

JRS MHPSS Communication Guide

Purpose: This glossary defines key MHPSS concepts and terms used in JRS humanitarian programming to promote consistent use, understanding, and communication among practitioners and stakeholders organization wide. The glossary aligns JRS MHPSS language with globally accepted best practice.

Using compassionate, inclusive, and accessible language in MHPSS is essential to promote dignity, inclusion, healing, and reduce stigma—especially in humanitarian settings. The way we talk about mental health can either build trust or create barriers to care.

According to the IASC Guidelines, using clinical or diagnostic terms outside medical contexts may alienate individuals or reinforce stigma, particularly where services are limited.

Focusing on people’s experiences, strengths, and resilience—rather than labels—helps create safe, culturally sensitive environments and encourages greater understanding and uptake of MHPSS support.

Defining MHPSS

Mental health - a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) - a composite term describing services or activities that protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental health conditions.

Psychosocial – the interaction between psychological and social aspects that affect a person’s overall wellbeing.

Community-based MHPSS (CBMHPSS) - focuses on the strengths, needs, and active participation of affected communities in design and delivery of support. It offers culturally relevant and accessible activities—like psychological first aid, peer support, creative expression, and vocational training—that support well-being, resilience, and social connection. CBMHPSS prioritizes prevention, early support, and integration with services such as health and education, fostering local ownership, reducing stigma, and strengthening long-term recovery.

Standardized JRS MHPSS Language for Use

Forcibly displaced individuals and communities face a wide range of stressors, including exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, disruption of social and community networks, and lack of access to basic services and safety.

These experiences, combined with the ongoing adversity and uncertainty of displacement, can significantly affect mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) is an umbrella term used to describe any support that aims to protect and promote psychosocial wellbeing and prevent or treat mental health conditions.

Most people affected by emergencies experience distress that is natural and expected. The majority can recover and adapt when supported by family, community, and access to basic services. In crisis or post-conflict settings, there is often a lack of resources to adequately address the mental health and psychosocial needs of displaced populations.

Through MHPSS, JRS aims to reduce the suffering and improve the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of the forcibly displaced. MHPSS has always been an integral part of JRS's programming, and the organization has historically been a global leader of best practices, contributing to the IASC MHPSS Guidelines in Emergency Settings (2007).

Currently, JRS is known for our community-based MHPSS programming. JRS strives to ensure communities are involved in co-creating contextualized solutions. MHPSS is integrated across our core priority areas of advocacy, education, livelihoods, and reconciliation, and responsive to the layered needs of affected individuals and communities.

MHPSS needs are considered in all JRS operations and activities are present in nearly every JRS program. Common activities include those that build social connection like through art, theatre, games, and sports, psychoeducation, Social and Emotional Learning, support for parents, teachers, and caregivers, Psychological First Aid, support groups, individual counseling, and referrals to specialized mental health services.

Essentials of MHPSS Communication	
Recognize common stress responses.	Most people affected by crises will show signs of emotional distress—such as anxiety, sadness, fatigue, or irritability—which are common and usually improve with time.
Avoid overemphasis on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).	Do not focus heavily on PTSD in communications. Most reactions are natural responses to abnormal events and don't require a diagnosis, which can only be given by certified mental health specialists.

Be cautious with language.	Instead of using terms like “traumatized,” describe individuals as “distressed” or “experiencing strong emotional reactions.” This can hinder coping and resilience and reinforce stigma or a sense of helplessness. Normalize rather than pathologize stress.
Mental health and psychosocial support are holistic.	Communicate that MHPSS involves multiple layers of care: from basic needs and safety to specialized clinical services—each supporting different groups based on psychosocial need.
Children and adults cope differently.	Children express stress differently depending on their age, and most recover well with safety, support, and care. Avoid reducing children to their stress reactions in communication materials—focus on their resilience and needs and ways to address those.
Respect boundaries.	Don’t pressure individuals to share traumatic events unless they choose to. Instead, encourage conversations about their identity and life before the crisis if they’re comfortable sharing.
Highlight refugee community resources and capacities.	Highlight the capacity and resilience of affected individuals. Focus on fostering dignity, community ties, and the social conditions that promote well-being.
When describing people receiving MHPSS services, use humanizing and person-centered language that respects dignity and avoids stigma—for example: <i>people experiencing distress</i> , <i>individuals feeling overwhelmed</i> , <i>people with mental health conditions</i> , <i>persons diagnosed with a mental condition</i> , or <i>individuals facing psychosocial challenges</i> .	
When describing MHPSS activities, use clear, inclusive, and non-clinical language that highlights their purpose in supporting well-being, coping, and resilience. The IASC Guidelines recommend avoiding technical or diagnostic terms in non-clinical settings. Instead, describe activities by what they offer—such as “safe spaces for children,” “peer support for distress,” or “tools to manage stress and build community connection.” Emphasize that MHPSS is culturally grounded, strength-based, and supports dignity during crisis.	

