

Baghdad, 21 May 2020 – Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been experiencing varying degrees of fear, concern, anxiety and stress which requires psychological support to enable them to cope better with the challenges they are facing.

In Iraq, WHO identified groups in need of psychological care, with a special focus on women, and addressed their needs through a series of online training sessions on psychological first aid and how to address stigma and discrimination.

In April this year, remote psychological first aid training was provided to more than 100 participants from several organizations working in the field of mental health and psychosocial support. The training introduced the principles of providing psychological care using phones or social media outlets.

Participants were coached to deal with stigma and shame suffered by people who have contracted COVID-19. They shared observations of negative behaviours and attitudes seen as directly contributing to negative health outcomes and difficulties in accessing information on the disease in pandemic-affected locations.

One of the training participants commented: “My neighbour refused to allow his 68-year-old mother to go to the isolation facility because of stigma. It is hard for a man in Iraq to allow his mother, wife, daughter or his sister to be taken for quarantine or isolation outside the family home; community traditions and social norms don’t allow it.”

Other participants spoke about how people infected with COVID-19 experience severe stress due to isolation from the family, neighbours, relatives and community.

“Stigma in some areas is cultural or grounded in social beliefs around the shame of getting a communicable disease,” another participant from Mosul commented. “I think a lot of people don’t understand that we all are vulnerable to COVID-19; acquiring the disease can happen to anyone and we need to focus on raising awareness and educating ourselves on preventive measures, the top of which is social distancing and hand hygiene. There is no shame in going into quarantine or staying away from family and friends if you are sick.”

Participants were also made aware of the important role they play in convincing the populations they serve to report suspected COVID-19 cases and encouraging them to maintain a proper and healthy lifestyle, including adopting appropriate breathing, talking, eating and body hygiene protocols.

“People with COVID-19 have to a certain level been negatively associated with stigma and discrimination worldwide,” said Dr Adham R. Ismail, WHO Representative in Iraq. “WHO and the Ministry of Health and Environment jointly confirm that all people regardless of race, social status or ethnic background are vulnerable to the disease if protective measures are not properly followed.” “WHO and health authorities recognize the importance of addressing the health needs of those in need and continue providing specialized services to help them feel calm and able to maintain normal life activities in this difficult time,” concluded Dr Ismail.

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