

# Psycho-education and psychosocial support in the Netherlands; a program by and for refugees

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*This article is about a community based intervention program in the Netherlands. In this program, asylum seekers and refugees are trained to provide psycho-education and psychosocial support to fellow groups of refugees and asylum seekers. These trained refugees work in their own language and culture, with a professional coach from a local mental health institute. The group courses consist of psycho-education, psychosocial support and empowerment. On the one hand, they raise awareness of problems like trauma, mourning, stress, feelings of guilt, acculturation, alcohol and drug abuse. On the other hand they teach participants to cope with these problems, rediscover their strength and have confidence in their ability to move forward. Referral takes place when the need for further professional help (e.g. therapy) is identified. In this paper, emphasis is put on the training of trainers.*

**Keywords:** psycho-education, psychosocial support, empowerment, training of trainers, refugees, asylum seekers, community-based intervention programs

In most European countries asylum-seeking refugees have to wait a long time, often years, before a decision is made on their asylum application. While waiting, they frequently live in asylum seekers centres. During this period, they can be very vulnerable to psychological problems, due to:

(1) the difficulties they experienced in their home country which caused them to flee, or occurred during their journey, (2) the lack of a supportive family or social structure in the new host country, (3) the uncertainty of their future in the country of exile, (4) the constrained living conditions of a refugee, and 5) the loss of positive social identity.

Once asylum seekers have been granted a residence permit, other problems may become apparent. Building a new life in a new country can be very difficult and stressful.

Refugees may require help with any, or all, of these problems. But, professional help can be very difficult to find. If refugees do find the help they need, it is most often offered by Dutch aid workers who do not speak the refugees' own language, or know their culture, or situation. Therefore, refugees often experience a large cultural gap between their personal needs and the type of assistance they are offered.

For this reason, a program was developed in which specially trained refugees and asylum seekers offer psycho-education and psychosocial support to other refugees and asylum seekers.

The initiative to establish community based psycho-education and psychosocial support groups, known as Mind-Spring, evolved at

an asylum seekers centre in the Netherlands in 2002. A group of asylum seekers active in the centre expressed the need to offer help to their compatriots. A pilot group was started with the cooperation and support of the medical service and the local mental health institute. The group of asylum seekers was trained in offering psycho-education. Both this training, and the psycho-education groups that were subsequently implemented by the trained asylum seekers, were evaluated positively. Asylum seekers are often eager to learn new coping strategies in order to gain more control of their lives. This kind of aid seemed to fill an existing gap between the standard health services and the specific needs of asylum seekers. A Dutch health insurance company rated the program as innovative, and provided a one-year fund to develop and implement the program at other centres. It became clear very shortly after its inception in 2003 that not only asylum seekers, but also residents in the Netherlands with a refugee background, could benefit from this program. To adapt the program to the needs of resident refugees a second fund (European Refugee Fund) was obtained in 2004. Since that time, resident refugees have been trained to provide psycho-education to other resident refugees as well. The psycho-education groups take place at centres where asylum seekers live, and outside these centres at locations where resident refugees who have been granted asylum meet.

### **Psycho-education groups**

The ongoing goal of the psycho-education groups is to increase awareness of psychosocial problems that might impact refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, they increase awareness of self-help strategies, or in other words: what people can do

for themselves to solve these problems. New skills are taught: how to prevent a worsening of problems, recognising when professional help is needed, regaining emotional control, and becoming more realistic in setting new goals for life. The psycho-education course is based on a cognitive framework combined with social support and physical relaxation exercises.

Many refugees have negative attitudes, or feelings of mistrust, towards government institutions offering help. They are often afraid information gathered will be used against them, or feel ashamed that people might find out that they have mental, or coping, problems. Also, some people indicated they are not used to talking about their problems within group situations. The Mind-Spring trainers, refugees themselves, are able to lower the threshold and breakthrough some of this mistrust. For this reason, the trainers play an important role in reaching out to the beneficiaries. This outreach is done by contacting local medical services, local migrant and refugee organizations, and through their own networks.

