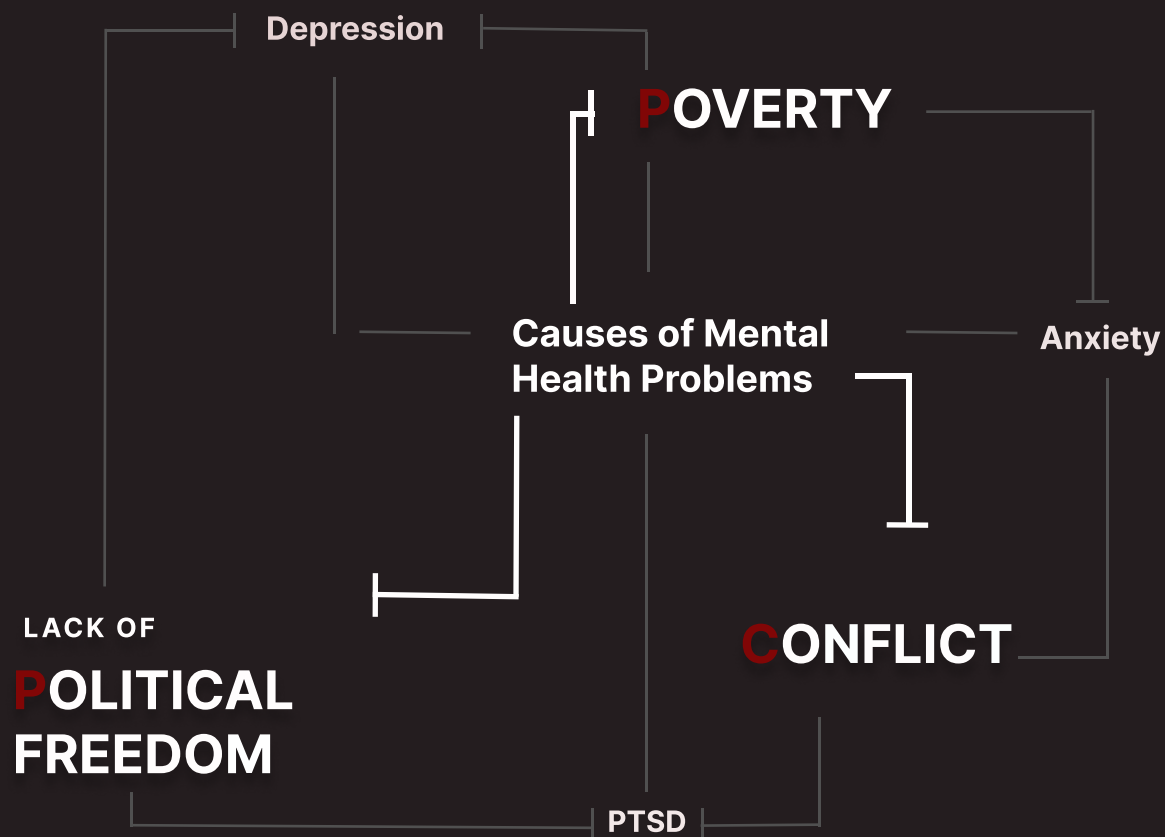




BRIEFING PAPER: THE IMPACT OF LONG TERM TRAUMA IN BURMA

THIS BRIEFING PAPER provides a summary of the body of evidence on the long-term implications for the mental health of people in Burma in view of the unprecedented levels of violence directed by the military junta towards the population, as well as the weaponization of the COVID-19 crisis in the country [1]. Drawing from AAPP data, as well as academic literature and several interviews with CSO activists, this briefing paper reveals the severe consequences of psychological trauma, and the persisting effects of distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among communities, after suffering from insecurity, widespread attacks, torture, displacement, and terrorist-like action by the armed wing of the military Junta.



THERE can be distinguished at least three significant causes for poor mental health in Burma as a result of the coup, namely conflict, poverty, and lack of political freedom.

