Psychological Wellbeing: Toward an Innovative Provision of Mental Health and Wellbeing in the United Arab Emirates

Fatema S. Alrumaithi[1*], and Immanuel A. Moonesar[2]

[1] Master of Innovation Management program, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, United Arab Emirates
[2] Associate Professor, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

While physical health strategies have been developed through establishing healthcare centers and e-services, psychological health services have not improved by the same degree, especially in the UAE. Since the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency in January 2020, the demand for health services—including mental healthcare—has increased and led to the detection of several global gaps within the healthcare systems. Thus, it is essential to understand the requirements of advanced technologies and approaches to provide healthcare services. Nevertheless, social cohesion, financial burden, and associated stigma are among the primary factors behind the reluctance to approach psychological wellbeing services. Consequently, this study aims to explore how innovation can support the provision of mental health services and how it can assist in spreading awareness of psychological wellbeing and reduce the associated stigma, in the context of the UAE. A qualitative research design was afollowed, that focuses on the preliminary literature review of innovative methods applied in the area of mental health and psychological wellbeing services. Additionally, primary data was collected by conducting a focus group discussion among specialized counselors, psychologists, and other related professionals working in the city of Abu Dhabi. The acquired data were analyzed based on the research objective with NVivo Software (QSR 2.0). The fidings were evaluated to present results that answered the research questions. The coding process led to finalizing six unified codes that were extracted into six correlated themes: Workplace environment, Counseling sessions, School children matters, COVID-19 pandemic concerns, Treatment mode, and Future mental health development. Also, visual illustration was generated and presented. The findings of this research provided recommendations for a strategic framework and suggestions for future research.

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[*] Corresponding author E-mail address: f.alrumaithi@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The wellbeing of individuals is not only measured by the absence of disease but also by the state in which people can realize their potential, cope with life's tensions, and contribute productively to their community (World Health organization [WHO], 2020). However, several factors affect individuals' wellbeing, including health problems or stressful life experiences. Some mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression, have increased globally in the last decade (Chnanis, 2017; WHO, 2020). In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, isolation and social distancing led to several mental health issues (Tanhan et al., 2020). In the UAE, it is essential to admit that, although medical and health services are practical and advanced, access to them and the required treatments have stagnated. His Excellency Abdulrahman bin Mohamed Al-Owais, Minister of MOHAP, stated that one of the targets to be achieved as part of the UAE Vision 2021 is superior healthcare services, "The ministry emphasizes the importance of disease prevention and the existence of a strong healthcare system that is capable of responding effectively to epidemics and health risks" (FCSA, 2018, p. 32). As such, mental health awareness must be integrated into all elements of health and social policy, health-system planning, and healthcare delivery. Moreover, the complexity of UAE's social, political, and cultural context indicates the need for an innovative strategy to be implemented, which focuses on mental health policies and services. However, there are major limitations to implementing innovation and e-services, namely the lack of supportive data and research.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Several factors and barriers affect how individuals view mental health care and whether they will pursue professional help. Besides, the health care sector, and mental health care specifically, is lagging in services and prevention (Mahomed, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to explore how innovation could assist in overcoming the struggle to ensure provision of mental health care in the UAE, given the numerous initiatives and agendas in place to support the country's goal of becoming a leader in health care development and innovation (Zakzak et al., 2020).

1.2. Aim and Objective

This research aims to discover the role of innovation in providing psychological health care services in the UAE and the viewpoint of the specialists in this field, thus assisting in defining possible ways to achieve UAE Vision 2021, UAE 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, and the UAE National Innovation Agenda. This research will be a viable contribution to determining a framework that navigates the adoption of innovation for mental health care services in the context of the UAE.

1.3. Limitations and Assumptions

The methodology used in this study explores the views and beliefs of a focus group. The focus group participants are specialists in the counseling and mental health sectors in Abu Dhabi. As such, the transferability or generalizability of the results to other emirates is not applicable, as the participants do not represent the wider population. However, it is recommended that further studies be conducted on a larger scale to assess professional perspectives in other cities and to generate a more general framework for the UAE.

