

# Supporting mental health needs of FGM/C survivors

A summary of evidence and learning

Meeting summary

[Presentation recording available here](#)

**Presentation recording passcode:** d83iZ9M\*



Dr. Suaad Abdulrehman is a medical doctor with a specialisation in psychiatry working with Somali FGM/C survivors in the Netherlands as part of her medical practice. She shared the mental health consequences of FGM/C which include:

- Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Anxiety
- Shame, particularly body shame
- Disruption in sexual relationships
- Depression

Dr. Suaad shared how individual therapy can be helpful but many FGM/C survivors struggle to connect their mental health symptoms with their experience of and the complications that result from FGM/C. Dr. Suaad often sees patients first for medical symptoms and then is able to provide connection and support for mental health symptoms.

As many complications of FGM/C relate to sexual satisfaction and sexual relationships, mental distress can often be related to the challenges this creates in intimate relationships. Although individual counselling can be helpful, couples counselling has more impact to help to resolve some of these issues. Participation of partners can be challenging but is very important.



Cognitive behavioural therapy has been shown to be the most effective modality for supporting survivors of FGM/C and creating alleviation from mental health symptoms. In addition, psycho-educational groups can provide a supportive space for health education, psychosocial support, and peer to peer exchange, as well as building a stronger understanding of self, anatomy and relational expectations.

*FGM/C-related trauma is a form of complex trauma linking with sexuality, self-image, confidence, efficacy, and identity. Healing requires restructuring of identity and renegotiation of relationships.*



Benazir Mohamed, Founder and Executive Director of Silver Lining Kenya, presented on community-based mental health supports for survivors of FGM/C and shared the programmes that are run by Silver Lining Kenya to address mental health needs. These programmes include:

- Trauma-informed art spaces for survivors
- Community dialogues on mental health needs of survivors
- Radio programmes on mental health supports
- Community theatre

Benazir presented on the complicating factors that contribute to mental health consequences for survivors of FGM/C. She outlined the acute consequences immediately following cutting which include trauma (post-traumatic stress), anxiety, shame, and fear. She also explained that among Somali communities, FGM/C is linked to cleanliness and belonging so when girls are not cut, they can experience social isolation, shame, and as a result, traumatised.

Benazir shared that where there are limited clinical support services for survivors, community-based approaches can support alleviation of mental health symptoms and complications. Within Silver Lining Kenya's work, they work to build awareness and understanding of the mental health consequences of FGM/C while also providing safe spaces for girls to come together and share their experiences. Using art and theatre through a trauma-informed approach has been a powerful tool for Silver Lining Kenya to support survivors.



## What works to support the mental health needs of survivors of FGM/C

### Dialogue themes and key points

- A multi-disciplinary approach is critical for supporting survivors of FGM/C to access mental health supports, particularly in low-resource environments. Healthcare workers, community practitioners, teachers, and other service providers can create essential links between mental health symptoms and experiences of FGM/C, as well as providing referrals where possible.
- Many survivors struggle to connect mental health symptoms with FGM/C and suffer in silence for many years. Providing education for a range of service providers on the mental health consequences of FGM/C can support earlier identification and referral.
- As FGM/C has implications for sexual satisfaction and intimate relationships, couples counselling and involvement of men supports greater understanding of these challenges and renegotiation of relationships to provide greater satisfaction and intimacy
- In addition, shame and silence within sexual relationships and lack of understanding of the complication of FGM/C on sexual relationships can contribute to divorce if not addressed. Religious and community leaders have a role to play in providing lay counselling and helping couples to understand the link between FGM/C and challenges within intimate relationships to avoid marital breakdown
- Trauma-informed safe spaces and use of art and theatre, as well as intergenerational engagement, can provide opportunities for survivors to break the silence and stigma around their mental health challenges and create opportunities for peer to peer support
- FGM/C trauma is a complex trauma and requires support in renegotiating identity, sense of self, confidence, sexuality and sexual experience.

