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Editorial

Unpacking the Psychological Baggage of Migration: Identity, Loss, and the Journey to Healing

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ABSTRACT

Migration is often viewed through political or economic lenses, yet its psychological dimensions remain underexplored. This editorial delves into the inner world of migrants, especially those from Iran who have recently resettled in Canada, revealing the emotional toll of leaving behind not only places but also parts of the self. Drawing from clinical experiences with immigrant clients, the article highlights key themes such as identity fragmentation, grief, cultural dissonance, and the hidden forms of psychological distress, including addiction and intergenerational tension. It argues for a redefinition of migration as an existential passage rather than a mere geographic transition. Emphasizing the need for culturally responsive therapeutic frameworks, the piece calls for greater societal and institutional support to help migrants unpack their emotional burdens, reclaim meaning, and build new narratives of belonging.

Keywords: Migration, Identity, Psychological Trauma, Cultural Adaptation, Immigrant Mental Health.

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In today's unstable world, migration is no longer a marginal phenomenon. It is a defining reality that touches nearly every corner of the globe. Whether driven by political unrest, economic collapse, or the pursuit of a better life, migrants leave not only behind a physical home, but often parts of themselves—identities, roles, relationships, and familiar ways of being.

As a clinical counselor supporting immigrant communities, I have spent years observing the often-unseen psychological cost of migration. Beneath each residency application, each displaced family, and every attempt at starting anew lies a complex emotional landscape—shaped by longing, disorientation, grief, and, at times, a quiet yet enduring resilience.

One story stands out vividly: a young Iranian man, newly arrived in Canada, sat across from me during our first therapy session. He had only been in the country for a few months, yet his eyes already revealed the burden of living a double life. He spoke with aching nostalgia about Tehran and with confusion and detachment about life in Ottawa. He wasn't just learning to navigate unfamiliar streets—he was trying to rebuild his sense of self.

At one point, he showed me a video. In it, a young man said, "I want to move abroad, but I need a suitcase—one that can hold the coat my grandmother made for me. I want her to be in it. I want to bring my memories with my friends—and I want them to be in that suitcase too…"

As he played the video, he began to cry. That moment reminded me that migration is not just a change in geography—it is a profound psychological rupture, a challenge to one's very identity.

According to the International Organization for Migration, the number of international migrants rose from 272 million in 2019 to over 295 million in 2022. In this global tide, Iranians have increasingly sought refuge and opportunity abroad, especially since 2019, amidst escalating political and economic instability (International Organization for Migration, 2022). Canada, among other destinations, has seen a sharp rise in Iranian immigration, particularly among educated professionals, students, and middle-class families. In Canada alone, the Iranian population has grown significantly over the past decade. According to the 2021 Canadian Census, over 210,000 people of Iranian origin now live in Canada—an increase of nearly 30% since 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2022).

For many, migration is a lifeline—a path toward dignity, safety, and a future. Yet it also demands a reckoning with profound uncertainty. Migrants often carry invisible burdens: trauma left behind, unresolved grief, and identity fragmentation. In clinical work, these struggles manifest in various forms—depression not as sadness, but as emotional numbness; anxiety not as fear, but as a sense of relentless urgency; and, frequently, an aching loss of meaning.

But pain doesn't always present itself as sadness. For some, it emerges as anger—a raw, often unspoken emotion directed at institutions, governments, or oneself. This anger grows in the space between expectation and reality, in the broken promises of the "better life." I have sat with clients whose grief has hardened into resentment toward their country of origin for pushing them out, or toward their host society for failing to embrace them. Left unacknowledged, this pain becomes corrosive, silently eroding well-being and relationships.

In these emotional vacuums, addiction sometimes enters as a substitute for support. Migrants may turn to alcohol, drugs, gambling, or compulsive behaviors as a way to escape emotional overload or cultural dislocation. While not unique to immigrant communities, substance use is often overlooked in this population, hidden behind shame, language barriers, or fear of stigma. For many, addiction is not about indulgence, but survival.

Identity confusion, cultural dissonance, and intergenerational tensions further complicate the adjustment process. Children adapt quickly to new languages and norms, often reversing traditional family dynamics. Parents, once authoritative, may become dependent and disoriented. Grandparents struggle in silence, their grief invisible to systems that don't speak their emotional language. Their bodies may have crossed borders, but their spirits remain elsewhere—in the alleys of a homeland they may never see again.

What, then, does healing look like in this context?

It begins with reframing migration not just as movement, but as an existential passage—a confrontation with loss and possibility. Migrants must unpack more than suitcases; they must examine their psychological baggage: old wounds, internalized beliefs, unrealistic hopes. And they need tools to help them do so.

We need to equip them—and ourselves—with a psychological toolkit: resilience to endure ambiguity, Cross-cultural awareness to navigate difference, Mental health literacy to name and normalize suffering, Relational skills to build new networks of belonging, and Self-awareness to avoid being devoured by inherited pain.

But we must also recognize that the burden of adaptation should not fall solely on the individual. Host societies, healthcare providers, and policy-makers must offer support that is culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and free of stigma. Therapy must be a space where migrants can speak in more than just fluent English—it must allow them to say in the language of memory, grief, and hope.

Migration may begin with loss, but it does not have to end there. I have seen, time and again, how people can start to reclaim themselves—not by erasing their past, but by weaving it into something new. If we understand migration not merely as a crossing of borders, but as a journey toward meaning, then perhaps we can stop treating it as a crisis—and begin honoring it as a human transformation.

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