2. Literature Review

The mental health field contains several specializations: psychology, counseling, psychiatry, and clinical social work (Trout & Wexler, 2020). According to WHO (2017), the number of mental health professionals has increased globally, reaching 7.25 mental health workers for every 100,000 people, comprising of psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors. However, this number was still lower than the global requirement. Globally, WHO (2020) estimated that around 1.1 billion individuals suffer from mental health issues. Moreover, by 2030, it is estimated that mental health issues and related conditions will increase and cost global healthcare systems around $6 trillion (Zakzak & Shibl, 2020).

According to a 2015 WHO report, the UAE recorded the highest levels of some mental illnesses among other Eastern and Mediterranean countries, including depression (Ibrahim et al., 2020). The UAE's healthcare system is still developing and considered young compared to other countries (WHO, 2020). Mental healthcare services began operating in the UAE, specifically in the cities of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, in the mid-1970s with essential psychiatric services (MOHAP, 2020). Later, they developed further and spread to other emirates. According to the "Health Profile 2015" report, the number of psychiatrists in the UAE was 0.30 per 100,000 people (WHO, 2020). Despite these limited services, the health system is based on a strong foundation of laws and agendas to support further development and to be able to function when faced with emergencies. Several federal laws on psychological illness, mental disability, and drug and substance use are presented, as treatments in mental health vary from medical to non-medical interventions (MOHAP, 2020).

2.1. Challenges and Concerns

2.1.1. Awareness and Supportive Regulations

Although non-clinical interventions, awareness campaigns, and programs are effective, their results are limited if they are not well-integrated into the health system model. As such, there is a vast demand for policies, regulations, and awareness of mental healthcare services. Moreover, mental health policy policies established in the UAE in 2016 have not been implemented adequately. Several weaknesses have been identified in recent literature, including a lack of specific policies on mental health or children's mental health (Zakzak et al., 2020). Moreover, a clear roadmap does not exist for the services that need to be implemented (Zakzak et al., 2020).

2.1.2. Scarcity of Resources

The shortage of healthcare services and specialists in mental healthcare is one of the apparent weaknesses that need to be addressed. For instance, WHO stated that the average global health spending devotes about 0.5% to mental health; this signifies that the investment in mental support and healthcare is lower than the current demand (Mahomed, 2020). This investment may be hindered by the challenging nature of hiring an adequate number of mental health professionals since regulatory entities have different procedures and requirements in the UAE. Furthermore, there is a lack of professional graduates in mental healthcare because of the limited number of institutes offering specialized programs in the country's mental healthcare sector (Zakzak & Shibl, 20).

2.1.3. Associated Stigma

A cross-sectional survey study in the UAE by Ibrahim et al. (2020) indicated that the main barrier to seeking professional help for mental illnesses were individuals' beliefs that the

disease would disappear by itself. Furthermore, it found that anxiety and stress are perceived differently in Muslim societies. For example, death anxiety is viewed differently in Muslim communities than in Christian societies or among individuals of different faiths (Sardar et al., 2019). Moreover, political and social trends could affect the future of Muslim and Arab societies because of current wars and political conflicts (ASDA'A BCW, 2019; Sardar et al., 2019).

2.2. Innovation in Healthcare Sector

According to Omachonu and Einspruch (2010, p. 3), innovation can be presented as "the implementation of new services, technologies, and organizational structures to improve outcomes." The health sector is continuously evolving and updating itself due to providers' rapid innovative and experimental progress (Brooks et al., 2011). When applying innovative concepts, the aim is to select cost-effective methods and improve the quality of services. One essential concepts in product and process transformation is technological innovation (Omachonu & Einspruch, 2010). For example, electronic recording and big data concepts could annually save up to $420 billion currently wasted on paperwork (Omachonu & Einspruch, 2010). Technology such as smartphones, health monitoring applications, online platforms, and wearable devices are some of the current approaches to tracking an individual's health. Thus, telemedicine has gained in popularity among doctors and specialists in several countries including USA, Australia, and the UAE. However, implementing these advanced and innovative products and services is a financial burden (Omachonu & Einspruch, 2010). In general, the diffusion of innovation has several stages and components, making it a struggle in any sector (Clayton et al., 2018). However, this struggle is more evident in the health sector because of the interconnected aspects, including governmental laws and policies, stakeholders' roles, and legal and financial aspects (Omachonu & Einspruch, 2010).