Firstly, it is well-known that populations affected by armed conflicts present higher rates of poor mental health [2]. This can be caused by displacement, as well as exposure to traumatic events and increased levels of daily stressors [3]. The second cause, poverty, is related to the deprivation of a person's capabilities to live the life they have reason to value [4], and it influences mental health through factors such as education, food insecurity, housing, socioeconomic status or financial stress [5].

There is a positive association between poverty and mental health, meaning that conditions of poverty worsens mental health and/or that people with mental illness are more likely to drift into, or remain in, poverty. Finally, lack of political freedom and political violence can result in potential exposure to traumatic events, and can also be associated with depression, anxiety, and PTSD [6].



SINCE the coup, AAPP Mental Health Assistance Program (MHAP) continued counseling and psycho-social services, mainly focused on helping pro-democracy supporters facing mental stress on the daily basis. These offered services also help to shed light on the main risk factors encountered by people in Burma as impacting their mental health. Figure 1 exhibits motives of worrisome expressed by the one hundred and ten clients assisted between the months of September and November, 2021.

The main stressor expressed by clients, hence, was worry and insecurity about violence delivered by the junta since 1 February 2021 and return to military rule, which tremendously impacted and triggered income insecurity and joblessness, as well as apprehension concerning COVID-19 infection and adequate healthcare provision.

Consequences of Mental Health Problems

THE loss of mental health affects the health and wellbeing of the person suffering, but it likewise impacts their family and societies at large [7]. In 2016, it was estimated that the lack of mental health facilities was causing the loss of forty-three healthy years worldwide, valued in \$310 billion. This was a result of increased health and other welfare expenditures, diminished productivity at work, reduced rates of labor participation and foregone tax receipts [8]. Mental health disorders can also induce numerous somatic

