

# Lay counselling in humanitarian organisations: a field report on developing training materials for lay counsellors

**Barbara Juen, Heidi Siller, Michael Lindenthal, Leslie Snider, Marie Nielsen, Marie Louise Muff & Nana Wiedemann**

*Lay counsellors provide valuable psychosocial support in many different circumstances, such as manning telephone helplines for cancer patients, assisting people after crisis events or giving focused support to refugees or other vulnerable groups. This paper describes the process that a consortium of four humanitarian organisations followed to develop a training guide for lay counsellors as it was found that no common training curriculum existed. The process was comprised of the following steps: 1) review of existing literature on lay counselling; 2) a mapping report to identify organisations and existing materials available on trainings for lay counsellors; 3) a needs assessment to identify the needs of trainers; 4) development of first drafts of the training material; 5) pilot trainings to gain further understanding of needs and expectations of participants and trainers from different organisational contexts; and 6) adaptation of the training materials based on pilot trainings. The final materials consist of a variety of didactic methods and allow integration of materials as a supplement to existing trainings, or for use as independent training for lay counsellors, within a wide variety of settings.*

**Keywords:** humanitarian organisations, lay counselling, training materials

## Introduction

Humanitarian organisations, by responding to the needs of people affected by disasters

or other large scale emergencies, as well as people affected by individual adverse life events (such as critical illness or death of a loved one), provide essential psychosocial support at critical points in people's lives. Often this support is both practical and emotional, involving elements of counselling. The aim of such support is to promote resilience in affected individuals, groups and communities so they may recover and cope with changing life circumstances.

In terms of those offering support, *lay counsellors* are those who provide psychosocial support, but are not clinical, mental health specialists (i.e. social workers, psychologists or psychotherapists). Specifically, they may work on telephone help lines, crisis intervention, leading self-help groups, or providing assistance to the elderly, children, youth or refugees through focussed individual counselling, or practical support. Many are volunteers, providing key psychosocial services within their organisations, and often work with people facing serious life challenges. However, providing lay counsellors with adequate skills and knowledge to perform this task is a challenge in itself, as no common training curriculum existed. This has meant that trainers have had to develop their own training materials, specific to their own context, with little or no awareness of best practice, and without agreed standards.

Efforts were often duplicated, and opportunities to share learning lost.

According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2011), the use of volunteers to bridge gaps in humanitarian service provision in many European and non European countries, is on the rise. These gaps often occur in low resource settings, where there are few mental health professionals to provide essential psychosocial services. While the effectiveness of lay counsellors has also been critically debated in the field (e.g. Brown, 1974), recent literature demonstrates that volunteers can be highly effective and valuable to organisations in providing psychosocial support services (IFRC, 2011). Additionally, the literature review (included in this study) showed support for the utilisation of lay counsellors, presuming organisations provide adequate training and preparation for their tasks, as well as ongoing support and care for the lay counsellor's own wellbeing.

Therefore, providing quality training is the key to health and wellbeing, of both the beneficiaries and volunteers seeking to support them. Responding to the need for innovative, generic training material, the authors (who represent a variety of humanitarian, care and support organisations) undertook a joint process to develop a standard guide to training lay counsellors, based on enabling a cascade of knowledge and skills transfer within psychosocial support. This paper describes the process of developing this guide, intended for various humanitarian organisations that utilise lay counsellors to provide essential psychosocial support services.

The consortium responsible for the project included: IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support at the Danish Red Cross, the War Trauma Foundation (WTF),

the Danish Cancer Society (DCS) and the University of Innsbruck (UIBK). All of these organisations have expertise in the field of lay counselling, within a wide range of settings, such as crisis intervention, telephone counselling, psychosocial care to cancer patients, and training volunteers in the field of psychosocial support in conflict and disaster areas. This is delivered through direct service provision, research and evaluation, volunteer recruitment and support, and training and knowledge transfer. The consortium has strong European and international networks, including networks in low and middle income countries, and a variety of socio-cultural contexts, including those prone to disaster (i.e. earthquakes, hurricanes or floods), conflict and/or poverty. The consortium regularly disseminates their work through direct training and the production of resource materials and publications for beneficiaries, practitioners and academics.

