



SUPPORTING TURKISH, KURDISH AND SYRIAN LONDONERS' MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Updated 9 February 2023

Introduction

As part of Thrive LDN's research and insight's function, we routinely carry out public mental health scenario planning exercises to synthesis available intelligence, anticipate what might be on the horizon and plan actions to strengthen and maintain capabilities to support partners to step up public mental health responses to crises.

Earthquakes in Turkey/Syria - Overview

During the early hours of the morning on 6th February 2023, a severe earthquake measuring 7.8 in magnitude on the Moment Magnitude Scale hit an area close to the Syrian/Turkish border. Its effects were most severe in the south-eastern regions of Turkey and northern region of Syria and were felt as far afield as Cyprus, Lebanon, and Israel. This was followed by a second earthquake several hours later with its epicentre only a few miles away from the first, which further devastated infrastructure and resulted in additional loss of life of thousands of civilians, with the death toll expected to rise over the coming days as recovery efforts continue.

The full extent of the earthquake's impacts is yet to be known, but in light of these distressing events it is important to consider the mental health impacts on Londoners in relation to this national disaster, in particular those belonging to the country's significant Turkish and Syrian communities, the vast majority of which are based in the capital.

Anticipating future needs and impact for public mental health in London

Considering the scale of this natural disaster and the extent of damage already reported in the immediate aftermath, displacement of Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian people should be anticipated. Humanitarian crises require international awareness and compassion as populations flee and recover from threats to safety, livelihood, and life, all of which have the potential impact on public health in and surrounding countries.

The earthquakes which have taken place will be accompanied by a rising death toll over the coming days, with rescue efforts still ongoing and the full impact of the disaster on local, regional, and broader populations yet to be realised. Loss and bereavement will be experienced by thousands of people, many of which have suffered through adversity in the form of geopolitical conflicts, economic downturn, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the risk for compounding trauma which is felt not only by those immediately affected but equally those across the diaspora for months and years to come.

The following factors have been identified when considering how best to support partners to step up an appropriate public mental health response to these events.

Diaspora populations in London

The UK is home to many hundreds of thousands of Turkish, Kurdish, and Syrian people, with London being home to the vast majority of these communities. Within the capital, particularly substantial communities are concentrated within the north London boroughs of Islington, Hackney, Haringey, Barnet, and Enfield.¹ In addition, there are several thousand Syrian people living in the capital including, more than a thousand Syrian refugees displaced due to conflict and resettled in London, with Lewisham, Lambeth, Camden and Greenwich some of the boroughs which have resettled the highest number of Syrians over recent years. The mental health and wellbeing of these communities as a result of these devastating earthquakes is of significant concern. Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian people living in London are likely to feel concerned about families and friends left in their countries of origin and feel 'helpless and shocked' about the current situation. There may be heightened feelings of anxiety, distress, and re-traumatisation, as well as thoughts of 'survivors' guilt as the death toll rises into the tens of thousands and issues of displacement materialise to an increasingly significant extent.

There is need for an appropriate public mental health response targeted towards these communities in a way that is trauma-informed and culturally competent. Informed by insights gathered from diaspora communities and grassroots organisations, we know that many of those belonging to Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian communities in London have already faced experiences of trauma, isolation, and discrimination, and may access support through their own communities as opposed to more formal routes. Therefore, their mental health needs will be potentially urgent but equally will require specialised, tailored support that addresses their life experiences, culture, and behaviours in an appropriate manner. The London response to this crisis must be rooted in community action, utilising routes and pathways that may be preferred to more traditional routes of mental health support already in place.

Londoners' resilience

At this point in time, nothing is certain regarding the full impact of this disaster which has emerged in Turkey and been felt across a significant portion of its southern neighbour, Syria. As always with emerging issues, it is important to consider the impact across the general population and determine how best to strengthen resilience and ensure all Londoners have the tools and resources to manage uncertainty and cope with distressing information around this humanitarian crisis. Natural disasters have a proven link to both direct and indirect trauma and distress, as people across the world are exposed to feelings of powerlessness and insecurity that often occur in the wake of a mass tragedy such as the one currently unfolding in Turkey and Syria.

For many Londoners, being confronted with the realities of this situation could be a source of stress and anxiety. This is particularly significant for London's multitude of migrant communities from areas which have been prone to natural disasters and/or experienced displacement alongside the loss of their homes and livelihoods.