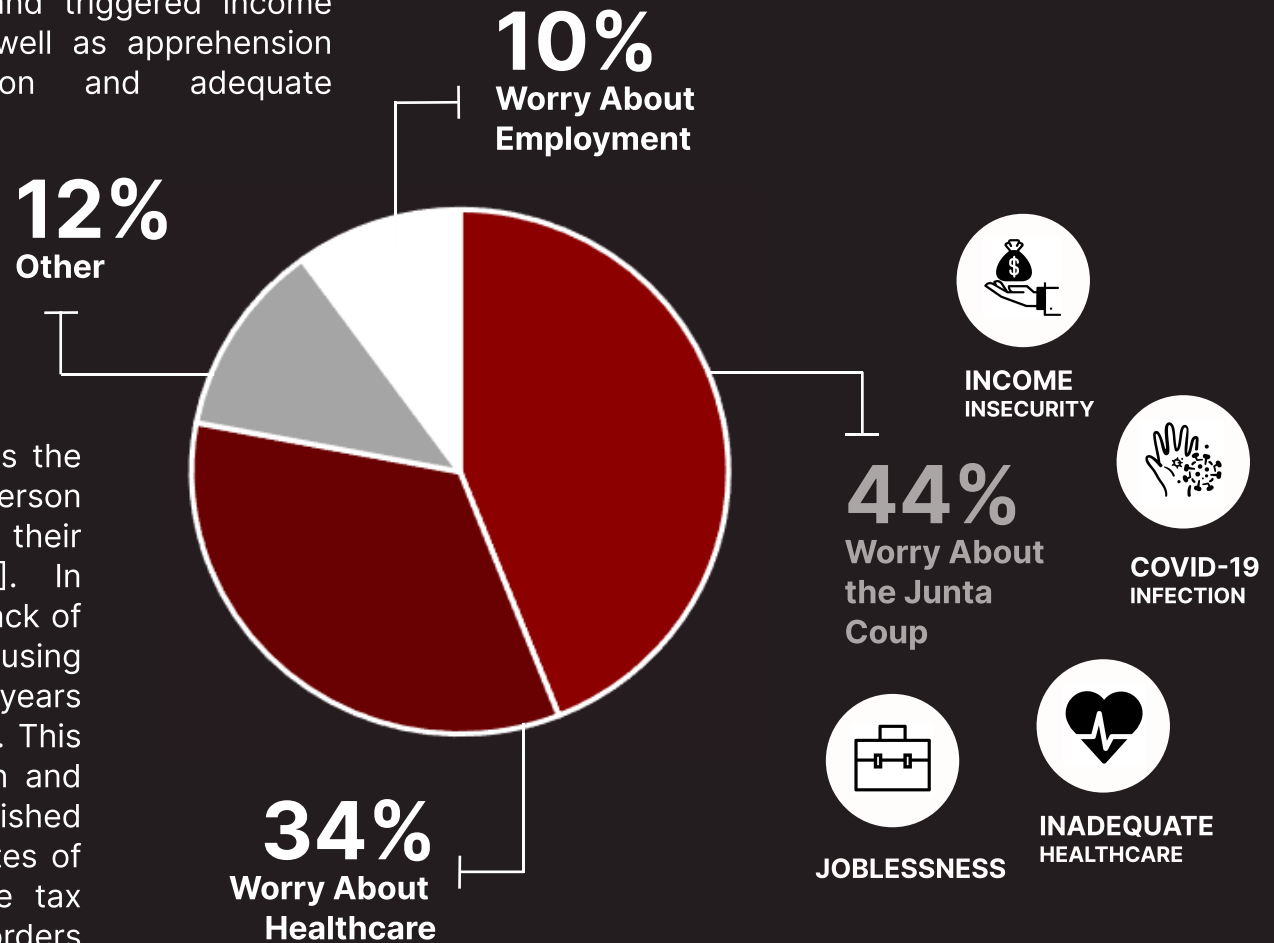


Figure 1. Main Problems Voiced by 110 Assisted Clients as Causing Distress, September-November



diseases including heart attack, artery diseases, stroke, diabetes, certain types of cancer and HIV [9].

Similarly, substance abuse and low compliance to treatment regimens are also consequences of mental illness which add to physical diseases and health expenditures, and there is also strong evidence indicating that depression in a caregiver can negatively affect infant attachment and child growth [10].

There are two main procedures to treat mental health disorders, namely psychosocial therapy and community support. However, these both have been disrupted by the coup, with the targeting of health workers and counsellors protracted by the junta, and the disturbance of daily life and destruction of community spaces of encounter.

Burma has undergone several man-made and natural disasters in the past. Many pro-democratic supporters being persecuted today were involved in the 1988 and 2007 demonstrations, now experienced in the distress of younger generations fighting for democracy. Hence, Burma is suffering from intergenerational trauma and a loss of future and hope.

Previous AAPP programs implemented to assist former political prisoners, like psychological first aid, stress management and self-care, and CETA, revealed high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illness.

