Debriefing after traumatic situations - using narrative ideas in the Gaza Strip

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This paper describes the use of narrative ideas in debriefing Palestinian adults and children in the Gaza strip after traumatic experiences. The author was working as a volunteer psychologist for Medecins Sans Frontieres in Gaza.

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A great part of my work as a psychologist for Medecins Sans Frontieres in the Gaza strip (mid 2004 - early 2005) involved responding to requests for therapy by Palestinian adults and children suffering the effects of ongoing violence, fear and sadness. There were occasions, however, when I was requested to debrief people directly after a particular traumatic experience. The practice of psychological debriefing is one that has become popular among relief agencies working within disaster settings and was considered a standard part of our work. And yet, the concept of debriefing was one that I had questions about. Long ago I had been exposed to the idea that debriefing meant providing an opportunity for people to retell the story of an horrific event and to re-engage with and express feelings associated with the event. In this single session, people were supposed to 'feel what they needed to feel' in a safe context, 'process their emotions' and be protected from later developing 'psychopathology' such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The debriefer could also 'normalise' the person's distress responses and provide techniques to manage these reactions. It is often advocated that this process be conducted in groups made up of people who have experienced the same traumatic experience (Mitchell 1983).

While I could see benefit in the idea of giving people the opportunity of having their story heard, their experience validated, I wondered about the potential for this debriefing to inadvertently re-traumatise a person. And, in the case of group debriefing, I wondered about the effects of exposure to other people's terrifying stories or experiences. Further, I considered that providing only one session without follow-up may leave people highly vulnerable. Indeed, many years ago working for an agency in Australia with people who had experienced torture, I regularly participated in worker group debriefing. In a wonderful attempt by the agency to take care of its workers, the most distressing and recurring memory of all that I heard while working there is that of a story told by one of my co-workers during a debriefing session.

Indeed, these same questions have been raised by many researchers and practitioners in recent years. The claim that single session debriefing can prevent later problems such as PTSD has been convincingly refuted and some argue that it can in fact impede natural recovery or make things worse (Rose et. al. 2002, Van Emmerik et. al. 2002). Problems considered by these researchers include the forced revisiting of the trauma, exposure to other's experiences and the insufficiency of a single session. The debate has been persuasive enough for the World Health Organisation to recommend against the dominant model of single session debriefing after disaster or emergency situations (WHO 2003).

It is argued however that some form of intervention is appropriate to relieve suffering and to attempt to prevent the development of psychological problems after experiences of trauma. WHO (2003) propose psychological 'first aid' within the context of a broader two-phase model focusing on social and practical assistance. The psychological first aid involves listening, conveying compassion, assessing needs, ensuring basic physical needs are met, not forcing talking, mobilising company and protecting from further harm. McFarlane (2003) however, argues that care and sympathy, although needed, are not enough and advocates that further interventions effective in preventing post-traumatic psychiatric problems are needed.

Consequently I was interested in alternatives to the dominant model of debriefing. It was my experience that people often wanted to talk about what had happened to them following a terrifying incident and did invite an audience to their experience. In meeting with people, my primary concern was to avoid retraumatisation. I became interested in how the person who had experienced trauma could be invited to re-tell their story from the perspective of a safer ground, a different territory of identity than that evoked by the traumatic experience.

I was interested in two lines of enquiry, both informed by narrative therapy ideas. The first involved questioning what any expression of distress signalled about what had been violated or devalued for the person. I became interested in exploring the values, beliefs, ideas, hopes or dreams that had been potentially dislodged by the traumatic experience. In this way I wanted to uncover what was 'absent but implicit' in the expressions of trauma (see White 2000) and to engage in conversations that made these values, beliefs, hopes or dreams available to the person again.

A second line of enquiry involved examining how the person survived the traumatic experience. I was interested in asking questions about the thoughts or actions that served to sustain him or her throughout the ordeal. I did not hold the hope that the value of the work lay in preventing the onset of PTSD or other 'pathology', but rather aimed to facilitate access to, and articulation of, skills and knowledges the person used to survive.

