

# Center for the Victims of Torture

## Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/importance-world-mental-health-day-every-day>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

*Tesfanesh Kassaye is a counseling supervisor at CVT Ethiopia-Tigray.*

World Mental Health Day has been commemorated worldwide since 1992. The day is used for education, awareness and advocacy against stigma towards mental health victims globally. Especially in developing countries where mental health problems are considered a curse from God, and families of most mentally ill individuals are ashamed of talking about it afraid of being isolated by their community the day is considered an opportunity to talk about mental health.

Mental illnesses are health concerns we must take them as seriously as other health problems, as they affect our thinking and behavior as well as emotions, substantially impacting our sense of wellbeing and our ability to carry on productive daily lives. Mental illnesses affect every aspect of peoples lives, but they can be treated.

Over the course of their lives, refugees experience mental health disorders in their thinking, mood and behavior due to their experiences of torture and certain traumatic events such as loss of loved ones, properties or status, as well as sexual or gender-based violence (SGBV). Recently COVID-19 also resulted in significant changes to their lives. This pandemic left them feeling fear, stress and worry about themselves. Besides, most of the refugees are separated from their family members, which might intensify those feelings due to lack of social support and worry about their loved ones. Most refugee communities used to receive remittance from their loved ones living abroad for their basic necessities. However, their loved ones are also impacted by the pandemic and many are unable to generate money due to the shutdown policies in the countries where they reside. So, many run in to economic crises as they lack remittance and lose their social supports.

*Photo: The CVT Ethiopia-Tigray team shares the word about mental health.*

According to the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), depression has serious impacts around the world. Statistics cited by WHO indicate the disturbing connection between depression and suicide, with nearly 800,000 people dying of suicide annually, with deaths of the very young, 15-29 years old, being shockingly high. The increased pressure caused by the pandemic has serious effects. In the last couple months, CVT has received frequent suicide attempt reports. There was also a very recent completed suicide case. Thus there is an increased need for mental health and psychosocial support in our community.

To increase the communitys ability to combat suicide, CVT has been working on mental health related interventions in Adi Harush and Mai Ayni refugee camps in Tigray, Ethiopia. CVT has conducted awareness-raising campaigns, psychoeducation workshops, training for those in the position to help others, crisis intervention for those who attempted suicide, post-vention with the family and friends of those who die by suicide, and longer-term therapeutic interventions for individuals experiencing symptoms of severe depression. Some of the activities have been challenging to implement during COVID-19 pandemic, but methods are modified and services are continuing.

In addition to these services, CVT also has been commemorating World Mental Health Day every year in both camps. Usually in the past years, CVT commemorated the day by gathering camp community members at the healing center, where messages are conveyed face to face. However, this year the awareness raising was done using COVID-friendly methods to protect our community from being infected by the virus. The messages about mental health were carried over banners, brochures, posters, mini-medias, megaphones, and small-scale marches.

This years event focused on prevention of suicide. In our community, there are negative attitudes and responses to mental illness. Most community members believe it is going against Gods will to complain about mental health disorder feelings and symptoms. But as Curt Goering, CVT executive director, remarked in the message he sent for our refugee community: This is a day to combat the stigma too often attached to mental health issues and the pursuit of healing. This day enabled our organization to reach all community of the two camps, helping them to understand what they can do to support each other. Helping the community reconsider talking about mental health, so that it is productive and a step towards healing, instead of a complaint, is an important step.

This years commemoration is unique and substantial as COVID has impacted the mental health of everyone in the world. Refugees are



more vulnerable to mental health problems since COVID has exacerbated the scarcity of resources and impaired social ties, said Medhanye Alem, psychotherapist/trainer, CVT Ethiopia-Tigray. He added that CVTs commemoration in the refugee camps has shown the significance of caring for our mental health, and symbolized that social support can help overcome the impacts.

The event also featured additional activities like Question-and-Answer competitions focused on overall mental health. Education about suicide prevention and torture effects was carried over mini-media and phone to those who wanted to participate. The clinical staff carried out marches over different zones of the camps wearing T-shirts with messages of mental health, and they distributed brochures while a recorded message was broadcast via megaphone.

Girmay Abraha, psychotherapist/trainer, CVT Ethiopia-Tigray, noted, Commemorating World Mental Health Day serves to increase awareness about mental health in the camp setting. Girmay added, In the camp setting where the provision of mental health is limited and the demands are paramount, it felt to me that there could be a role that organizations like ours can play in terms of extending their services and advocating for the need to donors.

It is common to observe clients who have benefited from the counseling service provided by CVT, and who re-instill hope in their own lives and engage in proper self and family care and in different income-generating activities, even in such difficult times as today. Because of this, we know our outreach is important. Beside the messages on mental health issues, the day provides an opportunity to sensitize about what the role of CVT in the community is. This helps new community members know how to access the help they need, and gives them a place to turn where they will be supported on their healing journey. And CVT shares this message in other locations as well similar events were organized in Gambella, Ethiopia, where CVT is working with South Sudanese refugees.



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