More generally, Londoners are currently recovering from the pandemic, living through a period of significant economic adversity, and experiencing a variety of challenges related to these two key challenges. Collective memory of the trauma experienced during the pandemic and widespread ongoing concerns related to the cost-of-living combined with distress of this crisis has the potential to erode resilience and negatively impact population mental health indicators such as depression, anxiety, happiness, and life satisfaction.

Current Thrive LDN Actions

Commissioning and delivery of trauma-informed training

¹ Kartal, Ahmet Gurhan (2019), [Turkish minority in UK ready for Thursday's polls, Anadolu Agency](#), retrieved 10 January 2021, Around 400,000 Cypriot Turks and 200,000 Turks live mostly in the north London neighborhoods of Dalston, Stoke Newington, Haringey, Walthamstow and Enfield.

As part of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Mission supported by the Mayor of London and delivered in partnership with Thrive LDN, we are working with Nicola Lester Psychological Trauma Consultancy to offer free, recorded open access [Trauma-Informed Practice training](#) to support individuals and organisations.

Offered at three levels, this training series is designed to help professionals and volunteers gain an understanding of the impact of trauma and to integrate a trauma informed approach to practice. In responding to this current crisis, a trauma informed approach utilised by those who will be interacting with Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian diaspora communities, as well as any Londoner impacted, could not be more important.

These training sessions will be available to access at any time from [Thrive LDN's website](#).

Available resources

- [Wellbeing guidance in 36 languages](#) – including [Kurdish](#), [Arabic](#) and [Turkish](#)
- [Five ways to good mental wellbeing & Islam](#) – including [Arabic](#)
- [Bereavement guides and resources on Good Thinking](#) - including an [Islam and Bereavement guide](#).
- Thrive LDN [support after sudden bereavement resource](#) (currently framed around COVID but may be useful)
- Thrive LDN [mental health conversation starter tool](#) (SIGNSS)
- [Good Thinking's](#) tools and advice to support with anxiety, stress, low mood and trouble sleeping
- Mental health workbooks developed by Good Thinking and expert advisors - including [coping with trauma](#), [coping with trauma videos](#), [sleep](#), and [panic](#)
- [Urgent mental health support](#)
- For those supporting communities - free [Trauma-Informed Practice training](#) and [suicide prevention training](#)
- [Principles of psychosocial approaches](#) and general guidance for supporting individuals and communities adversely affected by events (currently framed around COVID but still useful)

Potential Next Steps

Following on from existing streams of work and anticipated communities in need, Thrive LDN proposes the following programmes to support the mental health and wellbeing of those affected by earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

1. Translation of existing mental health and wellbeing resources into Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish

Thrive LDN has repurposed a previous resource titled '6 Ways to Wellbeing' to make applicable to the wider refugee and asylum-seeking community in response to multiple geopolitical crises and humanitarian displacement; this resource is translated into Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic for dissemination across networks. It can be downloaded from Thrive LDN's [Wellbeing guidance in 36 languages webpage](#).

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This work could be replicated for the adaption of the Thrive LDN mental health conversation starter tool (SIGNSS) and psychosocial first aid [guidance](#) for people supporting individuals and communities affected by this crisis.

2. Culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing resources for Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian diaspora communities

Delving more deeply beyond step one, we would work collaboratively to update and co-design bespoke mental health resources for Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian communities that are culturally appropriate and translated into Turkish/Arabic and distribute these across our networks and to those communities across London. These resources may take multiple forms including (but not limited to) online video sessions, pamphlets or workbooks, and social media content. These resources could include:

- Rights to the NHS and how to access services
- Signposting to local organisations and further mental health support resources
- Culturally appropriate language around mental health and wellbeing
- Addressing barriers to mental health support and de-stigmatisation
- Taking a full life-course approach
- Addressing further needs identified by the local organisations who work directly with Turkish, Kurdish and Syrian communities

3. Training and support offered to those affected by eco-anxiety and impacts of natural disasters

Thrive LDN would develop an additional programme of work around the link between climate change, natural disasters, and mental health. This would take multiple forms:

- A space on Thrive LDN's website where people can go to and learn more about how natural events and climate change can impact on mental health and wellbeing, and signposting to further support. This would be co-designed with partner organisations and professionals with knowledge of climate justice and mental health.
- Signposting guides and/or informational resources on how to help a person displaced by a natural disaster access services around London such as the NHS, education, and council services.
- Commissioning the development and delivery of webinars for professionals, volunteers, and Londoners to better understand the link between climate change, natural disasters, and mental health.