When offering debriefings for people in Gaza I didn't always manage to explore both of these enquiries fully, but they informed my thinking and led to some significant

conversations. I will share here two stories of debriefings. The first occurred with a group of children and focused on the skills and knowledges they had developed in supporting each other during a major military attack. The second debriefing took place with an adult whose colleagues had been kidnapped. Our conversations explored some of the values that had been so powerfully violated during this kidnapping and the events that led up to it.

FINDING WAYS TO BREATHE - THE CHILDREN OF THE AIDINI FAMILY

About ten children of the Aidini family and I were drawing faces in the sand of one of their uncle's backyards in the north of the Gaza Strip. The faces showed large inverted semi-circles for mouths and tears coming from their eyes. The children had fled from their neighbourhood a few days earlier during a heavy extended military operation where their homes had been surrounded by tanks, under fire, occupied or demolished by the Israeli Army. Managing to escape after twelve days, they were now staying with relatives in what they thought would be a safer place. However, the previous day and night had brought a new incursion, and again the children were subjected to tanks, helicopters, missiles and gun fire. The Israeli Army had now pulled out and I had been invited to 'debrief' the children who were keen to speak to me of their ordeal. Ayman, who is eight years old, told me 'I was feeling my heart small and I was unable to talk. I thought I was going to die'. As Ayman spoke, tears ran down his cheeks.

I asked Ayman about his tears and what they were an expression of. He said: 'When the people are dying, when houses are being destroyed, my tears are an alert'. I noted Ayman's words and then Aiya, a girl of ten, told me: 'I feel I am going to be killed here. I'm not able to breathe well'. I asked if anyone else was having difficulty breathing. The children were unanimous in their proclamation: 'Yes! All of us'. I asked the group what they thought was affecting their breathing. Answers included: 'When someone is killed', 'When the helicopters are there', 'When mines are planted', 'When our house is destroyed', 'When fields are razed'. I asked if these things had effects in addition to making it hard to breathe. The children told me that it was hard for them to eat or drink, that they often shake without control, that they cry a lot and can't sleep. They said they were too scared to go to school. The children agreed that there was a strong presence of fear and of sadness in their lives.

I asked the children about how they coped during the operation and how they coped when the tanks had left but sadness and fear were still present. One child said: 'We catch each other, we support each other'. I asked how they did this. Mohamed, eleven years old, told me the story of when a shell was launched and he saw his sister's face turn red and then she began to cry. He said: 'I talked to her'. Another tip was that it was important to 'keep our minds on the future, the day when we will be safe again'. Now that the operation was over the children told me that it was important to 'be together and to laugh', and to 'talk together'. They said one thing that helps is to think of games to play, like the one they offered to show me. The game involved breaking into two teams, lots of running around and rolling in the sandy ground. At the end of the game the children were panting and laughing. I asked the children if the game helps them breathe and they said it did.

I returned to the children about a week later. Ramadan had begun and people were generally attempting to honour the usual festive atmosphere that this brings. The children said that breathing had become easier since we last met. They named the kind of breath we were talking about, the Relief Breath. They told me about the times the Relief Breath was large - the first day of Ramadan and the day they felt safe enough to return to school. We explored the special powers of the Relief Breath and discovered that it helps the children to feel active, to play, to study and to eat. I asked the children to draw the Relief Breath in the sand and most of them drew big smiling faces. One boy, Mohamed, who was staying in a house a couple of blocks from the other children, told us that he continues to feel suffocated and unable to breathe. I asked others who were more in touch with the Relief Breath if they had any ideas for Mohamed. Hiba suggested: 'Come and play with us more, we don't see you much, it would be nice if you would come and play with us'. She also suggested that it would be better if he didn't visit the site of his demolished home, as he had been doing with his parents from time to time. I asked Mohamed what he thought about this idea and he said that it was much harder for him to breathe when he went there and that he did feel some relief when he didn't go. Hiba slapped me on the leg and smiled broadly; her theory was right! This led nicely to the proposition that we document the skills and knowledges of this group of people - to use for themselves should there be another attack, and also to pass on to other people in terrifying situations. The children thought this was a great idea.

