# **Empowering Minds – Episode 8** **Mental Health & Migration**

## **Script**

**[SHORT MUSICAL INTRO]**

“...there is nobody. I am alone in this country. I don’t have any relatives. I don’t have any friends. I am alone. During the night I maybe sleep three to four hours. I am in bed, but my mind is not in bed. My mind is in Afghanistan”.

# Quote from *France: Afghan Evacuees Need Mental Health Support*, research by Human Rights Watch

**[MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

Hello, and welcome to Empowering Minds, Mental Health Europe’s podcast featuring conversations with mental health experts, psychologists and psychiatrists, practitioners and people with lived experience.

I am Margi, Jr. Communication Officer at Mental Health Europe and today we will talk about migrants, refugees and mental health.

On the 10th of October 2022, Mental Health Europe held an event entitled **World Mental Health Day: Migrants, Refugees and Mental Health’** at theEuropean Parliament. The event was co-hosted by [MEP Estrella Durá Ferrandis](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/198329/ESTRELLA_DURA%2BFERRANDIS/home) (S&D) and [MEP Tilly Metz](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/193292/TILLY_METZ/home) (Greens/EFA). More than 100 people participated in the event, both online and in-person, with profiles spanning across European institutions, European Networks, national experts, persons with lived experience and more.

This episode will bring you the voices of Tetiana and Ahmad, two people who experienced forced displacement. Their stories took place in two different moments in time and space, but they share similar needs, struggles and hopes for the future of mental health in the context of migration. Before listening to their stories, it’s important to frame this conversation with the help of the experts who took part in the event on World Mental Health Day.

**[MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

**Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety,** opened the event highlighting that crises have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable in society, such as women, children, young people, the elderly, refugees, and migrants. Mental health is a timely topic, since we are possibly “facing one of the greatest mental health challenges of this century”.

The Commissioner took this opportunity to refer to the recent announcement by President Ursula von der Leyen of a comprehensive mental health approach, where the term “comprehensive” refers to the notion that mental health goes across our society, “whether this is education, or employment, whether this is health, it is important we address it in all areas and we now see how it has been impacted on because of the war and the conflict”.

**[MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

**MEP Tilly Metz** takes the opportunity to remind us the impact that fleeing a conflict or a dire situation has on children and youth. Young people need expert support to deal with traumas they may have experienced, and we cannot forget about the role that parents and care givers have in these delicate situations. They need educational resources to be well equipped to talk about the trauma, and to deal with it themselves.

Prolonged trauma (PTSD), anxiety, and depression are some of the key mental health problems that migrants are more likely to experience, often more than once in their lives, as suggest **Ronan Mangan**, Head of Unit for Social Inclusion at the Red Cross EU Office. These mental health experiences are due to a number of risk factors that characterize the migratory journey, such as danger and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, detention, family separations, poor reception conditions and prolonged asylum procedure. While facing these challenges, refugees and migrants often deal with social exclusion and discrimination, which exacerbate the distress caused by the displacement experience itself .

The reality of undocumented migrants is another crucial part of the conversation that is often forgotten or ignored. **Laetitia Van Der Vennet**, Advocacy Officer at the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, explains how undocumented people live in very precarious situations for very long periods of time. They face extremely difficult living and working conditions, limited economic opportunities, exclusion from key services and the possibility of facing deportations. All of this contribute to chronic stress, uncertainty and inequalities, impacting people’s physical and mental health. However, their struggles are often left outside the priorities of governments and institutions.

Talking about migrants, displaced people and mental health is a responsibility that we all should take seriously. Using the right words is not only good practice but we should aim to make it a priority in our conversations. Staying away from stigmatising and dehumanising language will allow us to reframe the conversation and highlight the role of systemic cultural, political and social bias.

**[Longer MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

It’s now time to listen to the interviews "Our Stories: Seeking Mental Health in the Context of Migration,” which take us inside the migration journey, the struggle of fleeing one’s country without knowing where to go, and the impact that this process has on people’s mental health.

Ahmad is a Syrian person who fled Syria in 2015, embarking on a highly dangerous 55-day journey to reach Europe

*AHMAD:*

My name is Ahmad Al-Rashid and I am originally from Syria and I now live in the United Kingdom. I left Syria back in 2013 to Iraq, fleeing the conflict in Syria. The situation got even worse in Iraq, and I made the decision to move to Europe. I took a 55-day journey, and I arrived in the UK in 2015. I was hiding in the back of a lorry for almost three days. The lorry was moving. I did not have an idea what I was, what I was doing. The moment when I turned on my mobile phone and I got a message, *Welcome to the UK. Here are your rights. Blah, blah, blah*. I just was a great feeling that I finally made it to safety after crossing several countries after witnessing some horrendous experiences along the way.