Recommended language	
Wellbeing	Widely refers to a positive state of physical, mental, and social health that is defined by the individuals experience and interpretation. It is dynamic and can be assessed through feelings of belonging and social connection, ability to cope, ability to complete daily tasks, amongst other variables.

Distress	A feeling of intense suffering caused by extremely difficult circumstances and can encompass a range of emotional, physical, social and cognitive reactions. Commonly reported feelings include anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, grief. It is normal for people to experience distress as a result of displacement, and early and appropriate interventions can help people cope.
Resilience	The ability to cope and recover from adversity. People have an innate ability to be resilient. Psychosocial support can promote resilience for individuals, families, and communities.
Community-Based	Goes beyond implementing activities within the community to ensuring activities are implemented by the community and for the community.
Community-led	Goes beyond community-based and describes a process where communities are leaders in identifying needs, creating solutions, act as implementors, and having ownership over the evaluation of impact of MHPSS interventions in their own communities.
Cope/coping	The ability to deal with or have the appropriate resources to manage the type and amount of stress experienced.
Daily Stressors	The on-going, persistent conditions that threaten wellbeing, including lack of access to basic needs, education, livelihoods, racism, discrimination, isolation, and cause significant amounts of distress.
Multi-layered services	Referring to the IASC MHPSS intervention pyramid and the 4 areas of MHPSS work that are needed to ensure individuals, families, and communities can recover from forcible displacement. The layers include (1) Basic Services and security, (2) Community and Family Supports, (3) Focused, non-specialized support, (4) Specialized Services. JRS primarily implements layers 1 and 2, less frequently 3, and rarely 4.
Support	It is commonly used to describe the types of services we provide. It can be linked with an additional descriptor such as, 'psychosocial support,' 'peer support,' etc.

Psychosocial Accompaniment	Rooted in Ignatian Spirituality, in JRS, psychosocial accompaniment refers to meeting the forcibly displaced person where they are at, providing a safe space to listen and link individuals to their own resources, and resources within their communities.
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Keeping these essential communication tips in mind, consider adjusting language and terminology when discussing MHPSS to avoid common stereotypes and biases. In humanitarian settings, a psychosocial and human rights approach to MHPSS recognizes the inherent dignity of individuals, addresses the social determinants of distress, and promotes equitable access to culturally appropriate care while safeguarding protection and agency.

Instead of...	Use...
Trauma	Distress, Anguish, Tormented, Psychological and social effects, Emotional suffering, Disruption in daily functioning
Traumatic events	Adverse/terrifying/horrific/shocking/life-threatening/overwhelming/crisis events
Traumatized people	Severely distressed people, People exhibiting signs of distress/suffering/overwhelm
Trauma Healing	Mental health and psychosocial support
People suffering from	People experiencing, People living with
Symptoms (<i>unless linked to a clinical diagnosis</i>)	Reactions to difficult situations, People with extreme/severe reactions to the emergency
Mental disability, Mental illness, Mental disorder, Pathology	Mental health condition, Psychosocial disability, Emotional or psychological challenges, Difficulties related to mental well-being
Victims	Survivors, People affected, Individuals with lived experience, People experiencing, People living with
Treatment	Support, Care, Services, Assistance, Psychosocial accompaniment
Counseling	Psychosocial support - unless the service is clearly articulated as counseling, which JRS does infrequently
Therapy	Activity, psychosocial support, support, unless clearly aligning with a clinical intervention which JRS does rarely (ex. Instead of art therapy, use art activities)
Patient (<i>in non-clinical setting</i>)	Participant, Individual receiving support, Community member seeking care, People with lived experience, Experts by experience

Normal (<i>vs. abnormal</i>)	Typical or expected in the context, Common under the circumstances, Understandable reactions, Human responses
Addict	Person who uses substances, Individual experiencing substance dependence
Committed suicide, Failed suicide attempt, Parasuicide, Suicidal tendencies, Suicidal person	Died by suicide, Death by suicide, Attempted suicide, non-fatal suicidal behavior, self-injury without intent to die, suicidal thoughts, suicidal ideation, person with lived experience
Retarded	Person with intellectual disabilities, Individual with developmental delays
Cured	Recovered

The table below lists resources for further reading and guidance on language and communication related to MHPSS.

Mental Health Europe. (2024). <i>Mental health Europe's glossary (2024 edition)</i> . https://www.mentalhealtheurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Mental-Health-Europes-Glossary-2024-edition-FINAL.pdf
Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2007). <i>IASC guidelines on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings</i> . https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2020-11/IASC%20Guidelines%20on%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Psychosocial%20Support%20in%20Emergency%20Settings%20%28English%29.pdf
Poland MHPSS Technical Working Group. (n.d.). <i>Essential concepts and best practices for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS): Ukrainian refugee response</i> . https://chat.openai.com/share/file-HXEhNREkgTa5Q5t7bWP25