I had begun to draft a document from my notes of our last conversation and shared what I had recorded so far. The children approved what I had written and added some further ideas. Hiba said that she felt she would be able to manage an attack if it happened again, especially the not eating part, because Ramadan had trained her to be able to fast. A younger girl, Samah, said: 'Oh, I have another point to add. It's important to eat olives'. I asked her why. She said she wasn't sure and the group conversation continued. About ten minutes later, Samah said: 'Oh, I know why it's important to eat olives. It's because olive trees are the tree of peace'. The children pointed out, however, that their skills and knowledges in surviving a military attack were not so extraordinary: 'All Palestinian children know how to do these things'.

HOW TO MANAGE THE EFFECTS OF A MILITARY ATTACK: TIPS FOR CHILDREN FROM THE CHILDREN OF THE AIDINI FAMILY

During the Attack

- It's important to support each other, to catch each other. Look at each other's faces, if you see that someone is distressed talk to him or her.
- Keep your mind on the future, imagine the day when you'll be safe again.
- If you have no food, remember Ramadan. It is possible to go for long periods without any food or drink.
- Practise patience.

After the Attack

- Make sure you have times to be together and laugh.
- Talk together.
- Invent games that make you laugh and help you breathe.
- Keep studying - this is a good way to fight.
- Practise patience - patience is the key to wellbeing.
- Care for each other. Invite kids who are suffering to play with you.
- Eat olives - the olive tree is the tree of peace.

DEBRIEFING AFTER A KIDNAPPING - AHMED'S COMMITMENT TO RESPECT

I met Ahmed in the manicured gardens of the French Cultural Centre in Gaza city. The day before, four French associates of his had been kidnapped by members of an armed Palestinian resistance group and then released during the night. The French people were in Gaza as part of a sister city project with the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis. Ahmed was a primary member of the hosting group. The kidnappers had not taken Ahmed with the French people but he had remained outside the hotel in which they were held for the duration of the ordeal. Ahmed told me that it had been a terrifying afternoon and evening as the twenty or so armed and masked men controlled the situation, disallowing Ahmed access to his colleagues. When they were finally released, Ahmed followed his colleagues to the French Cultural Centre where they were now being cared for. My French speaking colleagues were debriefing the French people inside as I spoke outside with Ahmed. He told me that he was suffering deeply, that he felt responsible for what had happened. He hadn't been able to sleep or eat. Our conversation was interrupted by various media and administrative requests so I organised to meet Ahmed again some days later.

At our second meeting Ahmed told me that he couldn't believe that this had happened. He said he continued to suffer, had not been able to work and still had not been able to sleep or eat. He said that everything had 'stopped' for him. I didn't wish to have Ahmed recount the trauma of that night, his distress in relation to the event was obvious. Instead, I asked him what this suffering might say about what was important to him that has been denounced by the kidnapping. He said: 'For me, life is based on loving and respect for each other. Everyone has basic rights that are to be respected'. Ahmed wanted everyone to 'acknowledge and be committed to the notion of rights for all'. He said that the action of the kidnapping had failed to do this. It had violated the principles of respect for the rights of people that Ahmed treasured.

Ahmed expressed a second sadness. By now we were aware that the kidnapping had taken place in protest at the severe impoverishment faced by people living in the south of the Gaza where the kidnapping had taken place. This area is populated by refugee camps, sponsored by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), in which people have been living since 1948. The French people had been mistaken

for UNRWA diplomats and were kidnapped as an expression of outrage at the insufficient support of Palestinian refugees.

Ahmed told me that when basic rights are denied or are stolen from a person, 'for sure he will do his best to get them back. And this is what is going on in our life'. The kidnapping itself violated Ahmed's commitment to respecting everyone's rights. But he also saw that the actions of the kidnappers were an effect of the dishonouring of the rights of those in the refugee camps, and this too made him feel a great sadness.

I wanted to know more about Ahmed's values and how these had developed. By tracing the history of the values that had been violated by the traumatic experience, I hoped this would enable them to become more richly described. In turn, I hoped this would provide Ahmed an avenue to return to his original territory of identity. I hoped it would validate the significance of these values in his life.