As a result of this project, trainers in humanitarian organisations will have access to new training resources, grounded in sound research methods, and highlighting current best practice to provide a new common standard in the field. This will allow staff and volunteers to provide lay counselling of high quality to people in vulnerable situations within a wide range of settings.

### **The project design**

To start the project, a workshop was held to exchange experiences, create common definitions and explore opinions. The consortium's first challenge was to find a common definition of the term *lay counselling* that was appropriate for lay counsellors working in the field of short-term crisis intervention, as well as those providing long-term support. As part of this process, the connotations of the term lay counselling, as well as

debates in humanitarian circles about appropriate and ethical training, supervision and practice were also recognised and discussed. In the end, the authors chose to keep the term *lay counselling* as it was deemed to be the most accurate in describing psychosocial interventions provided by non professional helpers, and with the aim of contributing further clarity on best practice in the field.

On first view, the contents of a core curriculum for lay counsellors produced the following key psychosocial support skills: active listening, knowledge of stress and trauma, knowledge of resilience and grief, and the ability to convey an attitude of non intrusive support that assists those affected to find their own solutions. This last point highlights the importance that lay counsellors understand that affected people have the agency to help themselves, and that the role of a lay counsellor is to assist them to mobilise and use their personal resources as an active survivor, and not as a passive victim. Furthermore, for the group, it was of utmost importance to achieve well balanced attention to knowledge, skills and attitude

in both the training materials and the approach.

In order to develop the materials according to the highest standards, as well as with the needs of different kinds of organisations in mind, a literature review, mapping and questionnaire were utilised to better understand resources and gaps in current training approaches and materials.

This information was then used to compile a first draft of the training materials that was shared and discussed among the consortium through email and face-to-face workshops. The draft training materials were then piloted by group members, with trainees from their respective organisations, and shared for peer review among experienced, external partners. The lessons learned from piloting the training materials were shared in a joint workshop, and were accordingly redrafted, reviewed and finalised by the consortium, based on the results (Fig. 1).

#### *Literature review*

The literature review placed special emphasis on volunteers and psychosocial support, using databases, such as: PsychInfo,

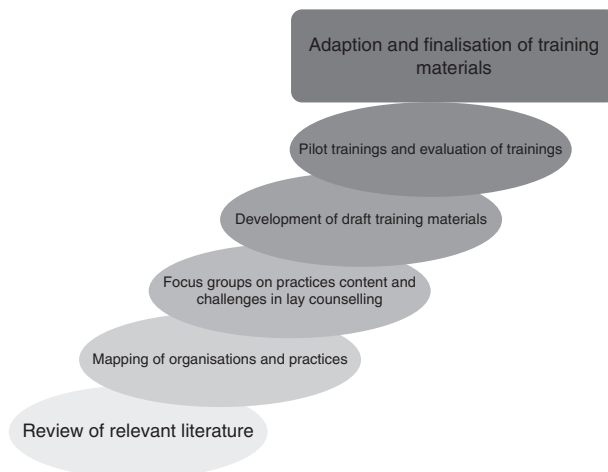


Figure 1: Steps in developing the training materials for lay counsellors.

Psyndex, SocIndex, Academic Search Premier and Social Science Citation Index. After selection of the literature (using key search terms, such as: lay counselling, psychosocial support, social support, etc.), 321 studies, handbooks and guidelines were included in the review (Juen, Siller & Gestrein, 2011). The key points of the review contained an initial framework for further use in the project, and formed the basis for the development of the training materials. Key points of the literature review included: the definition of (volunteer) lay counsellor, effective intervention techniques, core elements of existing training materials, and support and care for lay counsellors. Underpinned by this literature, the authors then defined lay counselling/psychosocial support as the following:

*'A key activity in many humanitarian organisations is support to individuals in crisis provided by trained volunteers. This activity can be called social support, psychological support or lay counselling, and the activity is likely to consist of active listening, information sharing, and support to take informed decisions, all with the objective of empowering the individual to cope with stressful and critical situations. Furthermore, if a person needs professional help, the volunteer can ensure referral to the relevant specialists/ doctors/ therapists.'* (Juen, Siller & Gestrein, 2011, p. 58).