2.3. Best Practices

Non-clinical interventions and emerging approaches applied to improve mental wellbeing have proven their efficiency in several contexts and are adjustable according to available resources (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Also, they assist in reducing the burden on the health system. Some mental health interventions that have demonstrated efficacy are the Circle of Care model applied in India and the Open Dialogue model in Finland, as these interventions are tailored to the targeted population's needs (Mahomed, 2020). Likewise, collaboration must progress while considering the political, medical, religious, and social aspects of Arab and Muslim communities. For example, one innovative model of online counseling was created by a Kuwaiti team of psychologists, under the banner of Ayadi Health (2020). They provide teletherapy and online counseling sessions designed and integrated especially for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. These services assist in spreading awareness and providing the care needed based on the context of the Arab countries (Ayadi Health, 2020). Similar approaches are needed to cover mental health aspects across several dimensions in the UAE, including social and counseling services, rather than relying only on medical clinics and physicians.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative design, as it assists in collecting the opinions, thoughts, and feelings of participants (Creswell, 2014). The research questions (How can innovation support the provision of mental health services? and How will it assist in spreading psychological wellbeing awareness and reduce the stigma associated?) were asked via open-ended questions. The questions were based on funnel-type interviews, moving from the general to more specific questions, which help build a conceptual framework for the data collected (Morgan, 2012). The focus group participants' level of engagement helps them elaborate more on the research questions and provide different observations on the topic. During the discussion, the researcher used props to encourage elaborations and clarifications of the participants' statements. The researcher had to consider not influencing or emphasizing specific points to avoid impacting the participants' opinions.

3.2. Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

The study frame involved recruiting participants through a purposeful sampling of counselors and psychologists. The criterion to choose participants was their working experience, which included working in Abu Dhabi, with at least five years of experience in the field. Snowball sampling was employed to recruit the targeted participants. The initial number of participants was 11, who were then divided into two focus groups. However, several individuals declined to participate due to the online nature of the interview while others cited work obligations and unsuitable timings. The final focus group consisted of six participants, with education levels ranging from a bachelor's to a master's degree in psychology and counseling. The participants' demographic information was collected, including their age, gender, nationality, qualification, profession, and duration of the experience. No personal data, such as participant names and workplaces, were collected. Ethical approval forms were obtained, completed by the researcher, and approved by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government Ethics Committee (Approval Number: REC-83-2020). Participants were provided with consent forms beforehand that mentioned the study's purpose and the use of the collected data. During the focus group discussion, participants shared their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in conversation with and while relating to other participants. This research design helps collect different views on the research topic, as insights are explicit within the discussion and do not consist of only information and answers (Morgan, 2012). The discussion was based on five main questions and several sub-questions. The discussion was accomplished via Zoom and lasted for 57 minutes. The researcher was in charge of asking the questions, moderating, reflecting, and recording the discussion.

4. Results and Analysis of Research Findings

4.1. Demographics of Participants

The sample consisted of six participants working in the mental healthcare field in Abu Dhabi, and all were Emiratis. The participants' demographics are presented in the following figures:
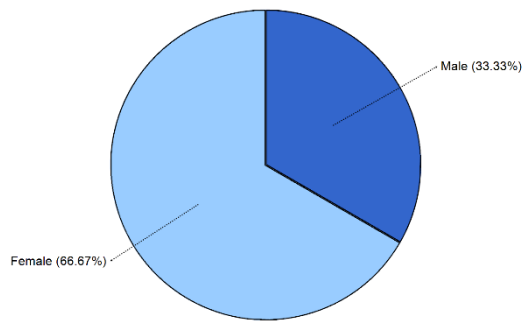
Figure 4.1: Participants by Gender

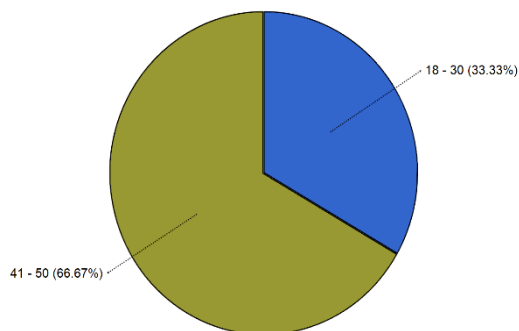The number of female participants (n = 4) was double that of the male participants (n = 2).

