

## A faith-based approach to trauma healing for Muslim communities

What aspects of faith and community infrastructure can be used to offer effective programs to address the impacts of trauma, and can these be self-sustained and led by the community?

### Islamic trauma healing: a different way to intervene

This study demonstrated the effectiveness of a brief Islam-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) intervention for war and refugee trauma, and its ease of implementation by community leaders.

Islamic Trauma Healing (ITH) is a community-led program to target the psychological impact of trauma while promoting community reconciliation. It is a 6-session, manualised, mosque-based group program combining Islamic principles, prayer, and core concepts, with evidence-based psychotherapy practices. This study showed its effectiveness at reducing trauma in Somaliland, and potential for further research and investment in scale-up.



Women's group turning to Allah in du'a. Credit: Mahdi Malamud Faarax

## Background

Somaliland, like many conflict-affected countries, is in dire need of mental health services, with communities affected by multiple humanitarian crises and traumatic events while facing barriers to accessing effective mental health care. Conventional trauma-focused treatments are Western-based and require extensive training. Enhancing the capacity of existing community infrastructures could provide accessible, effective, and culturally appropriate treatment.

## How the research was conducted

The study was a randomised controlled trial, conducted in nine mosques in three cities in Somaliland. Lay leaders received 2x 4-hour trainings and were supervised weekly. 238 adults were assigned to either an ITH group or a waitlist (WL) group. Qualitative interviews and comprehensive cost measures were collected.

## Key findings

- ITH reduced posttraumatic stress, depression, somatic symptoms, and increased wellbeing compared to the WL control condition, maintained over three-month follow-up. The intervention also improved negative trauma-related beliefs, social connection, and forgiveness.
- At follow-up, no significant differences remained between the original ITH group and WL participants who later received ITH (with similar results), meaning intervention benefits were maintained.
- Participants were highly satisfied with ITH in addressing trauma-related symptoms, religious matching, and facilitating reconciliation.
- Lay leaders trained by experts implemented the program with a high degree of fidelity to the intervention and trained 24 new trainers; both fidelity and effectiveness was maintained as these 24 trained and supervised new lay leaders.
- The ITH group sought more healthcare and saw reduced severity in disability. ITH led to modest increased personal costs for both leaders and participants (mostly transport and minor expenses), linked with attending the mosque more often.

## Implications for humanitarian practitioners and policymakers

In many Muslim communities, barriers like stigma, lack of trained providers, and compatibility between one's faith and psychotherapy interventions highlight the need for a program like ITH. ITH is a step towards utilising and enhancing the capacity of faith-based communities to heal, while addressing access to effective trauma interventions in the face of humanitarian crises. Using ITH, Muslim communities can access and sustain a culturally sensitive intervention that reduces trauma-related symptoms and increases community reconciliation.

Humanitarian stakeholders and policymakers, including country ministries and international and local non-profits, can expand this work to other Muslim communities via harnessing the faith, strength, and connection within communities themselves to promote mental health and resilience.

## Recommendations for future research

Additional planned analyses will examine the possibility of cost savings as related to improved functioning, reduced disability, and improved wellbeing. Future research should examine the effectiveness of ITH in comparison to interventions commonly implemented in resource-limited communities such as Problem Management Plus (PM+). Further research is needed to understand and target active mechanisms that facilitated ITH effectiveness and assess the length of post-intervention gains with longer follow-up periods. Finally, future research should evaluate scalability and sustainability of ITH, including local mosques, refugee camps, existing health care infrastructures, and in other resource-limited and faith-based communities.

## About the study team

This project was a collaboration among Somaliland and United States universities and organizations: The Somali Youth Development and Voluntary Organization (SOYDAVO); University of Burao; Case Western Reserve University; University of Washington, ITH Leadership Team: Abdisalan Awke, Dr. Essa Nur Liban, Mohamed Hussein Aideed, Momin Hussein Egeh, Ahmed Ismail, Mohamed Kunle, Dega Angula, Kevin King, Carol Levin, Christopher Burant, Mohammed Alsubaie

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## Keywords

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), refugee, war, Islam, PTSD, depression, lay-led, psychotherapy

## Articles and further reading

Elrha project

page: <https://www.elrha.org/projefct/islamic-trauma-healing-a-scalable-community-based-programme-for-war-and-refugee-trauma/>

Study

Protocol: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10784141/>



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<http://www.elrha.org/programme/research-for-health-in-humanitarian-crises/>