Evaluations with beneficiaries showed clearly that once they joined the psycho-education course, they became enthusiastic and stimulated others to join as well. Asylum seekers, who are in the long process of waiting at centres, are often very pessimistic about their future and possible future opportunities in their lives. A lot of effort is required to convince them that participating in a group can make a real difference. However, asylum seekers are easier to contact because they live in a concentrated setting, i.e., the asylum seekers centre. Refugees who have already been granted asylum are more difficult to establish contact with because they live throughout the country. Therefore, cooperation with local migrant communities, or NGO's, and the

trainer's own personal network is essential. The psycho-education courses are carried out in a culturally-sensitive way. The trainer chooses subjects, theory and exercises from the Mind-Spring manual that is related to the perceived needs of the group. He/she translates and adapts these topics to the culture, language and living situation of the group. In this way, the refugee background of the Mind-Spring trainer brings an added value to the psycho-education sessions. The trainer also serves as an example, and is able to discuss the importance of joining the course. He/she is also frequently able to overcome the initial hesitancy to trust mental health institutions found among many refugees and asylum seekers. The trainer conducts the training together with a Dutch coach from a mental health institute (e.g., GGZ, Geestelijke gezondheidszorg – the Dutch mental health care system). In this way the culturally specific knowledge and experience of the trainer is combined with Dutch mental health professionalism. As trainers become more experienced, they develop new material and exercises in their own language that is culturally specific. This material is made available for other trainers and coaches on the Mind-Spring website ([www.mind-spring.org](http://www.mind-spring.org)).

### Tasks of the trainer

*Starting up.* In order to begin, the trainer must first contact individuals in need. He/she then organizes a meeting for asylum seekers or refugees in order to provide basic information. Refugees, and in particular asylum seekers unused to therapy, are not initially convinced that talking can solve their problems. They are also reluctant, and have some mistrust, towards help offered by Dutch organizations and authorities. It is therefore essential that the introductory meeting clearly state the aims of the psycho-

education course. At this meeting the trainer stresses that the program is operated for, and conducted by, refugees. He or she has to convince the beneficiaries that they can benefit from the course. This invariably leads to a dynamic discussion on the relevance of such a course. The trainer must also make clear that even though some problems and stress cannot be completely eradicated, courses enable participants to gain control over the negative effects that can result from them. He/she must also make it clear that it is a training course and not a therapy group.

In the Netherlands, asylum seekers can be waiting for a decision on their asylum application for many years. During this period, their living conditions are highly constrained and often outside their direct control. This situation naturally creates a lot of stress, frustration, anger, depression, and other mental and physical consequences. When a Mind-Spring information meeting is organised and the trainer talks about the life of a refugee in the Netherlands, he or she directly addresses a very stressful and frustrating topic. For the asylum seekers, this is an opportunity to express their own anger and frustrations. As a result, lively discussions can ensue with participants able to vent their feelings about the Dutch system and its perceived failures in terms of refugees and asylum seekers. At this point, the trainer has the difficult task of convincing participants that they can still have control in their lives. At the same time, trainers also need to be acknowledge the feelings of anger, frustration, grief and injustice encountered. As stated by a trainer: *Complaint alone will not bring you any further. To put it more extremely, nobody will come and help you out here, so what are you going to do? Just wait and let them [e.g., the system, the immigration officials, the employees at the centre] keep you down?*

*During the course.* The Mind-Spring trainer combines several roles within the psycho-education sessions. He/she must be a mental-health educator who can provide information on relevant topics. He/she is also a counsellor; participants can talk to him or her on an individual level. He/she must also be a psychosocial group supporter, creating the proper ambiance that allows participants to feel safe and comfortable in order to share grief, joy and personal experiences within a group situation. He/she must be a listener, as well as a discussion leader who has an awareness of group dynamics. But most of all, he/she must embody the skills of a trainer who can make use of interactive training techniques to: raise awareness, empower people, and teach them new coping skills in dealing with mental, emotional and social problems.

