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Audio Documentary Script
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In A-U-C, a Stigma Lives On

LEAD IN: In the American University in Cairo, Egypt's most mentally liberated campus, many students are still reluctant when it comes to addressing the Students' Counseling Center when they are facing problems. A-U-C's Dina Salah ElDin reports.

(Fade in) Louis Armstrong "What a Wonderful World" (:25) (Slow down and fade out)

(Fade in) Yann Tiersen "Goodbye Lenin!" (:44)

Sometimes, life is not that wonderful. Sometimes, you wake up feeling sad, anxious, stressed, empty and depressed. Maybe you had your heart broken by someone (NAT SOUND: *crying woman*), maybe you had your house torn down by an earthquake (NAT SOUND: *earthquake*), maybe you lost your loved ones in a transatlantic flight that landed right in the ocean (NAT SOUND: *plane crash*), maybe you have too many exams and very little time, and maybe, chemical imbalance in the brain brings about hopelessness, sadness and apathy to your life, like a giant dark cloud covering a bright, sunny sky. Whatever it is, clearly, you need help.

The question is, isn't there anything we can do so as to let the sun shine again? Dr. Aly Mohktar, director of the American University in Cairo Counseling Center says there might be.

MOUKHTAR: "Talking is very useful. I find that useful, and perhaps I will advise somebody else to go. So, there's a bit of self-confidence, which develops when he comes, when the student comes, because he realizes that, it's not, I

mean, counselors are not odd strange people taking about mad stuff. It's just everyday language talking about everything happenings, which happens on campus or anywhere, and I suppose there is still a degree of stigma attached to the counseling center.” (:42)

The real question is, why is there a stigma against seeking help?

(Fade out) Yann Tiersen “Goodbye Lenin!” (2:17)

(Fade in) NAT SOUND: AUC Campus

The American University in Cairo or A-U-C, located in the outskirts of Egypt's busiest and most congested cities, with its state-of-the-art campus, was able to escape Cairo's madness, but what could not escape was the stigma of mental illnesses and counseling.

(Fade out) NAT SOUND: AUC Campus

The Counseling Center, currently headed by Dr. Moukhtar, was established in 1987. It is part of the department of student support, which also includes offices like the Student Mentoring Unit, the Student Conduct Unit and the Disabilities Services. Even though it has been running for more than 20 years, Dr. Moukhtar says that A-U-C students are still reluctant in addressing the center if they have problems. Why? Well, the story is a long one; it dates back to the Middle Ages.

(Fade in) Spanish Medieval Song (3:11)

MOKHTAR: Well, stigma related to mental illnesses is something historical really, because if you go back in history, you find that even up to the Middle Ages, or later parts of the Middle Ages, people who were abnormal in their mental state, they were considered to be possessed by demons, and in Europe, for

example, they were even burnt. They were sort of tied to trees and burnt, because it was considered that this was the only way to get rid of the witches, which are possessing them. And in the Arab World, again, people with mental illnesses, used to be beaten up, again, with the assumption that by beating up the patient, the demons and evil spirits will leave him. So there was always this in the back mind of the, lets say, the modern civilization. Years have passed, and I practiced in U-K, for many years, and I can tell you, say back in the 1980's the stigma was quite apparent, even in England, and even among the British. Things have changed, of course, over 20, 30 years. People in England for example are more accepting. New Generations are more accepting of the idea of needing psychological help. In the United States, for examples, the stigma is much less, people re more willing to go to see to seek mental health support or help, so I think it's something that takes time, and I think new generations, even in Egypt are gradually become more accepting. (2:10)

(Fade out) "Spanish Medial Song"

(Fade in) Pink Floyd "Careful with that Axe, Eugene"

The stigma, is not only a story of the past, we still live it every day, in every part of the planet, as Dr. Anne Justus, Professor of Phycology at A-U-C explains.

JUSTUS: Definitely there's a stigma here at A-U-C. Maybe here less than other place, but, for sure, definitely here. If we look across the world and Egypt as well, we see less stigma with people with higher socio-academic status, which is of course the majority of the A-U-C population. So there tends to be less stigma in general, but still, I would say, way more stigma if we looked at a more comparable school in the U-S, for example (:25).

So why is the American university in Cairo, not so American in that regards?

JUSTUS: I think it's just different levels of exposure to therapy, different levels of exposure to psychology. I mean, a lot of people in Egypt still don't know what psychology is. So I think, it's catching up, it's just, at a different time line. (:30)

(Fade out) Pink Floyd, "Careful with that Axe, Eugene"

(Fade in) Keith Jarrett, "Sapporo Encore"

Mohamed Ashraf, a senior at A-U-C had a brief encounter with the Students' Counseling Center, after a near-death experience in a car accident, in which a friend had died.

ASHRAF: People told me you need to, like, talk about it and stuff, and I didn't really want to talk about I, so I decided maybe I should go to the counseling center, I went there for about three of four sessions, and then I stopped (:18)

Ashraf explain why he stopped.