In general, psychosocial support/lay counselling is further defined as a method of enhancing resilience of the affected population or groups. Resilience is defined as the ability to make use of one's resources in order to return to normality after adverse experiences (Paton, 2000). According to the literature, a lay counsellor, therefore, has to be able to support people in crisis, in a non

intrusive manner, that enables the affected person to make the step from passive victim to active survivor.

Based on the skills necessary for effective psychosocial intervention strategies, the following topics were highlighted for inclusion in the training materials:

- Giving information (Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Promoting expression of emotions and sharing of experiences (e.g. Anckerman et al., 2005; Giese-Davis et al., 2006; Hudson, Aranda & McMurray, 2002; van Ommeren et al., 2005)
- Providing a sense of safety (e.g. Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Promoting calming (Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Promoting self and collective efficacy (Ager, 2002; Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Promoting social connectedness (Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Instilling hope (e.g. Hobfoll et al., 2007)

In the literature review the authors also focused on recommended topics of existing training materials, in order to filter out the core elements, for inclusion in the guide. These included:

- Dealing with stress
- Assessing stressors and needs
- Counselling techniques
- Psychological first aid/emotional and practical support (e.g. Bisson et al., 2007; Hobfoll et al., 2007)
- Active listening
- Self awareness and empowerment
- Cultural and gender sensitivity
- Knowledge of the target group

Further emphasis was placed on the organisational framework for working with lay counsellors, including recruitment, selection and care for volunteers. Care for lay counsellors

was found to be essential for effectiveness and sustainability, and includes support from the organisation, as well as advanced training and ongoing supervision.

#### *Mapping of lay counselling practices*

Parallel to the literature review, a mapping was performed to get an overview of lay counselling practices in Europe (Juen & Lindenthal, 2011). The core question was: *‘what are the relevant activities currently executed in Europe, fitting the headline “lay counselling” as defined in the project, and by what types of organisations?’*. One of the main sub questions for the project was to discover how many organisations provide lay counselling in Europe.

#### *Methods and organisations*

Three main sources were used in the mapping. The major source was online search engines, with interconnections and links between the organisations found. Additionally, a small questionnaire was handed out at the European Network for Psychosocial Support meeting (ENPS) in Vienna in October 2010, mainly asking the participants to name organisations that they were aware of that offered lay counselling. Results from an earlier survey within the European Section of the IFRC were also integrated.

It was discovered early in the process that the term *lay counselling* was seldom used by most organisations. Therefore, in order to find relevant content, the search terms used instead were: *‘volunteers; psychological, psychosocial, emotional, support; and counselling’* in different variations and combinations, in both German and English.

It also became apparent, early in the process that there are a vast number of organisations offering lay counselling. However, only the larger ones have a web presence that allows them to be identified and/or makes it clear whether it is, in fact, lay counselling or

professional support. It was also apparent that some organisations set their main focus on other activities (e.g. medical or technical assistance), while including lay counselling as a supplement within those activities. One example would be as *‘companions’* to the elderly in nursing homes in order to provide a form of social support.

There is no typical organisational format that includes lay counselling. The spectrum ranges from huge international organisations to very small local initiatives, from large multi-professional teams reinforced by volunteers to small, self-organised initiatives. As well as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) offering lay counselling, two other types of organisations commonly appeared in the mapping: (1) networks and umbrella groups; and (2) research and competence centres (these are similar to networks, but focus on the creation and dissemination of specific findings), with both types acting as *‘multipliers’* (distributors of influential content) on psychosocial support, but also on specific findings in the field (Fig. 2).

#### *Lay counselling training and practices among European organisations*

Based on the mapping, an online questionnaire was sent out to 162 organisations, geographically spread throughout Europe. This questionnaire covered types of lay counselling, training of lay counsellors, materials used, as well as questions about target groups served. Despite the relatively low response rate (31 organisations), certain trends could still be identified, and are listed below.