In the psycho-education course the participants might be confronted with their own ineffective coping skills and asked to question whether they have adopted the victim role for too long. They are also provoked and challenged to view their present situation within a different perspective and to try new coping strategies. When combined with acknowledgement of their problems and emotions, the participants feel respected, taken seriously, and challenged. Some have indicated that they felt like a human being again for the first time since leaving their home country. Others said that they were tired of feeling like a 'football' or victim. They were able to view the imposed constraints in their life as something they can influence. Raising self-esteem plays an important role in the change from *victim of circumstances to someone who takes control of life and makes it count again*. During the course, a lot of emphasis is put on the topic of 'identity' and it's role in re-establishing self-esteem.

## **Recruitment of trainers**

Candidates for the training of trainers are recruited through advertisements in magazines, the Mind-Spring website, websites of other organizations working with refugees and migrants, and through the organizations that work closely together with the Mind-Spring project. Many refugees are highly educated, but still encounter difficulties in finding a job in their own profession. Through Mind-Spring they can improve their chances of finding suitable work.

The candidates must be able to meet the following minimum criteria: have a background as a refugee or asylum seeker, be able to speak at least Dutch and/or English, and have an educational and/or working history in one of the following fields: (para)medics, psychology, social work, teaching or education. The candidates also need to be prepared to work on a voluntary basis. The training of trainers is offered free of charge and all costs of the Mind-Spring trainer are covered.

The training group consists of a minimum 12 trainees. They come from different countries, have different educational, professional, religious backgrounds and include both sexes. This multicultural setting adds an extra dimension to the training situation.

## **Training of trainers**

The training of trainers consists of two parts. The first part includes theory and exercise. The second part is a short internship at a local mental health institute in the Netherlands.

*The first part:* Theory and exercise, takes place in ten training sessions of four hours each, scheduled once or twice a week. The theoretical part of the training is focused on mental health issues specific to refugees and asylum seekers, such as; trauma, stress,

mourning, feelings of guilt, depression, somatic complaints, identity, and acculturation. They learn and practice how to educate fellow refugees and asylum seekers on these subjects. During the training, the trainees are shown exercises to make people more aware of their problems and their own ability to do something about it. They learn about coping strategies (cognitive approach), relaxation exercises, how to empower people, developing a helping attitude, how to stay healthy themselves and most the skills and tools of a good trainer. These subjects and exercises are learnt and described in the Mind-Spring manual for trainers. Throughout the program role playing and exercise occurs regularly.

After the training of trainers, a personal evaluation is completed with each candidate. When a candidate is successful, a local mental health institute is contacted.

*The second part:* The internship, requires completing one psycho-education course for asylum seekers or refugees. One course consists of eight sessions of two hours each. The trainee works with a mental health professional. This professional is also trained in working according to the Mind-Spring methodology. Together with a nurse from the municipal medical service or contacts from other organisations, they form a team that will approach asylum seekers or refugees who are in need of psycho-education groups.

Some trainees appear not develop the skills required to work within groups. Other working situations, in which they still can use the acquired skills, can be sought for them. One possibility is to offer help on an individual level. This individual social support especially suits the needs of more isolated and depressed beneficiaries. In the near future the Mind-Spring project will develop this

individual social support on a broader level.

### **The mental health coach**

The training manual consists of theory and exercises. Each chapter addresses a topic that can be used for a session in the psycho-education course. The trainer, along with the mental health coach and the beneficiaries, choose topics that suit the needs of the entire group.

