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Reuters

## Afghanistan battles widespread mental health issues

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Afghanistan is struggling to fight the mental health problems that afflict an estimated two thirds of its population after decades of violence, the country's health ministry said on Sunday, World Mental Health Day.

Extreme poverty, political instability, weak infrastructure and large gender disparities all contribute to mental problems, which will escalate if they remain untreated, the ministry said in a statement calling for more funding.

"We hope in the future at least one trained (mental) health professional will be working in every health facility and every patient will have the opportunity to be screened and get proper counselling and treatment for the mental health and psychosocial problems," acting Health Minister Suraya Dalil was quoted as saying.

"We hope that the donor agencies and other Afghanistan Health partners support us to enhance the mental health of those Afghans who have been affected during the war and conflict years."

Afghanistan has endured decades of violence starting with the fight against Soviet occupation, a civil war that ended only with the Taliban rule and then over nine years of insurgency after a U.S.-led invasion ousted the hardline group.

Millions have been killed or maimed since the conflicts began, but countless survivors also carry serious mental wounds.

"More than 60 percent of Afghans are suffering from stress disorders and mental problems," the ministry of health said.

"If mental health disorders are not treated, they could be seriously disabling," the statement added.

Mental health problems are also rising in neighbouring Pakistan as violence there mounts.

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Afghanistan's health system is basic and overstretched. It has the second worst maternal mortality rate in the world, after Sierra Leone, and is one of just four countries in the world where polio remains endemic.

Malnutrition and disease such as tuberculosis and dysentery remain widespread in many areas because of poverty, bad sanitation, rugged terrain, poor medical facilities and a shortage of trained doctors.