they are not to blame for anything that has happened to them.
- Show them you are listening.
- Check in with your own emotions.
- Help them to feel confident that you will maintain their trust

Don't

- Interrupt them.
- Judge them for their feelings or actions.
- Tell them what they should do or pressure them into taking actions they are not comfortable with.
- Blame them for how they feel.
- Tell anyone else what they have told you.

What have you learned?

This manual has been designed to ensure that you, as a service provider, know how to effectively provide the women who use your services with a supportive and non-judgemental consultation. Consider this list of competencies for psychological service as a means of assessing your own practice.

01 Body language and active listening

Culturally-appropriate body language for feelings of sadness or worry:

- Body turned towards the woman
- Use appropriate eye contact
- Use supportive body language (head nod), comforting touches when appropriate
- Change your body language depending on what she is saying, and her emotions

02 Asking open ended questions

Open ended questions to help the woman give more detailed answers:

- Open ended questions such as: 'Please tell me more about...' 'Please share with me...'
- Summarising what the woman has said
- Allowing her to respond fully before asking the next question
- Asking clarifying questions: "I heard you say..." "What I've understood is..."

03 Explaining confidentiality

Service providers are often not able to keep everything a woman tells them confidential. Explaining this at the start of a consultation is important.

- Explain how her story might need to be told to others within your organisations, for example to help her access services
- Explain how you might need to talk to your supervisor about her story
- Explain that you will not tell her family or relatives what she tells you, unless she says that she wants you to do that
- Ask questions to see if she has understood what you mean by confidentiality

04 Exploring and normalising feelings

Encourage women to talk about how they are feeling by:

- Asking questions such as "I noticed that you seemed sad when you came in...can you tell me about that..."
- Explaining that how they feel is normal and that anyone in a similar situation would feel the same
- Explore reasons why women might not want to share their emotions
- Ask the woman to tell you about experiences they have had when sharing emotions with others

05 Be warm, empathetic and genuine

Demonstrate warmth and empathy through body language and the words you use:

- Show that you are concerned for the woman and that you care
- Ask questions to understand her perspective, such as "how did you feel about that?" or "what was that like for you?"

06 Assessing harm

If the woman talks about harming herself, do not ignore this. Ask questions to understand how serious this is so that a support plan can be developed:

- If she talks about harming herself, ask her about her intention to do this and any other attempts in the past
- Ask about what support she has from others and help her to develop a support plan (if low risk): who would she go to if she felt this way, what could she do in such a situation?
- If there is a high risk of her harming herself, a supervisor should be told and a follow-up plan put in place.

07 Talk about daily activities

Sometimes women can find it difficult to do daily activities because of worry or sadness. You can help by:

- Asking about any difficulties performing daily activities because of stress, worry or sadness

08 Exploring the cause of problems

Family members may have different understandings of the problem than women themselves. This can be explored in more detail to find the right support by:

- Asking questions about what she thinks is the cause of the problem she is facing
- Asking what others say are the cause of the problem, including different family members and friends
- Support the woman's own understanding of the cause in planning goals

09 Support from family members

A family member may be the cause of the problem, while others could provide support. This needs to be discussed carefully by:

- Asking about the people in her life that support her
- Asking who she would like to have involved
- Explore these choices with her about the reasons why she would like to involve some people and not others

10 Set goals together

Women who are suffering may have difficulty thinking about goals or solutions they can use to change their situation. You can help them by:

- Asking what her goals are
- Helping her identify specific goals that are realistic and achievable within a short time frame
- Praise her for seeking care and share reasons for hope from talking with you about her problems

11 Coping

It is helpful to talk about situations in the past when they have coped with difficult situations by:

- Asking about what they do to cope or have done in the past
- Praise her for how she coped and encourage the use of positive coping strategies
- Reflect on unhelpful strategies and help her find alternatives

Additional resources

For some women, a supportive conversation by a skilled service provider or with a friend may not be enough to help alleviate the suffering they are experiencing. In these cases, we have provided a list of additional resources that are available.

At the time of writing, these organisations were providing psychosocial support services to women in Afghanistan. Please note that some organizations may be more active in certain regions than others.

- International Medical Corp (IMC)
- Action Against Hunger
- Health Net TPO
- INTERSOS
- Handicap International
- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Care International
- Save the Children (SCI)
- International Organization for Migration
- Women for Afghan Women
- HEWAD
- International Psychosocial Organization
- COMAC Blumonth

Garima is a useful website developed by SNEHA in India, filled with resources for service providers supporting women's psychosocial needs in South Asia:

<https://garima-snehamumbai.org/>

The **ENACT Tool** provides a list of competencies considered to be universal for the delivery of effective psychological treatment:

<https://www.gmhequitylab.com/enact-tool>

About Us.

Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA) was established in 1999 by a group of youth Afghan women and men. HAWCA's establishment was motivated by the despair and devastation suffered by Afghan women and children as victims of war and injustice in Afghanistan and as refugees in Pakistan. HAWCA has remained committed to achieving its aims of improving the lives of Afghans under difficult circumstances. HAWCA's objectives are advocating for the most helpless of Afghans, the women and children, and providing assistance for them. HAWCA actively works in different communities and encourages the active participation of Afghan women and youth.

This manual was developed over three years with the efforts of HAWCA's researchers and a group of dedicated UCL, KCL and St George's researchers, to whom we extend our thanks. At a time when Afghanistan is in an unfortunate and unpredictable situation, at increased risk of further poverty and natural disasters which impacts women and children disproportionately, providing MHPSS services is vital. Our manual does its part in guiding service providers to carry out this tremendously important service.

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