Lay counselling practices covered a broad spectrum of issues and target groups:

- *‘Anyone in need of support’* (typical, for example, for many telephone help lines)

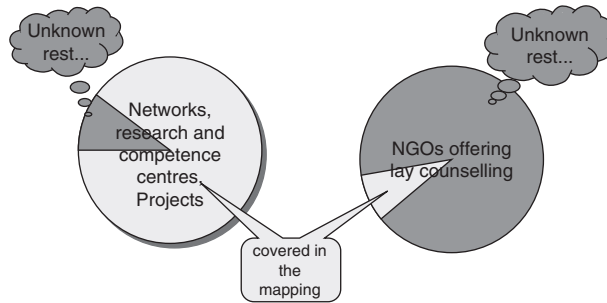


Figure 2: Rough estimation of organisations covered by the mapping.

- Specific events or incidents, but no specific target group (e.g. crime, terrorism, rape, disasters, accidents, etc.)
- Specific target groups, but no specific events or incidents (e.g. elderly, immigrants, students, etc.)
- Specific target groups and specific issues (e.g. social service linkage in low socio-economic context, palliative care for terminally ill, support for immigrants or asylum seekers impacted by trauma, etc.)

Recruitment, selection and training of (volunteer) lay counsellors also varied greatly amongst different organisations. Some have no specific activities and only on-the-job-training. Others have highly standardised selection procedures and intensive training curricula. There appears to be a strong correlation between the size of the organisation and the degree of standard procedures for the selection and preparation of lay counsellors.

As well as these differences in practice among organisations, there does seem to be a consensus on the types of intervention strategies lay counsellors should be able to perform. The five areas named by most organisations included: 1) listening/providing comfort to distressed people; 2) helping people to solve problems; 3) giving

information about services and support available; 4) referral to more specialised (psychological) care; and 5) emotional/practical support in acute crisis situations (e.g. after the diagnosis of severe illness; death of a loved one; disasters; accidents, etc.). In most organisations, trainers seem to work with self-developed materials, in combination with established textbooks, or other publicly available sources. The lack of generic material was often highlighted as a problem. Many trainers expressed their need for material that combines theoretical with practical knowledge, including good case examples, and adequate roleplay or demonstration videos. Requests for other training materials depended on the specific context the future lay counsellors would work in, or on the expected target groups served by the organisation.

#### *Assessment of trainers' needs*

After the mapping, a guideline for focus group discussions was developed. The guideline was sent out to organisations in four European countries (Austria, Bulgaria/Croatia, Denmark and the Netherlands) and covered topics on: selection criteria; information about the courses; description of trainers; methodology in trainings; evaluation of readiness of volunteers; support

provided by the organisation; sample materials for participants; evaluation of trainings; best practice and volunteer advice; and needs and suggestions.

Although there is a large variation in actual training practices among organisations (from almost no training of volunteers to extensive training), the focus group discussion results revealed the following challenges for trainers: 1) translating theoretical knowledge into practical, relevant and understandable elements; 2) providing training to a mixed group of trainees, with different professional backgrounds, and therefore also differences in basic psychosocial support knowledge and skills; and 3) developing and utilising a variety of didactic methods in training (roleplay, case examples, etc.). In general, trainers emphasised the importance of allowing practice and reflection during training, promoting self-awareness among trainees, and a focus on essential psychosocial support knowledge and skills. Although training content was tailored to each organisation's target group, nearly all trainers included the following main points:

- Information about the organisation
- Theoretical knowledge adapted to the target group
- Basic skills necessary for lay counsellors (counselling, active listening, etc.)

The results also show that many organisations emphasise the appropriate selection of lay counsellors as a first step, usually taking into account age and/or maturity, and using interviews to explore a candidate's motivation and experience. Organisations also emphasised the need to provide support and care for their lay counsellors, through various techniques such as supervision, intervision (case consultation and exchange

of learning among peers), peer support and ongoing training.

#### *Pilot testing*

Based on the literature review, draft training materials were developed for field testing. The pilot materials contained a trainer's handbook, *PowerPoint* slides and handouts for participants, and explored the relevance and utility of the core content, which consisted of:

- Role and boundaries of lay counsellors
- Organisation and target group
- Grief, nature and impact of critical events
- Skills in providing psychosocial support, active listening, decision making, and how and when to refer to mental health specialists
- Care for the lay counsellor, potential stressors, self care and organisational support

As the training materials will have to be adapted into existing training models of various organisations, working with very different target groups, the adaptability and flexibility of the materials are as important as their readability, scientific quality and practical relevance. In order to enhance ecological validity of the results (e.g. the adaptability and usability of the materials in practice) the materials were tested in four different formats and settings, listed below.

