

The Abnormal Has Become Normal: A Mental Health Crisis in Kashmir.

By: [UFRA MIR](#) UPDATED: 27.09.19

“How are you feeling?” I get asked daily.

In the post abrogation-of-Article-370 scenario, along with logistical and financial support, I've been providing emotional first-aid, psychosocial support and basic mental health counselling to over 300 people living outside of Kashmir, through countless conversations, sharing of tips for anxiety and panic attacks on social media, phone calls and constant support (through an online group), for them to express and share in a safe space.

When put in abnormal situations, it's normal for people to behave 'abnormally'.

The scariest part is that the abnormal has started becoming normal for people in Kashmir where we often shuttle between graveyards and weddings on most days.

People aren't scared of death, but of life, in such an uncertain context - agony evident in their sleepless eyes, restless breaths, fearful short talks; if only they could talk to their loved ones in and outside the valley, they would feel 'better'.

**'People Can Only Dream of Getting Mental Healthcare':
The Situation in the Valley**

The long queues that I saw at the police stations in August included many women (who usually have few avenues for expression and physical outreach), waiting impatiently to make calls to their children outside or crying to find out the whereabouts of their detained sons. Some [reports](#) claim around 13000 boys have been detained since 5 August.

Imagine the trauma and scars that these women and children will live the rest of their lives with!

The continuous coughing due to pepper gas shells fired nearby or the sound of footsteps in the nearby lanes at times at nights would make me and many others anxious, leading to restless sleepless nights.

I have heard stories and met people who still go through *midnight-knock-syndrome*, which was common in the 1990s and then again started showing up in 2016 (where people get panic attacks at nights thinking they are being searched for - that they will be taken away and may never return).

There's a mental-health crisis in the valley where according to a [report](#) by MSF, "about 45% of the population in the valley show symptoms of significant mental distress." Imagine this data drastically changing currently in Kashmir, with the distress from curfews and communication blockade affecting almost every single person living in constant fear there and outside.

Many people can only dream of accessing mental-health-care right now; causing more relapses in people going through treatments. A few examples were right in front of my eyes when I was at home, who I could only support through basic counselling and providing a listening ear.

Witnessing bouts of depression, anxiety, panic attacks in some very emotionally intelligent people in and outside the valley has been haunting me - business owners, daily wagers, aspiring employees, always carrying a tint of jaded pain on their faces.

Young People and Worsening Mental Health

15-year-old Yawar Bhat in Kashmir recently committed suicide after being allegedly beaten up by the Army according to various [reports](#).

Imagine the state of mind of this 15-year old and countless other young people in Kashmir right now!

With schools shut, students are anxious about their future, aspirations, dreams. I had 9th graders tell me that they are thinking of moving out to look for jobs now to save themselves from becoming insane and dying of anxiety.

Whenever my (otherwise very cheerful) 2-year old nephew at home is now asked if he wants a banana/lunch, he says, “*haan school mein khaonga kal* (Yes, I will eat it in school tomorrow).” The tomorrow which he awaits hasn’t yet come. A toddler has already started experiencing the distress of our abnormal lives, quite evident in his behaviour as he often feels irritated and bursts into tears, missing his playschool. Reciting rhymes he learned at the playschool bring some ‘normalcy’ to his little world.

Outside, people are experiencing this unimaginable fear, pain, panic, and anxiety, unsure of what is happening with their loved ones, due to total communication blockade. As most of them don’t have landlines at home, many still haven’t spoken to their families in more than 50 days. Let that sink in.

Fear and Hopelessness From Outside the Valley

People have been frantically calling me, sometimes at 3-4 am, hopelessly looking for comfort about the safety of their loved ones back home complaining of heartaches and mood-swings. Hope and prayer sometimes are the only things they have outside the valley.

At home, with everything shut, everyone outside has become a messenger - delivering messages, medicines and small tokens of love, whenever anyone manages to go back to Kashmir.

While back home, people mostly are unaware of happenings in nearby areas due to the restrictions; outside we have been a community – sharing, talking, crying, and consoling each other and feeling united like never before through genuine empathy. This continues to be the coping mechanism for people living outside, helping them survive.

Stuck in these situations, one can feel powerless and hopeless. The stress caused by these traumatic events can impact all the dimensions of our wellbeing – physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual, intellectual. This anger when left unexpressed can develop into repressed sadness, ready to erupt at the first possible opportunity, imprinting our memory and behaviour forever. This is how so many of us, in and outside feel – *homeless, hopeless and displaced* (externally and emotionally), and sometimes, plain numb!

What Can You Do To Feel Calmer?

As a peace-psychologist, I have found that in times of crisis one has to keep being resilient and create moments of calm in their lives, through simple effective coping mechanisms; evident in the case of Kashmir and Kashmiris currently.

Some of these are:

- Focus on the present moment by focusing on your breath and grounding yourself (notice things in and around you through sight, smell, touch, taste, sound).
- Instead of asking 'why is this happening to me' ask 'what can I learn from what is happening to me' and notice how you start feeling differently.
- Writing journals, creating a piece of art, storytelling, humor, physical movement/exercise, visualization, color/art therapy help to creatively express your pain

- Whenever you feel lost, take a pause, ask yourself: 'what am I feeling?' Emotions tell you about your underlying needs. Don't fight with your emotions - observe them, letting them flow through you.
 - We can only provide empathy and compassion to others when we first do it with ourselves. Self-empathy/compassion-care is not taught to us (especially as women) and we must learn to consciously practice them for our healing.
 - Paying heed to rumors in chaos makes us commit *thinking-fallacies*. Instead of reacting to situations, it's useful to respond rather by applying reasoning and logic.
 - A spiritual mindful awareness of *being*, of yourself and everything around you which helps you feel the importance of interconnectedness can help.
 - Acknowledging who you are and what you value, can help you psychologically; if you are a religious person, holding onto your beliefs-faith and focusing on prayers is helpful. Revisit *values* that make you who you are.
 - Shifting your focus on others who may need urgent support, when you feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your suffering helps to create a sense of purpose and meaning in suffering.
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- Creating support systems for community engagement creates a feeling of warm-heartedness, belongingness and deep connection, in times of isolation.

These tips help one feel more centered and grounded, empowering one to cope better with the ramifications of crisis and traumatic situations.

To find the courage to live in times of hopelessness - to survive - can be revolutionary; and I hope all of you in pain-trauma-mental distress, can trust yourself enough to survive, triumphing the tragedies. Seek help. Empathize. Keep breathing and hoping that people we haven't heard from in over 50 days are also breathing!

(Ufra Mir is the first and only peace-psychologist from Kashmir and she is the co-director of a non-partisan think-tank, The Kashmir Institute and the founding executive director of her own NGO, Paigaam: A Message for Peace.)