

5th International Conference on

Mental Health and Human Resilience

March 07-08, 2019 | Barcelona, Spain

The impact of traumatic experiences on people with severe mental illness in rural Ethiopia

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In most low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), such as Ethiopia, people with severe mental illness (SMI) experience high rates of stigma and human rights abuses. However, little is known about the types of events that people with SMI in LMICs view as traumatic or how these events impact their lives. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 48 patients, caregivers, health care providers, and leaders from Sodom District, Ethiopia. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed in Amharic and translated into English. Two coders conducted thematic analysis using NVIVO 12. Commonly occurring potentially traumatic events (PTEs) included beatings, sexual assault, and sudden death of loved ones. In addition to PTEs that met DSM-5 requirements, participants described other frightening experiences that caused suffering or emotional pain including being chained, inability to afford basic needs like food, stressful marital relationships, serious illnesses, and stigma and discrimination. Many participants attributed the onset of SMI to PTEs. In response to PTEs, participants described experiencing PTSD symptoms including avoidance, hyperarousal, re-experiencing, and negative thoughts as well as worsening of SMI. In rural Ethiopia many PTEs do not fit DSM-5 criteria but are still associated with PTSD symptoms and illness onset and exacerbation.

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