

TRANSFORMING MENTAL HEALTH IN PAKISTAN THROUGH THE 26TH NATIONAL PSYCHIATRIC CONFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan, with a population exceeding 240 million, faces a growing burden of mental illness compounded by poverty, natural disasters, displacement, and the long-term effects of COVID-19. Against this backdrop, the Pakistan Psychiatric Society (PPS) continues to serve as the leading platform for advocacy, education, and professional exchange. Its 26th National Psychiatric Conference, to be held in Karachi from 31 October to 2 November 2025, is themed “Breaking Barriers, Building Resilience.” The conference reflects the realities of psychiatry in Pakistan, where barriers such as stigma, limited resources, and workforce shortages persist, yet resilience remains evident among patients, families, and professionals. Relocation of the event from Quetta to Karachi underscores adaptability while retaining the academic spirit of Balochistan. This gathering will serve not only as an academic milestone but also as a statement of determination to advance mental health through innovation, resilience, and collaboration.

KEYWORDS

Mental Health Services; Psychiatry; Psychological Resilience; Health Policy; Pakistan.

BACKGROUND

Globally, mental health has become an increasingly urgent concern, and Pakistan is no exception. The nation is facing significant challenges, such as poverty, displacement, recurrent floods, political instability, and the long shadow of terrorism and COVID-19, that have collectively deepened psychological distress across communities.¹ With less than 1% of the national health budget allocated to mental health and fewer than 1,000 psychiatrists to serve a population of over 240 million, access to care remains critically inadequate.²

Within this challenging landscape, the Pakistan Psychiatric Society (PPS) has played a pivotal role in advocating for improved services, promoting psychiatric education, and combating stigma. Its annual national conference has become a symbol of resilience, intellectual exchange, and professional solidarity.

Conference Theme - Breaking Barriers, Building Resilience

The theme of the 26th National Psychiatric Conference, “Breaking Barriers, Building Resilience”—is both timely and profound. Barriers to care manifest in structural underfunding, geographic inequities, and cultural stigma that prevent individuals from seeking help.³ Families frequently travel hundreds of kilometers to access services, while patients and professionals alike face the consequences of systemic neglect.

Yet, resilience persists, and patients and families show courage in confronting illness despite societal stigma. Communities affected by crises demonstrate adaptability, while trainees and professionals persevere in advancing their knowledge under constraints of resources. PPS itself

exemplifies institutional resilience by sustaining its mission and adapting to challenges. Thus, the theme emphasises a dual imperative: barriers must be dismantled and resilience is nurtured to ensure sustained progress.

From Quetta to Karachi: Adaptability in Action

This academic event was originally planned for Quetta, but it was relocated to Karachi due to security concerns. While the venue has shifted, the essence of Balochistan remains central through dedicated sessions highlighting the province's unique challenges and innovations. This decision demonstrates the Society's adaptability and commitment to safety while ensuring inclusivity. Karachi, with its infrastructure and accessibility, offers the stability required for an event of this magnitude.

Anticipated Themes

The 26th National Psychiatric Conference 2025 brings together these eleven key themes to reflect the evolving frontiers of mental health:

- Foundations and Frontiers of Psychiatry (Conceptual, Diagnostic, and Neurobiological Advances)
- Mood, Anxiety, and Related Disorders (From Neurobiology to Recovery)
- Severe Mental Illness and Psychosis (Early Intervention to Long-term Care)
- Addictive and Dual Disorders (Substance Use, Behavioural Addictions, and Comorbidity)
- Psychiatry Across the Lifespan (Developmental, Aging, and Transitional Issues)
- Global, Cultural, and Social Dimensions (Equity, Inclusion, and Mental Health in Context)
- Consultation, Liaison, and Interdisciplinary Psychiatry (Integration with General Medicine and Specialties)

- H. Psychotherapy and Innovative Interventions (From Evidence-Based Practice to Technology-Enhanced Care)
- I. Climate, Crisis and Resilience (Global Challenges and Mental Health Futures)
- J. Training, Capacity Building, and Future Directions (Human Resource Development, Education, and Leadership)
- K. Forensic, Ethical, and Legal Psychiatry (Law, Justice, and Human Rights Interface)

These themes highlight the importance of advancing scientific understanding, holistic care, and global collaboration across the spectrum of psychiatry and mental health—from neurobiology and diagnostics to cultural, ethical, and educational dimensions. Collectively, these subject areas emphasise interdisciplinary integration, innovation intervention strategies, and commitment to equity and resilience, shaping a robust vision for a mentally healthier and more inclusive future.

Strengthening Psychiatry Through Innovation and Collaboration

The future of Psychiatry in Pakistan rests not only on addressing barriers but also on actively fostering resilience within systems of care, education, and research. The 26th PPS National Psychiatric Conference embodies this vision by promoting innovation and collaboration across disciplines. Psychiatry must expand beyond institutional boundaries to embrace community-based approaches, digital technologies, and intersectoral collaborations. Such strategies are pivotal for reaching marginalised and underserved populations, reducing disparities, and integrating mental health into broader health and social policy frameworks.

Moreover, the conference provides a platform to showcase locally relevant research and culturally adapted interventions, ensuring that global advances are translated into meaningful solutions for Pakistan. By fostering alliances between professionals, policymakers, and civil society, the event aims to create sustainable pathways for strengthening resilience at both individual and institutional levels. This approach ensures that psychiatry remains not only clinically effective but also socially responsive, capable of promoting systemic change in mental health care.

Conclusion

The 26th National Psychiatric Conference represents more than a scholarly meeting, as it reflects the determination of Pakistan's mental health community to move forward despite formidable barriers. By uniting professionals, policymakers, and communities under the theme "Breaking Barriers, Building Resilience," the conference embodies adaptability, resilience, and innovation.

Through the promotion of collaborative research, digital psychiatry, community-based approaches, and intersectoral policy dialogues, PPS is positioning psychiatry as a driving force of systemic reform in Pakistan. The conference is not just a forum for academic exchange, but a declaration of intent, that psychiatry will continue to evolve, adapt, and lead in shaping a more equitable and responsive healthcare system, both locally and globally.

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