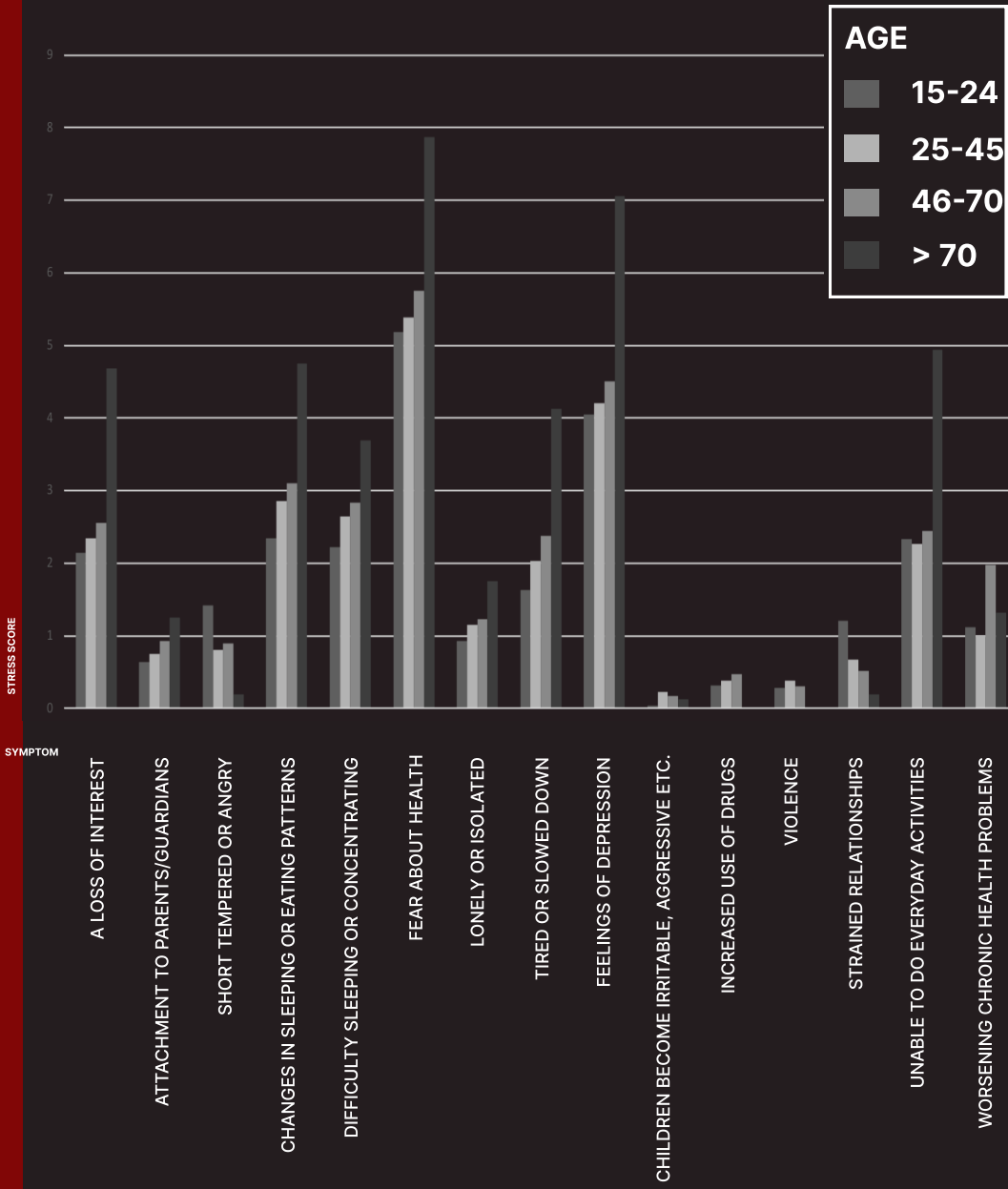
Mental Health Symptoms Include:

- Fear and Worry About You and Your Loved Ones Health
- Feeling Tired or Slowed Down
- Short-Tempered or Angry
- Changes in sleeping or Eating Patterns
- Strained Relationships
- Increased Use of Alcohol, Tobacco or Other Drugs
- Worsening Chronic Health Problems
- Inability to Carry Out Everyday Activities
- A Loss of Interest in Things That Were Once Pleasurable
- Feeling Lonely or Isolated
- Physical Symptoms i.e. Stomach/Headaches
- Reactions of Violence Against Oneself or Others
- Increased Attachment to Parents/Guardians



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Figure 2. Stress Symptom Scores of MHAP Clients Before Receiving Counselling (August-October 2021), Disaggregated by Age



of Burma, as a result of terror, insecurity, violence, imprisonment of family members, or torture in detention, delivered by the military during the 8888 uprising and civil war. Likewise, current MHAP data also shows that cumulative trauma exposure is related to higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder - basically the risk of mental health problems is exacerbated as the exposure to trauma increases in a dose-effect relation (Figure 2).

These previous traumatic experiences, and the consequences they have already burdened upon people in Burma, serve as a mirror of what is yet to come. The unparallel violence carried out by the junta, summed up to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and the cumulative trauma, set a tremendously severe scenario for future mental health in the country.

Bearing this in mind, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) urges stakeholders, the international community and the NUG to take into serious account the implications of post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by people in Burma, their future wellbeing, and its effects upon society at large. Hence, we call donors to endure their support in helping in this struggle and encourage the NUG to make its political will the prioritization of mental health regarding future national policies and government expenditure.