Ahmed told me that the value of respect for everyone's rights had been with him a long time. He said it was taught to him as a child by his family and at school. He said the value is upheld in Islam. He gave me the example of the teaching of Islam to respect diversity of people and of religions - that this diversity is the intention of Allah: 'People here believe this, people there believe that, this is how it should be'. I reflected on the unequivocal respect I had been shown by Palestinian people during my time in Gaza, despite being non-Muslim and having different dress and behaviour practices.

He told me though that these values were further developed during his travels as a tertiary student. Ahmed had been able to travel outside Palestine, to other Arabic countries and to Spain. It was in these environments that he discovered a diversity of opinion and a delight in exchanging ideas with other people, to debate, and have different opinions respected. He was inspired by the diversity of ideas and how it was possible to be respectful of such diversity. Ahmed became more animated as he spoke of these student days, describing difference in landscapes, life styles, ideas, and the practice of debate.

Ahmed told me that he tries to 'distribute' these practices in his life in Gaza. I asked him more about this and he told me about different activities he was involved in. One activity he described was the sister city project - intended to promote exchange, respect and understanding between the people of the city of Khan Younis in the south of Gaza and the small French town from where the visitors had come. Despite the kidnapping, Ahmed was able to confirm that this long-standing project had managed to achieve its aim. There had been many delegations of people from the small French town come and stay in Palestinian homes. Some Palestinian children had also been able to visit France. And, he said, the project will continue.

He also told me about the Khan Younis Youth Activities Group on whose board Ahmed volunteers. The children who attend this group live in a very vulnerable area and have all had their homes demolished and at least one family member killed by the Israeli army. I heard how being connected to this group provides an opportunity for Ahmed to share his values and ideas with the children who attend and to promote the idea of respect despite such great hardship and loss (see page 28).

In talking about these activities, I noticed that Ahmed was reconnecting with some of the key intentions that he has for his life. He was also recognising the ways in which he was enacting these intentions and values, and how his commitments were having a significant impact and influence.

In our conversations together, we had identified how the kidnapping had violated certain values that Ahmed holds dear. We explored the history of these values and examined the ways in which he was continuing to put these values into practice and the real effects of this on his life and the lives of others.

Having done so, our conversation came to a close and Ahmed told me, with a seemingly re-found resolve, that 'Life has to go on'. A few days later I spoke briefly to Ahmed. He told me he was back at work, finding sleep, eating again and planning the next visit of his French colleagues.

CONCLUSION

In writing this piece I am hopeful that ideas around debriefing after trauma will be further explored. I think that as therapists we can be useful in offering support to people soon after a terrifying event by reinvigorating what it is a person holds dear or by making people's particular skills and knowledges accessible to them again. I would welcome conversations with others who have been working in similar situations. Finally, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity of engaging in rich and inspiring conversations with people in the Gaza Strip. In sharing these stories I hope that some of the inspiration I was afforded is also shared.

WORDS FROM KHAN YOUNIS YOUTH ACTIVITIES GROUP

Following our conversations, Ahmed invited me to meet with the children and teenagers of the Khan Younis Youth Activities Group. About twenty girls and boys were eager to speak with me of their experiences of violence and loss and engaged with me in mapping the effects of violence, fear and sadness on their lives. The focus of the conversation, however, soon turned to the presence of Hope and how the children managed to stay connected to Hope despite everything that had happened. Halfway through our conversation we were interrupted by loud gun fire from the Israeli Army watchtower nearby. Once the shooting stopped and we were able to speak again, one of the boys, now versed in my narrative style inquiry, asked me: 'So how does the gun fire affect you?' I laughed and then told him that during the shooting I felt Fear, but also Anger. I asked the children if Anger was also around for them. The boy laughed and said 'Oh, yes, we know Anger, but we don't hold on to Anger'. I asked about this and he told me: 'Well, if you go with Anger, you will only feel terrible. If you stay with Hope you can continue to study, to laugh, to live.'

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