

Community Care to torture victims: Gaza Experience

by:

Abdel Hamid Afana, Med, GCMHP

Paper presented at the VIIth International Symposium in Cap Town, South Africa 15-17 November (1995).

Introduction

The philosophy of GCMHP in Gaza is to mobilize local social services in the community to assist individuals in feeling that they are members *Of* the community and not merely members *In* the community. This involvement helps individuals feel that they are more than passive recipients of their therapy and have the opportunity to become responsible participants, contributing to their own health. In this approach, The role of the mental health professional must be changed from that of a provider of health care to a facilitator of care in order to enable individuals to solve their problems, using the resources of the family and community institutions in addition to address problems which are not handled in the medical model such as domestic violence, child abuse, women's mental health and human rights.

The intifada period created fear and suspicion creating a situation of mass paranoia. Curfews lasted sometimes up to 40 days isolating families and friends. Children were greatest sufferers. Under these abnormal conditions people stopped confiding in each other repressing their fears and anxieties. Since 1967, approximately 400.000 Palestinian have been imprisoned and the rest of the population has been exposed to night raids, beatings, home demolition, have witnessed the violence of killings. A research carried out by GCMHP (1992) of the extent of developing symptoms of traumatic stress following imprisonment of Palestinians in Israel. Results indicate that (41.9%) of the subjects found it difficult to adapt to family life. (44.7%) find it difficult to socialize and 20.1% have sexual and marital problems and 76.5% have economic difficulties.

The strategy of work

The aim of our community outreach is First, to reach out to a larger number of people in need- in many case those reluctant to receive psychological treatment- with a very limited number of professionals. Second, to change the attitudes of Palestinian society towards psychological disturbances in order to come to terms with the stigmatization of people seeking psychological treatment and raise the peoples awareness about mental health problems. Our work is exceptionally difficult given that in our community the paternal authority is dominant, the tribal influence is strong, and there is a high degree of ignorance of mental health problems.. As many other people in the community, ex-political prisoners, it is often so difficult for them to seek help , for many reasons, The main reasons can be attributed to:

1. stigmatisation: being identified as mental health client causes many difficulties in Palestinian society not only for patients, but also for the family. In many cases people would prefer to see traditional healer or a general practitioner, rather than talk to mental health specialist. This is related to cultural aspects- the use of the body to express psychological problems. The problem of stigmatisation is even worst among ex-political prisoners as these return as heroes and heroes should not have psychological problems
2. Ex-political prisoners are using denial as a mechanism of defense, to establish a state of psychological balance. The denial is supported by the community which only complicates the matter. To be an ex-political prisoner in many cases is an advantage: S/he will be celebrated as a hero, will have opportunities others will not have. There is no room for complaints; those who were able to withstand the torture by interrogators must not complain. In an informal setting a political prisoner said "I have no psychological problems", while we were talking about prison experience he declared that it is difficult for him to take a shower after 7 pm, it reminds him with the time when the Israeli army used to enforce him to take a very cold shower at the middle of the night.
3. The arrival of the Palestinian Authority where ex-political prisoners need to be rewarded. They are looking for good positions in their national authority. Therefore, they must not have any emotional or psychological problems.

The new Philosophy

In order to counter-act the above mentioned problems, the staff of GCMGHP have adopted the following:

First, train members of ex-political prisoners to be peer counsellors have been approved. These counsellors will be better able to understand the problems encountered by former political prisoners than professionals. They can communicate more easily with prisoners, listen to their problems and convince them to seek help when necessary. They will be supervised by professionals.

Second, group therapy approach . The staff has been trained in group therapy, adjusted to the Gaza Context. It is based on very strict principles of selection and voluntary participation. Each member is given the space and time and his own authority to verbalise when he or she feels safe. Our approach has been based on the concept of improving relationships between people: between employers and employees; between husband and wife; and between family members. It is worth to mention that a high percentage of employees have been imprisoned. The group setting gives us and the patients the possibility of using time to talk about their problems. The group sessions give our members the opportunity to share like experiences to identify with each other problems to be affected by the changes takes place with other group members which gives them hope of their personal growth and confidence, building trust, empathy and fellowship within the members of the group.

We have already experienced through our training groups the changes that have taken place with traumatised persons. We hope and believe that through their group experience participants will be able to go into the community and be able to work with the groups in the community such as women , children . schools ... and be able to build up once again the meaning of openness and trust in each other.