### A review of evidence

Keles, E., Bilge, Y., Öztürk, M., Bektemur, G., Eker, H.H., Erkok, U., Mohamed, S.H., & Ali, K.Y. (2025). Mental health outcomes and post-traumatic stress disorder associated with female genital mutilation. *Scientific Reports*, 15.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-03878-9>



- This study explored the mental health outcomes associated with FGM/C to identify predictors of PTSD among survivors. 180 survivors who attended the Somalia Mogadishu Research and Training Hospital were surveyed with tools to assess resilience, stressful life experience, PTSD scale, and symptom inventories. The survey found that survivors of FGM/C had substantially higher levels of PTSD and predictors of PTSD included unanticipated FGM/C procedures and sexual dysfunction [as a result of FGM/C].

“What You Hide Also Hides You” Mental Health Screening, Risk Factors, And Service Use Among A Population Of Somali Women In The U.S. Georgia J. Michlig A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/81b0b045-a77b-48f4-bae5-86830f4c070a/content>

- This study used a screening tool (RHS-13) to explore clinically significant distress among Somali women in Arizona, USA
- Among Somali women who had experienced FGM/C and who were experiencing adverse health experiences, there was a statistically significant increase in clinical distress
- Qualitative analysis revealed that psychiatric illness had links to community social control and limited ability to disclose distress
- Somali women also perceived US mental health services as an affront to Somali identity and there was low uptake of clinical services by Somali survivors

Yusuf, A. (2014). Congolese and Somali Beliefs About Mental Health Services. *Journal of Nervous Mental Disease*. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000000087>

- This study found that although participants (Congolese and Somali men and women) experienced mental health systems, accessing formal mental health services was limited.
- Participants preferred to seek support for their mental health symptoms within their communities and for many, within their religious community.



## Shared resources and opportunities for collaboration

Dr. Suaad shared recent research within her presentation on addressing the issues of identity and shame related to FGM/C within clinical practice as well as research on therapeutic modalities and their effectiveness in working with survivors. Links to those research papers are below:

1. Adelufosi, A., Edet, B., Arikpo, D., Aquaisua, E., & Meremikwu, M. M. (2017). Cognitive behavioural therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety disorders in women and girls who have undergone female genital mutilation: A systematic review. *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 136(2), 121– 128. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijgo.12043>
2. Raghuraman S., Stuttard N., Hunt N. (2021). Evaluating narrative exposure therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder and depression symptoms: a meta-analysis of the evidence base. *Clin. Psychol. Psychother.* 28, 1–23. 10.1002/cpp.2486 <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2486>
3. Wulfes, N., von Fritschen, U., Strunz, C., Kröhl, N., Scherer, R., & Kröger, C. (2022). Cognitive-emotional aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder in the context of female genital mutilation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(9), 4993. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19094993>
4. Abdulrehman, Suaad. (2023). Relevant Aspects of Female Genital Mutilation. 10.1007/978-3-031-18432-1\_25. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369123997\\_Relevant\\_Aspects\\_of\\_Female\\_Genital\\_Mutilation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369123997_Relevant_Aspects_of_Female_Genital_Mutilation)

## Survivor support resources

**The Resilient Collective** provides support to activists working within the space of gender-based violence to deepen advocacy while also remaining connected and supported. Programmes include support in fundraising, grant writing, storytelling, and advocacy tools as well as trauma-informed healing, support to address burnout, and community-building events.

As many FGM/C activists are also FGM/C survivors, taking care of your mental health is critical. If you feel you need support in the work you do or personally, please reach out to the Resilient Collective for support. More details are available here:

<https://everywoman.org/every-woman-launches-new-program-to-support-activists/>

Contact: Zainab Ali Khan (zainab@everywoman).



**The Kintsugi Way** provides support for survivors of sexual trauma, including FGM/C, living in the UK. Their next meeting will be on April 24, 2026 in Brixton. More details are below.

TKW  
*The Kintsugi Way*  
in collaboration with



**Our Next Worksop**  
**24<sup>th</sup> April**  
**Brixton**  
**+ 3 online aftercare sessions**

a kintsugi class, lunch & collaborative practical therapy for women who have been through sexual trauma

  **SIGN UP HERE**

[www.thekintsugiway.co.uk](http://www.thekintsugiway.co.uk) Funded by Turning Point