Figure 4.2: Participants by Age

Two-thirds of the participants were in the age group 41–50 years (n = 4), while the remaining third were in the age group 18–30 years (n = 2). This reflected a difference in years of experience, as some participants were younger.
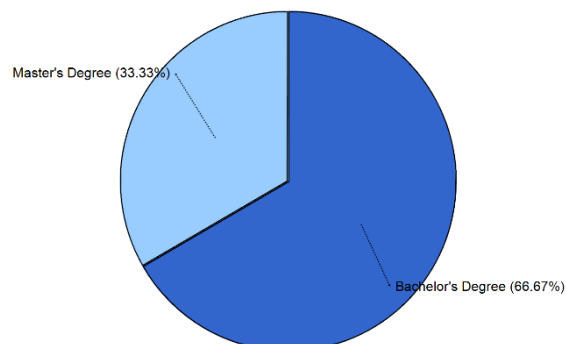

Figure 4.3: Participants by Highest Educational Qualification

With reference to the highest qualification level obtained, a third of the participants had at least a master's degree (n = 2), while the majority had a bachelor's degree (n = 4). In this sample, most of the participants had not continued to higher education.
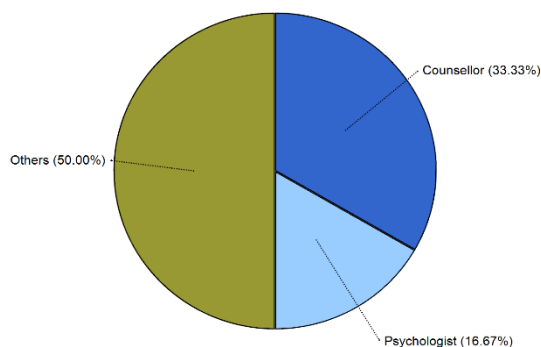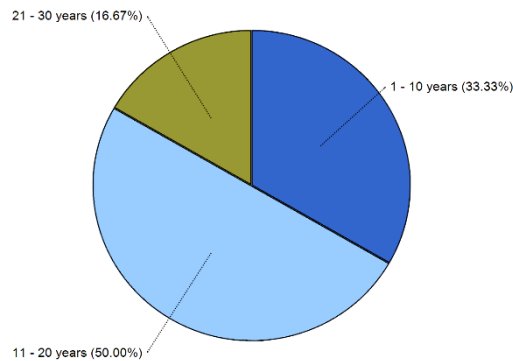

Figure 4.4: Participants by Profession

One of the participants (16.6%) was a psychologist, while two participants (33.3%) indicated that they worked as counselors. The remaining half (n = 3) answered not specified/others and provided no further details about their profession.

Figure 4.5: Participants by Years of Experience

Two participants (33.3%) had less than ten years of experience, while three (50%) had 11–20 years of experience. Only one participant (16.6%) had 21 or more years of experience. This data generally indicated a strong overall professional experience among the focus group participants.

4.2. Key Findings

The data collected during the focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. Later, the transcript was imported into the NVivo (QSR 2.0) software to be analyzed into codes, thus providing insight into the central themes of the data analysis. The coding process included the grouping and labeling of similar sentences and paragraphs into nodes, where each one covered a specific construct discussed during the focus group. The coding process concluding with six primary codes and several integrated sub-codes. Then, the coded data were extracted into six correlated themes.

4.2.1. Workplace Environment from the Viewpoint of the Participants

During the discussion, participants reflected about their experience as employees in the mental healthcare sector and its effects on their career. They expressed satisfaction at working in this field, as helping others made them appreciate the big picture, which is to work hand-in-hand to reach the country's goals. One of the participants who is working in high school counseling said:

> *"I chose this job because we can help others and, in my opinion, it is the most important point in this field. " (Khalfan)*

Although challenges are present, as in any other field, the participants stated that passion for their career encouraged them to overcome these challenges, as one of the participants who work in a counseling and therapy center declared that his job has affect him positively in developing personal skills and tolerate challenges and difficulties.