1. A Training of Trainers (ToT) with experienced trainers from several different organisations (UIBK)
2. A new training format with lay counsellors (IFRC Reference Centre, DRC)
3. An adapted version of an already existing training format (DCS)
4. An expert exchange between experienced trainers (WTF)

From a methodological point of view, the researchers combined a qualitative and a quantitative approach, using both questionnaires and interview formats.

#### *Results of pilot testing*

In total, 67 participants were asked about the training materials: 54 lay counsellors, 10 trainers and three experts. The 54 lay counsellors were trained in two groups (mean age group 1: 46 years, range: 23–69 years; mean age group 2: 27 years; range: 22–39 years). The first group (n = 42) participated in a workshop that integrated a two-day training into an already existing training. The second group (n = 12) participated in a three-day workshop, using the draft training materials only. In total, 10 trainers participated in the ToT workshop, from different organisations working with lay counsellors. Eight trainers had been working in their organisation for more than three years, with most of them trained psychologists. The ToT workshop consisted of a two-day training programme, in which the core curriculum was presented and the participants were actively involved in adapting it to the needs of the target group(s) of their organisation. During the workshop, case examples were collected, and essential missing content or content in need of editing were identified.

Finally, three experts with experience in both the psychosocial field and training experience were provided the core curriculum and a questionnaire for feedback. They also participated in a group discussion to provide recommendations on improving the core curriculum and training materials.

#### *Results from trainings for lay counsellors*

Most of the lay counsellors in the training already had experience in providing psychosocial support, medical support or

counselling, but had not (yet) received any specific training for psychosocial support. After training, they reported feeling better prepared for upcoming tasks as lay counsellors.

The results of the qualitative part of the questionnaire indicated a general satisfaction with the training. However, there were also some suggestions for changes from the participants. Participants recommended more variety in didactic methods (roleplay, practical cases, etc.) and less repetition in the training content. They also requested additional theoretical knowledge about reactions to critical events. Participants suggested shortening the training time. There were no differences in outcome, with respect to knowledge/skills or satisfaction, in the two types of trainings.

#### *Results from the TOT*

Trainers were highly satisfied with the ToT, and felt better prepared to train their own lay counsellors afterwards. They suggested providing the materials in a modular form in order to enable using the training more flexibly (e.g. to be able to remove some content less relevant to the organisation or target group, to supplement already existing training, or to use specific modules for advanced training). The training content and adaptability for the different organisations were perceived as useful aspects of the draft training materials. The trainers emphasised the importance of adapting case examples and developing unique case examples for the context and target groups served by the organisation, before conducting training.

#### *Expert exchange*

Recommendations from the experts included improving the structure and transparency of the training materials in order to make



the intended audience clearer, and to provide a better differentiation between information intended for trainers and information intended for participants. One key recommendation was to unify core terminology about stress and its impacts as a way of harmonising the concepts and terminology developed by the different organisations comprising the author group. The experts further suggested developing visuals to represent conceptual frameworks, and deepening content related to critical events and resilience, in order to strengthen the theoretical underpinning of the guide.

### **The final materials**

Overall, as with the other pilot test groups, the findings suggest that the training materials need to be highly flexible and adaptable to the various needs of varying organisations.

The results also showed that materials should contain a variety of didactic methods, have a clear aim and modular structure. The final materials were revised according to the pilot results, and now consists of modules (including a suggested daily agenda and minimum time requirements for each module (breaks and wrap-ups not included) outlined below.

#### *Day one*

Module 1: Welcome, programme introduction, and ground rules (60 minutes)

*In the first module, the participants get to know each other by using activities that help them to talk about themselves and their expectations, and then talk about the ground rules that are important throughout the training.*

Module 2: Our organisation and its target groups (45 minutes)

*In the second module, the participants get to know the organisation's aims, role of staff and volunteers, as*

*well as the target groups served by the organisation. This is done using case examples that highlight the helpseeker's specific needs, and form the basis for a discussion about how lay counselling may help the target group.*

Module 3: The role of lay counsellors (70 minutes)

