The History Of Mental Health In The Middle East: Analytical Literature Review

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Abstract : The history of mental health practices and services in the Middle East region has been deeply intertwined with its rich cultural, religious, and societal context. Tracing back to ancient times, mental health approaches were heavily influenced by the traditions of major monotheistic religions, with a strong emphasis on spiritual and traditional healing methods. As psychiatric institutions and Western medicine gradually gained a foothold in the region during the 20th century, a notable shift occurred. However, the integration of Western psychiatric practices faced significant challenges due to cultural barriers and deeply rooted beliefs. Families and communities often turned to traditional healers and religious practices as their initial recourse for mental health concerns, viewing Western interventions with skepticism and hesitation. Historically, mental health services in the Middle East have been overshadowed by a focus on physical health and the biomedical model. Mental illness carried substantial stigma, with individuals and families often reluctant to disclose mental health struggles due to fears of societal ostracization and discrimination. This stigma posed a significant barrier to accessing and accepting formal mental health support. Later in the 20th century, governments in the Middle East began recognizing the need for modernizing mental health services and integrating them into the broader healthcare system. However, this process was hindered by several factors, including limited resources, inadequate training for healthcare professionals, and ongoing conflicts and instability in certain regions, which disrupted the delivery of mental health services. As the 21st century progressed, several Middle Eastern nations, particularly those in the Arabian Gulf region, began implementing national mental health strategies and legislative reforms to address the growing need for comprehensive mental health care. These efforts aimed to destigmatize mental illness, protect the rights of individuals with mental health conditions, and promote public awareness and education. Despite these positive developments, the historical legacy of stigma, cultural barriers, and limited resources continues to pose challenges in the provision of accessible and culturally responsive mental health services across the diverse populations of the Middle East.