ASHRAF: People there at the counseling center, they are really friendly, they want to make you feel better and everything, but, I felt they were kinda nagging, because when I didn't come they would call me, and, plus, they prescribed me meds (:14)

Oops. Medication.

ASHRAF: Like, when I first, like, went there, like, it didn't occur to me that I might need to take meds, but they told me that because you just been in an accident you might have post traumatic stress, and all of other medical terms I didn't really understand. So, I decided better be safe than sorry, so I went and took them. After a while, before I stopped taking the meds but way after I stopped

going there, I talked to one of my friends' mom, who's also a psychiatrist, who told me that you should have taken the meds in the first place. You should have waited for at least a month. So I thought maybe they're doing something wrong here (:42).

Prescribed meds, however, are not always a bad thing, as Dr. Anne Justus says.

JUSTUS: If someone gets medication does that mean they are like sicker? I don't know, for some people it also adds legitimacy. So some people, they are going through a really hard, rough time, and they go for therapy and the therapist recommends that they meet with a psychiatrist, maybe consider some medication, then the psychiatrist says, hey, you know what, looks like you have depression, why don't you consider taking medication. For some people that kind of legitimizes their feelings, or validates their feelings so they actually feel better. But this idea that, ok, so now I'm taking medicine, so this is a real, a real illness, or a real problem, so in that case I would say other people in the community would stigmatize less, but then you can also think about people who have mental illnesses which are portrayed in the media often as people who are out of control, people who are wildly psychotic, so these are generally the associations that I think most people have with medication. (:52)

(Fade out) Keith Jarrett, "Sapporo Encore"

NAT SOUND: Film Projector

NAT SOUND: Scene from "Ismail Yasin in the Madhouse" (:30)

But Ashraf remains an exception to the rule. According to statistics by the Egyptian Psychiatric Association released in 2008, about 1.2 million Egyptians suffer from

Depression; this excludes 80% of the sufferers, who choose not to seek psychiatric help, because of the stigma.

(Fade in) Aziza Mustafa Zadeh, "Sheherezadeh"

MOKHTAR: Twenty five percent, almost twenty five percent of people, across the life span, would have some kind of psychological problem. So that's a lot, that's one in four. (:20)

JUSTUS: If anything, finding really good statistics is hard, because of the stigma that's associated, so people don't self-report. I think the most recent statistics are from the World Health Organization from 2007, and I don't recall there being a difference between Egypt's statistics or Middle East statistics and what we would consider the European or Western or North American country. Generally, it's pretty stable internationally. (:25)

So now that we know there is a problem, how can we solve it? Unfortunately, there is no textbook solution for this dilemma. But time seems to be the cure most people agree upon.

ASHRAF: I think if more people go public with the fact that they do seek psychiatric help, erm, other might be encouraged to do so, but if, everyone, like, if anyone that goes there is still, does it in secrecy, then we're still, we're like going around in circles. (:20)

JUSTUS: I think education is important, that you're having a struggle or a mental illness like depression for example, isn't a bad thing, I mean, it's the same as having diabetes for example, it's something that you're dealing with, you go and get treatment for it and hopefully you feel better. So I think if people start seeing it in more of a medicalized realm, or way about it, then it will be easier to accept it. (:25)

Dr. Mokhtar assures that the center is going along the same steps.

MOKHTAR: Well, it's basically what we're doing here, it's basically: A) By being honest to our promise, students who come here, are dealt with in a very confidential matter, in a very confidential way, so we don't release any information about them, uhm, we, all information here cannot be released to anyone, including the university president himself, cannot get information from here, except with the consent of the student, any personal information, they can get data, information about number of cases, hoe many have you seen, etc. So this is one. When the student comes here we talk about the stigma, sometimes, we address it, so that it doesn't affect the student and make him stop. Uhm, we spend good time to reassure the student about the process of counseling, and we promote it in so many other ways, as I said. For example, we provide information on personal growth and dealing with psychological difficulties through emotional intelligence series, which is a fairly benign kind of term, or, different than saying a workshop on depression, for example, or a workshop on anxiety. It's a bit different. And, we encourage contact, I mean, for example, yourself, you are one of many, we see a lot of students who have opened that and we are inviting

students to come, do their assignments, talking to us, speaking about their assignments in classes. We help any of the clubs, student clubs needing a counselor or needing some help or something, we get into that. So, it's kind of, we are spreading, we are doing outreach work. We are reaching out to various places, not only in the counseling center so you found the counselor here and there. Well, I mean, it's a continuous fight.(2:10)

(Fade in) Yann Tiersen, "Goodbye Lenin"

Yes indeed, it is a fight.

Special thanks to Dr. Anne Justus, Dr. Aly Mokhtar and Mr. Mohamed Ashraf.

Music used in this documentary: *What a Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong, *Goodbye Lenin* by Yan Tiersen, *Sheherazadeh* by Aziza Mustafa Zadeh, *Sapporo Encore* by Kieth Jarrett, *Careful with that Axe, Eugene* by Pink Floyd, and scene from *El Maganin Fe Naim*, by Ismail Yasin.

(Fade out) Yann Tiersen, "Goodbye Lenin"