

Attaining Good Mental Health

When one hears the term psychology, the first thing that may spring to mind, is a person reclining on a couch, talking openly to a psychologist who assertively listens whilst frantically taking notes. Well, the domain of psychology is attached to many stigmas which may undermine the true objectives of a trained psychologist or therapist. Mental health is how we think, feel and act as we cope with life. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. Like physical health, ensuring good mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood through to adulthood.

The domain of psychology is evolving progressively in Lebanon and an increasing number of people are realizing the fundamental importance of taking care of your mental health - and having the resources to do so.

Dr. Michel Nawfal is a Medical Doctor registered at the Lebanese Order of Physicians as well as a clinical psychologist with a focus in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which is one of the most studied techniques in psychotherapy. “The outcome of this technique is usually a positive one,” explains Dr. Nawfal. Cognitive Therapy is not based on the concept of the unconscious like psychoanalysis; it is based more on the concept that emotions are dictated by the thoughts. Dr. Nawfal asserts that, “someone feels **anxious** because they **wrongly think** that situation is dangerous. Cognitive Therapy aims at correcting this thought.

Dr. Nawfal goes on to discuss the misconceptions surrounding the practice of psychology. “People sometimes may think that psychology is a form of mind reading or fortune telling but psychology is a science like physics or math and we need proof before we can make any claim.”

According to Dr. Nawfal, Cognitive Therapy is applicable to most psychological disorders however some show a better outcome than others. Clients with disorders such as obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), social anxiety disorder and phobias respond better to the therapy. A condition such as schizophrenia is a biological dysfunction and such patients are more in need of medical intervention than psychological one. It is made clear by Dr. Nawfal that not every person who enters the clinic has a difficult or complex disease; in fact serious disorders are rare. The most common conditions that Dr. Nawfal addresses fall under anxiety disorders. He claims that **OCD, as well as depression and panic attacks are among the most common ones.** “Most clients experience basic life

conflicts or obstacles that they wish to overcome with the support and guidance of a professional.”

In recent years, more people have chosen to accept the term mental health and to familiarize themselves with professionals if and when they are in need of consulting one. Dr. Nawfal clarifies that it has always been the case that people in Lebanon have consulted professionals but today, it is spoken of more freely. The increasing demand for professionals in this country and in the region is clear. People are realizing that meeting with a psychologist involves processing emotions by conducting interesting objective conversation with a specialist without danger or side effects. This open dialogue between client and professional enables the burden of their troubles to be alleviated regardless of whether the end result is a completely positive one.

Dr. Nawfal affirms that the average age of clients seeking consultation is between 25 and 35 years – **about** two thirds of clients are women. The most challenging patients are those who suffer from severe OCD. Dr. Nawfal explains that the reason for this is because such clients are very guarded and rigid and their excessive need to be in control makes them far less accessible.

Dr. Nawfal believes that Lebanon is clearly on the right track where raising mental health awareness is concerned. However he states that “challenges sometimes occur because of the vast difference in socio-economic standards which means it may not always be so easy to reach everyone. The message of mental health is difficult to communicate to those who are from more remote and less privileged backgrounds.

The question arises – what can be done to improve the field of psychology in Lebanon? “What lacks in this country are qualified personnel,” affirms Dr. Nawfal. “It is very important for a person to know that the psychologist they are seeking consultation with is fully qualified.”

Another point raised by Dr. Nawfal is that there is no **Order** or **Syndicate** for psychologists. The LPA (**Lebanese Psychological Association**), of which Dr. Nawfal is a board member, **includes a licensing committee which is working on establishing criteria and to decide whether a psychologist is allowed to practice as a therapist or not.** The concern lies with the reality that not every psychologist is **qualified** to practice therapy. In this case, the practical training experience (as mentioned by

Dr. Nawfal) is what distinguishes a qualified professional **from under qualified persons** who offer their services to clients seeking help.

Lebanon's schools and universities are striving to raise mental health awareness within the student body. Dr. Nawfal mentions that there are some educational institutions that are excellent in developing the mental health awareness amongst their community of youth. "It is fundamentally important to have a professional team on hand to ensure that children and teenagers have the necessary support and guidance in assuring good mental health." Professionals like Dr. Nawfal regard it a vital step to aiding young people during the most impressionable time of their self-development. **Eastwood College (Mansouriyeh) is one school which includes as part of its body a complete team of qualified professionals (Psychologists, Speech Therapists, Psychomotricians, Special-Needs Teachers) for any kid who needs additional attention. This system has proved highly beneficial to the outcome of students.** "We sometimes attribute the incompetence of children to things other than learning problems." If a condition such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is left unaddressed, this may have an adverse effect upon the child's personality later – resulting in low self-esteem and self confidence as well as anxiety and a poor academic performance. Professional attention will provide the child with stable foundations to guarantee better self-development and progress.

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