

Psycho-social first aid

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Case

After a tough journey, Abdulwahid (17) has been living in a reception centre for the last few months. During his registration, he is upset. He's not sleeping, he's having nightmares. He's still scared of being raided by militia. He's very concerned about the family he left behind. Life in a reception centre is hard. He avoids contact with people from his own country, he can't trust them. His only friend's application was recently rejected, so he left and headed to Calais. Abdulwahid can't concentrate during his Dutch lessons. He thinks he's going crazy because he talks to himself. He asks for help.

General

Psycho-social first aid is a simple and safe initial refuge for anyone who has been affected by a shocking event. What should you do during a first contact meeting or intervention? The following five tips may come in handy for any support worker:

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust
2. Restore calm
3. Advise and refer
4. Create a sense of solidarity
5. Provide hope and future perspective

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust

Ensure basic safety (physical) and trust (psychological safety). How do you do that in concrete terms?

- Check the meeting room: is the space safe? Can anyone see in from the outside? Try not to allow the client to sit with their back to the door.
- Introduce yourself clearly and briefly. Explain your job and the restrictions surrounding it. Discuss what will happen with the information you write down.
- Identify factors which trigger worry or fear. For example: talking about the procedure, talking about the past,...
- Inquire about the home and living situation. Identify elements which may trigger a feeling of uncertainty.

2. Restore calm

People cannot think clearly if they feel uneasy. How can you restore calm? Start by keeping calm yourself. Take plenty of time. People become calm by talking about what has happened. You can also create a sense of calm by providing information.

- Be clear: explain how much time you have.
- Let the client talk without interrupting too much.
- Listen and take stock of the questions and possibilities.
- Explain how the body and mind react to a shocking event. What are the consequences?
- Check to see whether the client understands you.

3. Advise and refer

Consider exactly what has to be done. It's best to "park" the things which cannot be controlled, as well as factors which cannot be addressed for the time being. Inquire about what attempts people have already made and what the result of these attempts was.

- Formulate realistic and achievable steps.
- Consider possible barriers together.
- Whenever you give advice or make a referral: make it specific. If necessary, get in touch with an organisation you wish to refer a client to, so you are aware what the client can expect.
- The most important message is: there are ways and means to achieve something. This is more important than the question of whether the client actually takes the step.

4. Create a sense of solidarity

Refugees become isolated. People often neglect to disclose the full extent of their suffering: they don't want to be a burden. Sometimes people are ashamed because they are in a better situation than those who stayed behind, or because they have allegedly failed. However, the most underestimated emotions are the loss of family and loneliness.

- Encourage the client to seek contact with others.
- Let the client talk: who can he/she rely on at the moment? With whom does he/she feel calmer?
- Your engagement is also important in creating a sense of solidarity. Try to be open to the various people involved with the client: doctor, social assistant, teacher, ... Try to give the client the feeling that he/she is not alone.

5. Provide hope and future perspective

With every instance of contact, place the client's situation on a timeline. A classic example when working with refugees it to go back in time a few years:

- How was everything with you four years ago?
- How are you now?
- What does the future hold? Of course, people cannot know what the future holds but they can prepare themselves: learning an additional language, taking a course, volunteer work, ...
- Refer also to your next appointment, in a week, a month. This allows you to create a perspective of time.

Adapted to the case

The five elements listed above can be adapted in many situations. We will now apply them to the specific case.

1. Create a feeling of safety and trust

- We identify:
 - the fear of a raid from militia (i)
 - the fear of a negative decision/rejection (and mandatory return)(ii)

- Which is the most important? The fear of the militia is unwarranted: a reception centre is a safe place. For as long as the procedure is in process, Abdulwahid will not be sent back.
- Say that.

2. Restore calm

- We identify:
 - the unease in the centre (i)
 - the lack of sleep due to nightmares (ii)
 - anxiety about going crazy (iii)
 - anxiety about the asylum procedure (iv)
- Explain about the way people react to a shocking event. This helps Abdulwahid place the nightmares, the sensitivity regarding the noise in the centre and the talking to himself.
- This explanation should be given in a didactic and simple manner: "Your anxiety system has been disrupted, it's sensitive. You're startled more easily, you keep a close eye on your surroundings. These are normal reactions in the body to the abnormal event you experienced."
- Let Abdulwahid talk about life in the centre. Perhaps there are a few simple things which may make life more bearable.
- Let him talk about his family.
- Explain the asylum procedure: so long as he hasn't had an interview at the CGVS (Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons), there can be no negative decision.
- Do not discuss it in any more detail, acknowledge the possibility but limit further discussion.

3. Advise and refer

- If a client is calm enough, he/she can take some time to reflect.
- Which of the difficulties are the most significant? What should we do in order to make a change?
- Each of the problems listed above presents an opportunity to take action:
 - What has Abdulwahid already tried in order to sleep better?
 - On which nights did he sleep better?
 - What can he do to prepare himself for the interview?
 - Is he able to prove his identity or would it be better to have some more documents sent over?

4. Create a sense of solidarity

- Abdulwahid saw his friend leave for Calais. The feeling of loneliness is having an impact of his well-being.
- Try and find out if he is in contact with his family and what obstacles are standing in the way of being in contact (practical or emotional).
- Ask who he feels comfortable around in the centre, what kind of relationship he has with his roommates etc. There are often housemates or roommates who will take care of someone if that person is unhappy, but the affected person doesn't notice them doing it. Say that.

- Your engagement will also be a way to break through this isolation.

5. Provide hope and future perspective

- The initial situation: somebody is upset.
- The goal: to finish the process with someone who feels more at peace, who has leads to be able to achieve a number of small tasks, who feels less alone.
- Place a number of tasks/activities on a timeline. Refer to a follow-up meeting (the greater the feeling of unease, the quicker), but spread over longer periods.

Want to read more?

Base article: Hobfoll, SE, Watson, P, Bell, CC, Bryant, RA, Brymer, MJ, Friedman, MJ et al. 2007, 'Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence' *Psychiatry*, vol. 70, pp. 283–315.

Practical implementation on the basis of the above-listed article: Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers (World Health Organisation):

http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/