4.2.2. Counseling, Psychiatry, and Other Treatments and Sessions

Participants talked about several kinds of sessions based on their expertise. Some of the participants are counselors working at academic facilities, such as schools and educational centers. Others work within mental healthcare facilities. Souad, who works as a psychologist, mentioned that guiding others to learn how to deal with life challnges and learn new skills. An important aspect was the value of these sessions for those who sought help. One of the participants indicated that counseling differs based on gender, traditions, and culture. Spacificly for girls and women, cases that require psychological mentorship and family-related issues often face discrimination. Despite the above biases, UAE has well-planned agendas and strategies focusing on enhancing the healthcare sector, including mental healthcare. Combined with advanced facilities and awareness programs, mental health services are accessible and comprehensible for those who need them:

"The country provides full healthcare for patients, and we can help people who suffered mentally from the stress. Those cases are priorities in our country; anyone feeling down can contact the specific numbers, and we will do our best to help them." (Badr)

4.2.3. School Children and Related Concerns and Issues

This theme covers the points indicated by the participants regarding children, students, and minors. A general agreement was observed during the discussion, as the participants acknowledged the importance of healthcare and awareness initiatives, inculcating the importance of mental health and wellbeing starting from a young age. Issues and concerns regarding mental health and psychological wellbeing could affect anyone and at any age. Although younger people do not face the same difficulties as adults, yet it is essential to provide support to them, so that they understand their mental health and seek help if needed. Alia, who work as a school counselor, said:

"Our sessions include meeting with parents to deal with children's issues such as stubbornness or anger, or poor academic progress, and neglected children at home or bullied children at school... when we help others, we feel accomplished, especially young children, as their personality develops at an early age and what they learn affects their future life." (Alia)

4.2.4. COVID-19 Pandemic and How it Affects the Mental Health of Individuals

The participants expressed their opinion on the current COVID-19 pandemic, as it brought many uncertainties and concerns regarding physical health and the spread of the disease, and it impinges on the mental health of individuals of all ages. The participants reported that the need for mental health services increased consequently. Furthermore, new regulations piled up the pressure on people, especially with the mandatory isolations, social distancing, and other social precautions being rapidly applied:

"With the epidemic in 2020, the people became fearful of connecting with others, especially at the beginning when we did not understand the disease fully, so many stayed at home for a very long time and had many [mental health] issues as a result." (Badr)

4.2.5. Treatment Mode and its Delivery During the Pandemic, especially the Use of Virtual Communication Modes

All participants reported that communication between the therapist and the patient is very critical in this field. Moreover, even in uncertain situations, such as the current pandemic, it is essential to provide mental healthcare services for those in need:

"At a time where the world has an epidemic, and everyone is worried about their health; their situation could worsen, so we have to have faster communication channels especially with risky cases." (Khalfan)

Thus, it was noticed during the conversation that the focus was on discussing several options for communication modes to deliver mental health services. Participants indicated several online methods to deliver the sessions and provide a comfortable environment for individuals. This was viewed as a positive point since UAE had delivered innovative media and communication channels before the pandemic. Being aware of the importance of implementing innovative services was always a concept discussed among stakeholders and policymakers in the UAE. This became critical with the mandatory quarantine in the year 2020. Nevertheless, some challenges have cropped up with the sudden change in methods

used to deliver the sessions. Professionals in mental healthcare usually rely on emotions and non-verbal communication.

4.2.6. Future Mental Health Development as the Insights and Plans for the Mental Healthcare

Participants mainly communicated positive attitudes regarding the future of the mental health sector. Hope and motivation were among the main phrases deliberated upon during the discussion besides increasing awareness regarding the importance of psychological wellbeing. The participants also emphasized expanding mental health services awareness programs dedicated to younger people. As one of the participants stated:

> *"I hope the parents would educate their kids about mental health; for example, kids as young as six years old can understand emotions and the meaning of being angry or happy or emotions of others. They [kids] can help others, whether in their family or with friends. I believe this will change the community." (Danah)*

4.3. Visual Analysis of Results

Three visual techniques were used in the NVivo software to present and inform the data analyzed in precise and competent figures. These visualization techniques help illustrate the NVivo analysis for frequent words, as presented in the Word Cloud. Similarly, the Word Tree represents the most frequent words and the context in which they were discussed. These related phrases and contexts are presented as branches. Finally, the researcher conducted a Project Map to visualize the main themes/codes and connected sub-codes, as reflected in the focus group transcript.

