



# Harvard Model Congress

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# The Mental Health Epidemic

## Update

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In December of 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF published Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE), a new psychological intervention intended to support both adolescents in distress as well as their caregivers. EASE is a particularly notable development in the realm of global mental health because it is the first WHO-UNICEF psychological intervention targeting the grave shortage of mental health care for adolescents. (World Health Organization, 2023) The program, which targets those 10 to 15 years of age, adapts aspects of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: a “first-line, empirically supported” intervention for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, eating disorders, and a wide range of other mental illnesses (American Psychological Association). Through seven adolescent group sessions and three caregiver sessions, the intervention integrates psychoeducation, behavioral activation, problem-solving, and stress management techniques.

The intervention is additionally critical because of cultural and contextual adaptation, as well as its field testing in four different countries: three of which were large randomized controlled trials in Pakistan, Lebanon, and Jordan (with over 445 youth per trial) and the final in Tanzania. (World Health Organization) The study trials, several of which were conducted in 2019, particularly targeted Syrian refugees. Studies by external researchers on the WHO intervention found that EASE “resulted in meaningful improvements in reducing psychological distress”.(Jordans et. al, 2023) Particularly because the intervention was crafted with low-resource environments in mind, the intervention can be delivered by “trained and supervised non-specialist helpers who receive ongoing supervision by mental health professionals” (World Health Organization). Such task-sharing approaches are vital in areas such as Mozambique, Afghanistan, Haiti, and Zimbabwe, where — as of 2016 — there is less than one

psychiatrist or psychologist combined for every 100,000 people. (World Health Organization)

EASE is important because of the dire need of mental health care for marginalized populations (ex. refugees, displaced people, the Global South). According to the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees, over 110 million people around the world are forcibly displaced — which has been known to cause a myriad of mental illnesses including but not limited to anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress disorder. (UNHCR, 2023) The Syrian Civil War alone has created 6.8 million refugees, many of whom have fled to neighboring countries such as Lebanon. The World Health Organization asserts that over 1 in every 5 Syrian refugees displaced within Lebanon — 22% — suffered from moderate to severe depressive symptoms. The mental health crisis in such regions is further exacerbated by the fact that the vast majority of displaced youth and refugees are not able to receive treatment due to language barriers, discrimination, and unmet basic needs. EASE’s variability and task-sharing approach allows for it to strengthen the delivery of evidence-based mental health interventions in low-resource settings. In Jordan and Pakistan, researchers found significant improvement in adolescents both one week into the implementation of EASE as well as in the analysis of assessments completed after a 3-month follow-up. Researchers additionally observed improvements in “caregiver distress and disciplinary parenting” (World Health Organization).

EASE is one of six low-intensity mental health care interventions released by the World Health Organization, with the hopes of expanding the usage of evidence-based mental health practiced in non-specialist workforces. Recent iterations include Step-by-Step, a digital mental health intervention launched by the World Health Organization and the Ministry of Public Health Lebanon’s National Mental Health Programme. In the randomized controlled trial, researchers found that people who utilized Step-by-Step — which provides the individual with digital and remote mental health guidance from a trained non-specialist — were “significantly less depressed and had significantly better functioning after the intervention compared with those who received enhanced usual care in the control group”. Such results were consistent across both Lebanese populations as well as Syrian populations residing in Lebanon.

Earlier that year, in January 2022, the World Health Organization studied the efficacy of Self-Help Plus, a similar psychological intervention, in mitigating mental illness in Syrian refugees residing in Turkey. Similar to the more recent EASE, non-specialist trainees delivered the pre-recorded audio course in a group setting across five different sessions. After a six-month follow-up, Self-Help Plus participants were significantly less likely to have mental disorders such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression as well as enjoy a higher quality of life. (World Health Organization)

As of 2019, over 970 million people around the world, — over three times the size of the entire population of the United States — are living with a mental health disorder. (World Health Organization) Such recent interventions, as well as their well-documented efficacy, illustrate the necessity of culturally adaptive and contextually-applicable mental interventions.

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