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Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

(No) Home for the Holidays

Last week, I picked up my daughter, Julia, after her last final. Yesterday, Ben arrived home. They have completed their first semesters at university. We are looking forward to potato latkes and champagne toasts with their older brothers and extended family, including their soon-to-be 1 year old cousin and octogenarian grandparents. This time of year is filled with celebrations of light - Hanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Year's. It is a time that I relish as we retreat from the busyness of work and school to be at home together. Sweet anticipation...



[Photo Credit](#)

In contrast, over 10 million Syrians are homeless. 4.8 million Syrians are refugees, and 6.1 million are displaced within their country's borders; half of those affected are children. In Aleppo, civilians are being driven from their homes - witnesses and victims of extreme violence. The ravages of war have cannibalized healthy routines and traditions. The mental health impact is immediate, and the sequelae will be enormous.

When there's no home for the holidays for millions of Syrian men, women and children, how can the international community spread some holiday spirit where it is desperately needed?

1. Good Cheer. Those who have fled Syria may no longer be in physical danger, but they carry horrific memories and emotional scars. [Half the Syrian refugees in Germany have mental health issues](#), with 70 percent witnessing violence and 50 percent having been victims of violence. Traditional psychotherapies and medications, as well as newer methods like Narrative Exposure Therapy, are proving helpful. However, much more mental health care is needed to restore good cheer for the millions of displaced Syrians. We need to rally.

2. The spirit of the season. Even before the conflict, mental health care was in short

supply in Syria, whose 21 million people were served by only 70 - yes, seventy - psychiatrists. [But now only one of the country's two public psychiatric hospitals is functioning, and only partially.](#) Located near the conflict zone, the hospital has had to improvise, like making a back entrance because the main gate was exposed to gunfire. The miraculous efforts of those who are trying to do good with the little they have, including humanitarian aid workers and local heroes, certainly exemplify the spirit of the season.

3. Magic and wonder. Aleppo's brief ceasefire ended this week, meaning many civilians are trapped in chaos and crossfire once again. [Many, especially those with mental illness, aren't able to leave.](#) At a minimum, pressure is needed to allow humanitarian airdrops to deliver lifesaving food and medicine to innocent civilians, including those with severe mental illness. There's not much magic or wonder in Syria at the moment. Food and medicine falling from the sky would be a start.

4. Good tidings. Although good news is hard to come by in Syria, one positive whisper about mental health needs comes from the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO is advocating for integration of mental health into basic health care services - indeed this is a major priority in low- and middle-income countries worldwide. Doctors working with NGOs are being trained to better diagnose and manage mental health conditions, which we hope means more mental health services in the new year.

5. Hope - A gift of the season. Hope is a powerful psychological asset. As global citizens, as a global community, what can we do to foster the hope that this Syrian holocaust will come to an end? What can we do to bolster the capacity of Syrians to endure their horrific and grueling reality? There is much we cannot change, but I know how huge small acts of caring have meant to me when my world seemed cold and dark.

So, in the spirit of the season, and with the aspiration that the accumulation of many small acts will bring hope, some things we can do:

- Convey our shared humanity with [#standwithsyria](#), which is being used throughout social media to organize marches, share information and photos, and create political pressure to end this carnage;
- Donate to the [International Rescue Committee](#), a leading provider of humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees around the region;
- Support the [Global Mental Health Programs](#) as we work to increase mental health capacity in the region;
- Join the [#cookforsyria](#) campaign by ordering their newly published cookbook and

hosting a dinner.