4.3.1. Word Cloud

A word cloud visualizes the most commonly used and positively reflected words within data imported into NVivo. As presented in Figure 4.6, "mental" and "health" were the most frequent words, followed by "help", "people", "field", "work", "session", "challenges", and so on.

Figure 4.6: Word Cloud

4.3.2. Word Tree

A word tree displays a keyword and all connected branches based on the recurrence rate within the context. For example, the word tree generated in NVivo contained branches related to the most frequent words, "mental" and "health", as visualized in Figure 4.7. This is because the word tree displays the branches based on recurring phrases and themes.
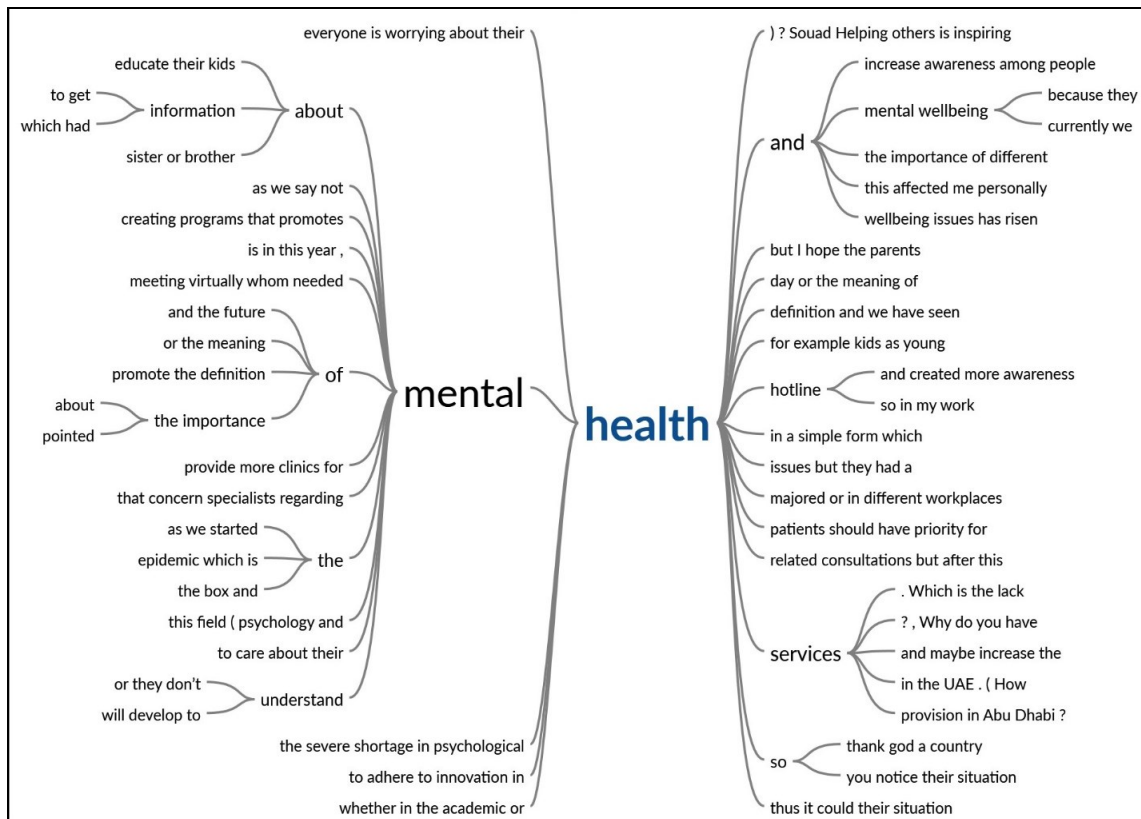
Figure 4.7: Word Tree

