

Letter to the editor

A request to support the mental health needs of Syrian refugees

This letter has been written by two mental health professionals who are refugees from Syria, currently living in Jordan. For reasons of safety, and to avoid any retribution to our families, the editors have requested that we are known only through our professional titles; a psychologist and a psychiatrist.

Dear Sir,

As your readers are no doubt aware, the recent violent crisis in Syria has deeply affected the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of all Syrians, with much suffering. Therefore, we request professional support, from the readers of *Intervention*, for any efforts to address the mental health needs of Syrians, both in and outside the country. We have written this letter in order to inform, and to share the events that have led us to this place.

In Syria, mental health care is neglected to the extreme, even in comparison to neighbouring countries, such as Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The limited mental health care system that does exist is very much focused on *medical* treatment, with psychopharmaceuticals. There is little opportunity to train as clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers, or psychiatric nurses. Psychology in Syria is a part of the Faculty of Education and the graduates in clinical psychology have very limited experience working with actual patients. However, one of the authors, the psychiatrist, had several

years of training in mental health outside of Syria (in the United States and Saudi Arabia). As a result, he realised the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to mental disorders and co-founded the association Syrian Psychology, in order to foster collaboration between psychiatry, psychology and social work in Syria. This was not a formally registered organisation, because in the oppressive political climate in Syria the establishment of nongovernmental organisations was strongly discouraged. The association was, in fact, an informal network of around 30 people, most of them graduates in psychology, as well as other university students interested in the field. The authors organised awareness raising activities, such as lectures, around mental health related themes. We also had an informal system for psychological treatment; using the psychiatric clinic, the psychiatrist referred patients to the psychologists for counselling, and offered clinical supervision and case discussions.

After the successful revolutions in North Africa, the Syrian people started to speak out and we became involved in the opposition movement. We participated in organising revolutionary activities, and supported the underground, secret hospitals that were established to treat wounded demonstrators. These hospitals were essential, as many people who were wounded in the demonstrations were afraid to go to government run hospitals due to of fear of arrest.

Over the past few years, the violent repression in our country has directly affected both our professional and personal lives. One of

the authors, the psychologist, was detained at the end of the rule of President Hafez al-Assad, just before his son Bashar succeeded him. He had done nothing more than speak out for freedom and democracy. He was tortured, and sentenced by an *exceptional court*. During the course of a one-year detention, he realised the importance of social action. After his release, in the early days of the rule of Bashar al-Assad, he wished to pursue his education. However, this was difficult as access to higher education was generally not allowed to those who had been detained. A few years ago, he was finally accepted into the Faculty of Pedagogy, and specialised in counselling psychology. However, his freedom of movement remained restricted due to the regular *'checks'* by the secret service (intelligence apparatus).

The other author, a psychiatrist, was arrested while working in his clinic. An unknown man had asked for a consultation. Unbeknownst to the psychiatrist, he was from the secret police. During the consultation, he asked suddenly if he might make a call and he called someone asking them to *"be here in thirty minutes"*. Within a few moments, armed men in plain clothes arrived and took the psychiatrist to a detention centre. He was never formally charged, nor brought to court. During detention, he was also tortured in the cruellest of ways. After his release at the end of 2011, he fled to Jordan, followed a few weeks later by the psychologist.

After fleeing to Jordan, both of us experienced the distress that comes with forced migration; the worry about those who are left behind, the problems establishing a livelihood, having to deal with daily hassles. Additionally, there were the memories of what we had seen and experienced, the guilt feelings, the anger, and the sadness about everything we had lost.

Gradually, more and more mental health professionals have left Syria. As a result, we have started a new association, Syria Bright Future, that unites mental health professionals in exile. Its aims are to improve the mental and social health of the Syrian people, and to contribute to the redevelopment of Syria. At the moment, our group consists of five psychologists, one psychiatrist, about 10 social workers and many volunteers. With support from the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), we have been able to set up a mental health clinic for Syrian refugees in Jordan. We provide free consultations, free medication and travel reimbursement for the patients. We also have organised trainings in Psychological First Aid for volunteers and medical staff. While we are still in the initial stages of organisational development, support comes from several corners. A Syrian psychiatrist, living in the United Kingdom, came to us and trained our staff in principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and a Syrian psychologist from the USA trained our staff in trauma focused interventions. Recently, the international nongovernmental organisation Médecins du Monde (MDM), who were already active in Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory, has partnered with us, and offer training, technical support and financial assistance.

Yet, there is so much more that needs to be done. The Syrians in Jordan, and those inside Syria, are in extreme distress. In a small assessment among 100 randomly selected Syrian refugee families, six out of 10 people had directly experienced traumatic events. Therefore, we ask the international community of mental health and psychosocial support professionals to assist the Syrian mental health professionals to address these multiple needs.

One of the authors is a psychiatrist from Syria who had his own private practice there until the end of 2011. He is now a refugee in Amman, Jordan, where he founded 'Syria Bright Future', a nongovernmental organisation.

The second author is a psychologist who is now also a refugee in Jordan. He is the co-founder of 'Syria Bright Future'.

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