

Refugee Perspectives on Mental Health Care:

An Evaluation of Treatment Satisfaction in German Pilot Project refuKey

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BACKGROUND

Refugee Mental Health

Asylum seekers and refugees (ASR) exhibit elevated rates of psychiatric morbidity (e.g., depression, PTSD), exceeding those of the general population [1]. Risk factors include pre-/peri-migration trauma (e.g., violence, war, persecution) and post-migration stressors (e.g., discrimination, social strain) [2].

Restricted Access to Mental Health Care

Despite high needs, access to standard mental health care for ASR remains restricted in many host countries, including Germany [3]. Various legal, structural, and cultural barriers lead to a substantial treatment gap; without the specialized care provided by precariously funded Psychosocial Counselling Centers (PCCs), mental health needs ofARS would often hardly be addressed at all [4].

refuKey: Improving Access through Stepped Care

The state-funded *refuKey* project (est. 2017, Lower Saxony, Germany) addresses this treatment gap through a stepped care model, linking psychiatric clinics with newly established PCCs and facilitating ASR’s access to the healthcare system.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

Aim

This study aims to assess treatment satisfaction among ASR within refuKey’s PCCs and to identify key factors shaping positive and negative evaluations of care from the perspective of ASR patients. Moreover, it explores the relationship between treatment satisfaction and treatment outcomes.

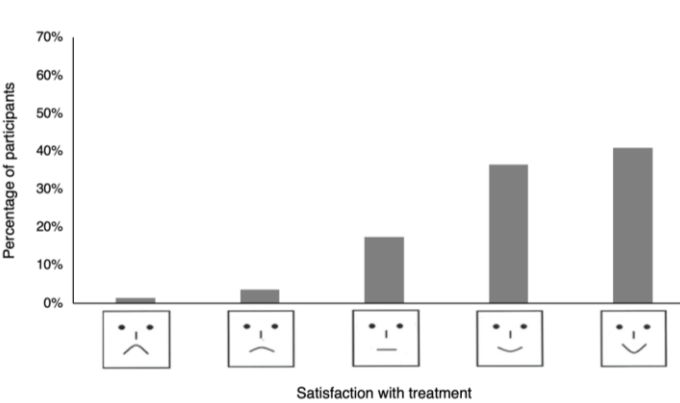
Method

Within refuKey’s naturalistic, multi-centered evaluation study, ASR complete internationally validated questionnaires before and after treatment in a PCC. Questionnaires assess mental health parameters (pre/post) and treatment satisfaction and experiences (post). Treatment evaluation includes multiple-choice items employing culturally sensitive pictogram scales as well as open-ended prompts. The mixed-methods design integrates quantitative data on mental health and treatment satisfaction with qualitative experience reports analysed through content analysis (Mayring).

RESULTS

Quantitative Results on Treatment Satisfaction and Treatment Outcomes

- High levels of psychological distress and post-migration stressors at the outset of treatment
- Significant reduction of psychological distress between treatment start and end, no change in post-migration stressors
- High overall satisfaction with treatment, staff, and communication in refuKey’s PCCs
- Most participants said treatments were helpful, addressed them personally, and took their cultural background into account
- Significant correlations between treatment satisfaction and symptom improvement for depression, trauma, and anxiety.



Correlations Between Treatment Satisfaction and Symptom Change Scores

Symptom Change	Correlation with treatment satisfaction		
	Spearman’s ρ	p (1-tailed)	n
Mental well-being	.16	.075	82
Depression	-.45	<.001***	85
Anxiety	-.30	.002**	87
Psychoticism	-.19	.046	81
Somatisation	-.22	.026	81
Trauma	-.34	<.001***	84

What forms treatment satisfaction? Qualitative Insights from the refuKey Project

Interpersonal and Relational Factors

- Trustful Connection to Staff
- Feeling Supported and Cared for
- Respectful Interaction
- Sense of Community and Safety

Verbal Interaction and Communication

- Being Listened to
- Feeling Understood
- Talking About Problems

Perceived Treatment Effects

- Psychological Relief
- New Coping Mechanisms
- Personal Growth and Development

DISCUSSION

- Findings support the effectiveness of stepped-care approaches, while also highlighting areas for improvement and further evaluation in meeting the substantial mental health needs of ASR
- Qualitative insights enrich understanding of treatment experiences, shedding light on the perceived value, effectiveness, and contextual relevance of the refuKey project for participants
- Overall, results emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive, needs-oriented, and low-threshold mental health care for ASR, with one of the key points being interpersonal and relational factors.

[1] Blackmore et al., 2020a, 2020b; [2] Jurado et al., 2017; [3] Führer et al., 2020; [4] Dumke et al., 2024