So, the sort of support that I received upon arrival was to provide the basics about providing a shelter and providing food so that sort of the basic necessities were covered. However, I think one of the elements that was sort of missing was the impact of the process of going through the asylum process. It's had a quite significant impact on your mental health and your well-being because I remember during the first few weeks it's been like a constant struggle. Waiting for a letter that would come through the letterbox, and that letter would determine your future if your case for asylum has been approved or rejected.

Where I come from, generally speaking, in the Middle East, mental health, mental wellbeing is a taboo subject. People do not feel comfortable talking about it. People do not feel easy talking about it. This is a subject or this is an area that was suppressed and I believe it continues to be suppressed out of the fear of being judged or there's something wrong with you. So, I think that is an area that kind of remained sort of untouched up to this moment.

One of the challenges is being able to discuss or be open about this. I know there's some sort of support mechanisms in place to help and support, but lacking the understanding, lacking the knowledge, the cultural background of these people, of these individuals, generally speaking, could actually hamper, could hinder, could add to the problem or add to the trouble if there is any, as opposed to trying to help.

So, I think the difficulty is understanding the culture and understanding the people's background, being patient, being aware of, you know, tailoring your support, making sure that this is a unique sort of group of people who've been through perhaps quite extraordinary experiences and they will need tailored support over time.

How you approach it, how you discuss it, is quite important.

**[MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

On the 24th of February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine and the ongoing war caused a human crisis which is far from being under control.

We spoke with Tetiana, a Ukrainian woman with two young children who was forced to flee her country following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tetiana is now in Slovakia where she supports other displaced Ukrainians with the project “Ukraine for Ukraine” and highlights the importance of sharing her feelings with those who went through the same journey.

*TETIANA:*

I'm Tetiana. I'm from Ukraine. I lived in Kiev before arriving in Slovakia with two kids aged three and six. We were forced to flee our country just because on the 24th of February, oh my god on that terrible day, so we woke up and under the cry and under the shouting of my husband. So, the war!

My husband and I were among those who couldn't accept the fact that there could be a full-scale invasion, especially in major cities, including Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. So when we heard the bombing at 5 a.m., our first reaction was to grab our emergency bag, kids, and get into the car and go somewhere. We understood the only thing that we had to leave the capital as soon as possible.

Only now, when six months passed, I can realize what feelings I had, what emotions I experienced at that time, because at that time it was like total blank blackout. So, you know, forced displacement is no doubt a huge trauma. And you feel despair, you feel fear, you feel loss, loss of your close ones, loved ones, your home, your homeland. And to live through that, you need a lot of efforts and a lot of time to live through that. But the new reality is that you're in a new country and you're with two kids and you have to think about basic needs. So that is food, that is shelter to stay, just education, access to health care. And I just remember that the first week, every single day, I was crying so bitterly, I mean, that tears streaming down nonstop. Without any words, without anything. But I was so blessed to get all what I needed.

And already after two weeks after arrival, I had a job, my kids were enrolled in the school, so in the kindergarten, we got access to health care. So, actually we had everything that we needed. But yeah, mental health suffered, suffered a lot.

At first there was like a wave of help for everyone, so but now, like, everything is coming down. People like, get used to that. And we see that a lot of humanitarian organizations, charitable organizations, they like step by step fade away from such a huge help. But now people even need more this physical help. So practical support, especially those vulnerable groups as moms, as elderly people, children.

What helped me and helps me so much in restoring my mental health is talking and sharing. And I wanted to highlight how vital it is to share your feelings with someone who has lived through the same experience, and personally, for me, it's something like relaxing, calming down when I talk to people who have the same problems, who experience the same fleeing from the war of Ukraine with kids, with no husbands, and only now when they work in the project *Ukraine for Ukraine*, I realize that it is a peer-to-peer support that really makes a difference. A huge difference in healing and in building new life in new communities.

Trauma doesn't disappear. So, we have to live through this grief. We have to transfer it into other activities, but without harm to our health.

There is no health without mental health. And that is very true.

**[MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

Mental health and mental wellbeing are essential for asylum systems to work properly, and for a successful management of human migration and integration policies, explains **Verena Knaus**, Global Lead on Migration and Displacement at UNICEF.

It is in Europe’s own best interest to invest in a mental health infrastructure to promptly address the mental health crisis of those who seek refuge in our continent.

Finally, MEP Durá Ferrandis listed 4 pillars that a European mental health strategy should be based on: Education, Environment, Digitalisation and Mental Health Systems.

We will have better chances to promote a human-rights based approach to migrants' mental health only by engaging in conversations around migration and by making mental health a priority for policies.

**[Longer MUSICAL TRANSITION]**

Thank you for listening to Empowering Minds.

You can keep following our work on our website, [mhe-sme.org](https://www.mhe-sme.org/), and on our social media accounts on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/MHESME), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/mentalhealtheurope/), [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mental-health-europe/), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealtheurope/) and [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/%40mentalhealtheurope417).

Have a great day!