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## Drug abuse in Gaza a time bomb: psychologist Gazans seek drugs to relieve stress and anxiety



CAIRO (Marwa Awad)

A wave of drug addiction is overtaking the Gaza strip as Palestinians increasingly resort to anti-depressants to cope with years of blockade, entrapment and most recently a traumatizing Israeli offensive, at a rate that has medical experts worried.

As Gaza drifts in limbo with no clear political future, so do the 1.5 million residents, many of whom have come to rely on anti-depressants and painkillers smuggled through tunnels to escape the ongoing Israeli blockade, a soaring rate of unemployment at 40 percent and the traumas of war.

Apart from the massive destruction, the Israeli offensive has led to more poverty, unemployment and overcrowding.

To relieve themselves of the continuous state of stress and anxiety Palestinian teenagers, adult men and women are taking pills to regain control of their lives.

"I have to take them otherwise I cannot function in the day," 36-year-old Sameh Alawy, a taxi driver, told AlArabiya.net, explaining that he cannot handle driving down the street without panicking.

"During the war, I would take them constantly because dead bodies were everywhere to be seen. Now I still take them because they help calm me down," he explained.

Ali takes Tramadol, a drug that relieves psychosomatic symptoms like headaches and abdominal pain as well as depression and panic attacks. The drug requires a prescription and is highly addictive. Yet Ali says it is available "everywhere."

"This is a time bomb and we fear the worst is yet to come," Dr. Eyad el-Siraj, president of the Gaza Mental Health Program.

"Despair is everywhere in Gaza and the many factors resulting from the occupation unite to heighten stress and entrapment. It is a form of escape," Siraj said.

A survey published by the United Nations Gender Task Force on April 21 found many Gaza residents suffered from psychological and health problems after the 22-day Israeli offensive last January.

"With increased trauma and stress and limited access to professional psychosocial services, there is a rising problem of self-medication with unsupervised pharmaceutical therapies among the Gaza population," said a summary presented in Jerusalem.

### Smuggled via Tunnels

Some supplies of the drug are smuggled into Gaza from Egypt through tunnels. The low price and availability without prescription make them very popular. As the tunnel business flourishes thanks to an unceasing blockade, smuggled drugs easily make their way to pharmacy counters and black markets.

There are rich profits to be made on drugs which pharmacists and other traders say can be smuggled in through tunnels from Egypt and sold for several times the purchase price.

"A big collection of narcotic drugs come through the tunnels that are still functioning," Nabil Abu Dalal, a Gaza pharmacist told AlArabiya.net. "Sales have tripled over the past year and a half."

Abu Dalal added that usage of drugs has increased since Dec. 27 when the Israeli offensive began as people experienced extreme stress and were trapped at home.

"I feel helpless living in Gaza because I cannot secure basic necessities for my family and with the war, it has been unbearable," resident Yahya Ismael, told AlArabiya.net but refused to disclose what type of drug he uses.

Other anti-anxiety medications and Monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitors, which are anti-depressants like Prozac, are available without prescription and are equally popular. But one of the most popular drugs is the mystery pill called Sa'ada (Arabic for pleasure), a sexual stimulant sold in the black market that many Palestinian men take to help prolong their sexual performance.

"High conditions of stress and anxiety cause sexual problems like pre-mature ejaculation," Abu Dalal said, adding that the contents of the pill are unknown and therefore very risky.