*Module three starts by defining psychosocial support as a way to help people recover after a crisis, and helps the lay counsellor to reflect on their own role: listening without judgment, providing comfort, and supporting and empowering helpseekers. Activities focus on the lay counsellors' personal experiences, filters through which they view others, and personal boundaries, as well as how these things may affect the way they provide support. Confidentiality is also discussed here.*

Module 4: Referrals and reporting (25 minutes)

*In this module, the referral and reporting procedures of the organisation are discussed, and a short activity is conducted to help them practise making referrals in an appropriate way.*

Module 5: Communication: basic skills (60 minutes)

*This module is aimed at understanding the key attitudes in lay counselling, such as empathy, respect and genuineness, and practices basic skills (i.e., active listening and helping people make informed decisions) through roleplay activities.*

Module 6: Structuring a counselling conversation (45 minutes)

*This module focuses on the process of counselling as a whole, and how it is structured in the given organisational frame (i.e., one time telephone contact, up to and including long term counselling). Specific techniques of opening a counselling session, reflecting and asking questions, and closing a session are covered and practised through roleplay.*

*Day two*

Module 7: Life events and coping (105 minutes)

*In this module, significant life events, traumatic events and their effects are discussed. Within activities (such as collecting significant life events of the target group, case examples, etc.) participants get to know the life events their target groups are facing in order to understand their stress reactions and needs, as well as healthy and maladaptive of coping. The concept of resilience is explained, and examples of resilient people from the target group are discussed in order to sensitise participants to resilience among helpseekers. Grief and suicidal thoughts/tendencies are also covered, including roleplay to support grieving people and how to speak with someone who has suicidal thoughts.*

Module 8: Psychological first aid (60 minutes)

*In this module, a step-by-step guide to Psychological First Aid is presented, and roleplay are practised, highlighting the basic elements of how to give emotional and practical assistance to people in acute crisis situations.*

Module 9: Self care (60 minutes)

*This module aims to emphasise to participants the importance of self and team care, recognising and utilising their own resources, as well as being aware of potential stressors in to lay counsellors.*

Module 10: Evaluation and close

*In the evaluation and closing, group discussion is used to discuss participants' experiences and feelings about the training, such as whether or not the goals of the workshop were reached and if participants feel better prepared for their task.*

The trainers' handbook contains additional information providing an introduction to the aim, audience and structure of the manual, and on the following:

- Being the trainer (walking the talk, providing an opportunity to learn, recruiting with care)
- Lay counsellors: their role and place in the support system
- Organising the training (planning the programme, and organising practicalities, such as set-up for the training, preparing the room, recruiting and selecting participants, etc.

The modules contain a variety of activities, exercises, roleplay and PowerPoint slides, with additional resource material available separately for trainers and participants. The final materials are now available in English, Danish, German and French, and can be downloaded from the website of the IFRC Reference Centre for psychosocial support (<http://psp.drk.dk>).

### **Concluding remarks**

As authors, we represent organisations working with lay counsellors within diverse contexts. This proved to be an asset in developing a training guide that could be both useful and adaptable to a wide variety of humanitarian organisations using lay counsellors. It also produced a rich process of dialogue around conceptual terms in the field of psychosocial support, and a sharing of resources and experiences in training, that was beneficial to all.

In the process of developing the guide, our first challenge, as a diverse group, was to find a common language on psychosocial issues across different cultural and language backgrounds. The next challenge was to come to an agreement on the contents of the training, in terms of sufficient quantity of information, and the depth of scientific and theoretical information of relevance to training lay counsellors. A third challenge was to collectively determine how to approach

knowledge transfer didactically. The fourth, and biggest challenge of all, was to give the final materials a consistent flow directed towards a common aim; namely, to provide materials that enable trainers and participants to acquire the skills to support people in a way that empowers and strengthens them, and enables them to make use of their own resources in order to positively cope with life challenges.

Ultimately, the authors feel that we achieved our aim to provide materials that are resilience building and resilience oriented. The materials can be used in a variety of settings, ranging from volunteers assisting people with terminal illness to those helping people cope with the consequences of mass disasters and armed conflict. In the end, we feel that the consensus achieved on core concepts and approaches makes the training materials useful for both highly resourced settings, such as Europe, as well as low resource settings.

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