4.3.3 Project Map

A project map assists in understanding the visualized ideas and themes of data in a precise map figure, thus assisting in presenting the main findings in a comprehensive visual scheme. This visualization identifies the principal codes or themes and related connections and sub-nodes within each theme. As illustrated in Figure 4.8, the main six themes discussed earlier were identified, and each one of these themes contained sub-nodes or sub-codes. The researcher identified these connections based on the data assigned to each theme.
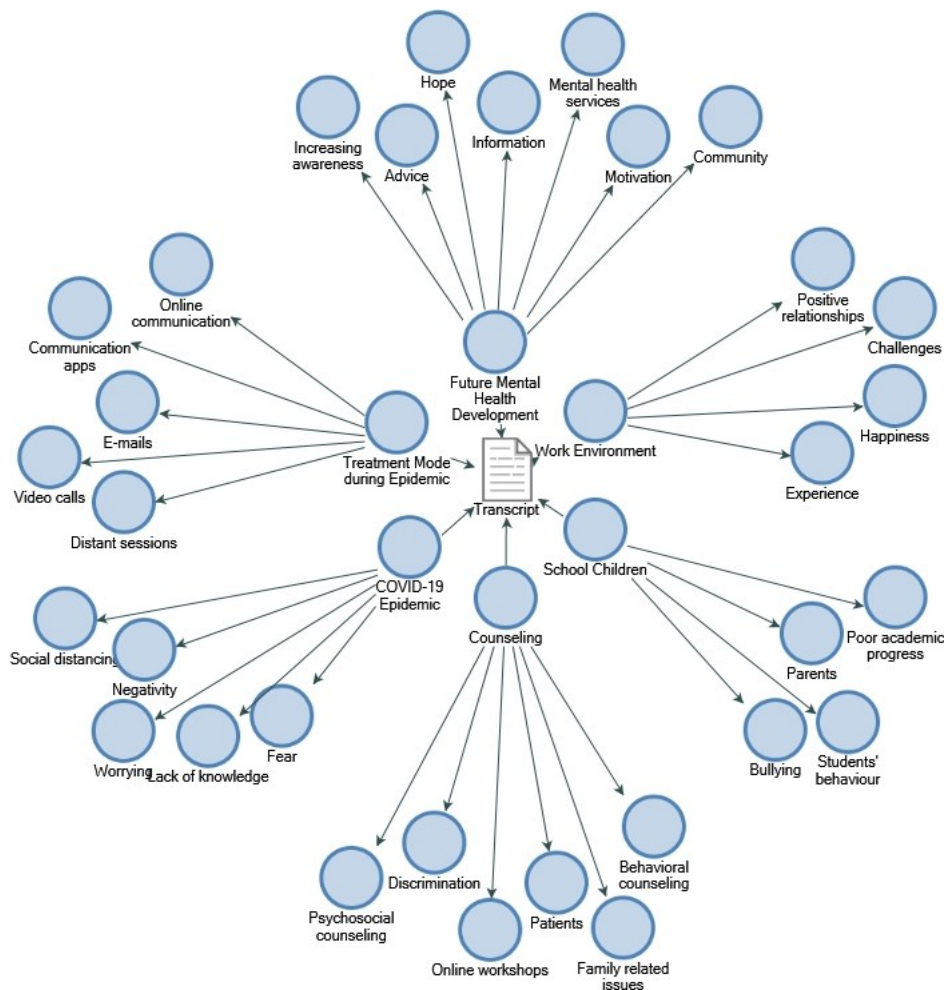
Figure 4.8: Project Map

5. Discussion

In general, the key findings emphasized the importance of psychological wellbeing in the society and the effect of issues and concerns regarding mental wellbeing, starting at a younger age. Furthermore, the participants underscored the importance of the workplace environment to provide support and enhance performance for professionals and individuals working within the mental healthcare sector in the UAE. This finding is echoed by Al-Ali et al. (2019), who indicated a positive relationship connecting job performance and satisfaction with the employees' performance. Thus, providing a supportive environment assists mental health employees in doing their job. This was also observed in the UAE at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government provided a mental health hotline and awareness programs for frontline workers to support their mental wellbeing during uncertain times, which could affect their job performance (El Hayek et al., 2020).

The participants were optimistic regarding the future of mental healthcare services in the UAE. This is because experts emphasize the government's role in providing regulations and policies that support services, including mental healthcare services. Such actions include implementing advanced technologies and enforcing laws regarding cloud chains and big data, alongside addressing privacy and cybersecurity concerns. This dilemma was discussed by Rebello et al. (2014), as technologies assist in delivering mental health services and cut treatment costs. Over the last century, it has been found that developing innovative technologies, products, and procedures in the healthcare sector enhances outcomes (Helfrich

et al., 2007). As a result, services become more convenient. Moreover, the stigma associated with mental healthcare is reduced because of enhanced awareness and the ability to access services through online media.