The mental health professional is trained in coaching and working with the trainer. Together they prepare the contents of the psycho-education course. The coach ensures the trainer works according to the manual and methodology. The coach also supervises the Mind-Spring trainer and sets boundaries so that the trainer doesn't get too personally involved with the beneficiaries. Since the Mind-Spring trainer still is (or has been) an asylum seeker or refugee, and usually from the same cultural group, he or she must be particularly aware not to identify too closely with the beneficiaries. If necessary, the mental health professional can provide further information during the training sessions, or can take further action such as referrals for more professional help as required (e.g., therapy).

### **Field results so far**

In the period from October 2002 to April 2005, 210 asylum seekers and refugees received psycho-education in 27 different groups; 45 were trained to become Mind-Spring trainers. Twenty-three trainers proved able to conduct psycho-education courses for groups. The other 22 trainees consisted mostly of asylum seekers who were relocated to remote centres at the time they were able to start working. Others were not granted asylum and had to leave the country. In 2003 this major dropout

was one of the reasons to shift the focus to training refugees who were granted asylum. Fifteen more trainers, most of whom are refugees granted asylum, were being trained in April 2005.

In evaluations, the participants indicated that they very much appreciated that their present living situation and problems were taken seriously. They pointed out that the problems addressed in the groups were their personal problems. As a result, the participants received acknowledgement for the situation they were living in, and recognized that other group members experienced similar problems. This was felt as a relief. A provocative approach appeared to motivate and stimulate them to join, learn and complete the course of eight sessions. In other evaluations, participants wrote down that they felt 'lighter' afterwards. They said that they gained more knowledge of psychological problems, and what they can do about it. Also, some prejudices about mental illnesses and the Dutch health care system were alleviated. For other participants the main value of the course consisted of having a better night sleep or becoming less agitated, or aggressive, in stressful situations. Some participants also indicated that they were able to regain trust in people. The trainer, the coach and the other group members were a positive social experience for them. Being a member of the 'Mind-Spring community' as some called it, gave a sense of support. Many found out that simply talking about problems with fellow refugees relieved some of their stress. The topic of 'identity' is also very popular among participants. When beneficiaries develop a more positive self-esteem they become more active and vice versa. As one beneficiary pointed out: *I have a life, and I am going to make it count!* This is exactly what Mind-Spring is about: changing the role

from passive victim to active agent.

The Mind-Spring psycho-education groups have a cognitive and sometimes confronting approach. This seems to be one of the reasons why participants say they feel taken seriously, respected, and challenged to learn.

The refugees and asylum seekers, who want to become a trainer, join the training of trainers program for different reasons. Asylum seekers want to do something useful while waiting at the centre. Mind-Spring enables them to learn and to play an important role within a larger community again. Their professional background as a doctor or teacher can be put to use.

For refugees, finding a job is very important, but for many of them it is very difficult to find a job in their own profession. A lot of refugees are in the process of learning the language, getting the right diplomas and acculturating to the Dutch system. Mind-Spring enables them to learn more about the Dutch health care system, get relevant work experience, and build up a relevant network of contacts from which they may later benefit. Since trainers work in their own language they can start right away, without the necessity of speaking the Dutch language fluently.

Many trainers told us that they wished that they had received a similar method of support when they initially entered the Netherlands as a refugee. From their own personal experience they know what is important for refugees and asylum seekers. The trainers also indicated that they benefited from the training of trainers program on a personal level as well. Becoming a trainer had a positive effect on their self-image. They felt useful again and regained self-esteem. *To be able to help other people one has to be able to help yourself first*, a trainer stated. So far the trainers have proved to be able to

work with other troubled refugees and asylum seekers, without becoming overburdened themselves. The trainers are selected and trained in keeping a healthy balance. Furthermore, they carry out only one or two psycho-education sessions of two hours each a week. Moreover, they carry out the sessions with a personal mental health coach. Each training of trainers program consists of candidates that represent the nationalities of asylum seekers and refugees living in the Netherlands. They consist of people from different countries, cultures, religions and gender. So far, each training program has taken place in an enthusiastic and inspiring atmosphere in which both the trainers and the trainees have been able to learn from each other.

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