The general literature review exposes a lack of awareness, the need to develop supportive regulations, and the scarcity of resources and funds. However, studies regarding the role of innovation in mental healthcare in the UAE are minimal. Several factors must be considered before implementing innovative international practices in mental healthcare, as the UAE's social and cultural aspects must be considered. Accordingly, this research collected the perspectives of experts working in the field of mental healthcare in the UAE. Key findings present a need for innovation regarding services provided and awareness. However, during the current global pandemic of COVID-19, individuals became more aware of the importance of mental and psychological wellbeing. Thus, focusing on enhancing these services and increasing awareness about mental wellbeing is highly convenient.

6. Recommendations

Implementing innovative strategies for wellbeing and happiness demands the consideration of the level of mental healthcare currently offered to the UAE's citizens. This study shed light on the need to enhance current mental healthcare services in the UAE and to explore innovative measures in providing services. Since there is limited research regarding innovation and mental health in the UAE, this research adds value to the extant body of knowledge, specifically from the experts in Abu Dhabi. Another aspect covered is the rapid development of the technologies, with the spread of teletherapy and telemedicine services. Continual revision and analyses of these services would enhance future outcomes and assist in the development of teletherapy and telemedicine services.

6.1.Proposed Strategies and Initiatives

Based on the literature review findings and the focus group discussion analysis, the main steps discussed previously are introduced in the following framework (Figure 5.1). This proposed framework is based on three pillars, which work simultaneously to reach the identified goals, and measurements included within the outlined agenda.

• Training and specialists: recruiting process, outsourcing specialists, online training, et. • Develop training programs for non-specialists. • Provide new positions and specializations in the sector to provide basic services and assist specialists • Telepsychiatry and telemedicine	• Ministry of Health and Prevention • Ministry of happiness and wellbeing • Community Development Authority • DHA • HAAD • Sharjah Health Authority • The Executive Counsel	• Targeted population: kids, adults, etc. • Gender • Religion • Culture and tradition • Communicating channels and median • Provide public health programs in schools and companies.
Training and Recruiting	**Government and Stakeholders Support**	**Awareness Programs**

Figure 5.1: Proposed Innovative Strategic Framework for Enhancing the Provision of Services in the Mental Health Sector

To address mental health and psychological wellbeing in a broader scope, interventions and health programs should focus on education and training, legal support, and the reduction of stigma at a community level. This proposed framework aims to provide a basis for

collaboration among different parties to focus on enhancing the mental healthcare services in the UAE. For example, providing training for primary healthcare workers could increase mental health literacy and assist in providing effective services (Blankenship, 2020; Zakzak & Shibl, 2020). This will contribute to solving issues related to the scarcity of resources and limitations in the number of specialists. Moreover, the stakeholders and governmental entities need to consider the need to apply innovative concepts in the mental healthcare service provision, such as establishing strategies and programs to protect vulnerable individuals and provide mental healthcare in primary care centers (El Hayek et al., 2020). These steps will help improve the services provided to citizens in the UAE and achieve the country's goals.

7. Conclusion

The research in mental health services and innovation is limited, especially in the UAE. As mental wellbeing is a primary global concern, UAE needs to further develop and enhance services in the mental healthcare field. It is imperative to focus on educating the citizens about mental health before developing the communities, ensuring a good life for all. Several gaps in the available studies were found in the literature review, indicating a need for further research and development. As UAE has been a pioneer in implementing innovative concepts and services for its citizens, tackling mental healthcare issues is also feasible. The current pandemic has created immense pressure worldwide; however, it has also shed light on the importance of mental health and wellbeing for all. This has considerably enhanced the research in this field and increased awareness about mental wellbeing.

This research explored the role of incremental innovation and the diffusion of innovation theory in providing mental healthcare services and psychological wellbeing. Additionally, it investigated the perspectives of specialists working in mental healthcare in Abu Dhabi. First, it looked at the gaps and the role of innovation in enhancing mental wellbeing, upon which recommendations were built. The literature review indicated a limited number of studies for implementing innovation within the UAE's mental healthcare field. The results also indicated a need to increase awareness and elaborate further on innovative concepts and methods used in the mental health sector. The recommendations are presented as a strategic framework, which would enable the country to become a pioneer in healthcare services, specifically mental healthcare and wellbeing.

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