



special articles

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When mountains weep: psychological care for those affected by the earthquake in northern Pakistan

Fate, it seems, conjures up all sorts of ways for us to be in a certain place at a certain time. In 1982 as a trainee psychiatrist in the UK, I found myself co-facilitating a group at the Castlewood Day Hospital, then part of the Bexley psychiatric rotation scheme, in the south-east of London. Group psychotherapy was part of our training. Held thrice a week the groups were open-ended and patients ranged from those with interpersonal relationship and personality problems to those with anxiety and substance misuse problems. At the time the experience was somewhat baffling. Not only was I from a different country and culture, my exposure to psychiatry was limited to about 12 months. More often than not I felt lost as I tried to come to terms with 'group dynamics', 'reality testing', 'transference', 'multiple transference', 'group cohesion', 'group pressure', etc.

I was fortunate to have an extremely skilled and experienced co-facilitator, who not only guided the group through its various stages but had the patience and tolerance to supervise and teach me as well. It was therefore with a mixed sense of relief and trepidation when I came to the end of the 6-month period, with the experience of group psychotherapy (like learning how to fire a gun) safely tucked away in some remote corner of my mind but hopefully never to be used in real life.

Twenty-three years later, I find myself sitting cross-legged on floor mats under a UNICEF canopy in a remote area of northern Pakistan, which was recently devastated by a massive earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale. Thousands have died, thousands more are injured and millions are left without shelter. It is a human tragedy of unfathomable proportions, compounded by the nature of the terrain, with many areas inaccessible except perhaps by helicopter.

Emotional scars

Sitting some 800 miles to the south in the coastal city of Karachi, we watched the events unfold on our television screens. We were aware of the psychological traumas many survivors would face. Unlike broken legs and arms, many would have wounds that would not be seen but would scar them for life.

A group of us – psychiatrists and psychologists – got together to discuss how best we could respond. None of us had ever faced this kind of disaster before and there were so few of us in the country that it would be virtually impossible for us to address the problem. The best and perhaps the only viable solution was to train large numbers of health professionals and volunteers in counselling.

We quickly developed a training programme for the development of counselling skills, using role-playing and experiential learning. We held the first workshop in Karachi. More than 100 people applied for 60 places. As it was the month of Ramadan, the workshop was held on three consecutive mornings. The participants were incredibly enthusiastic and we received excellent feedback.

Emboldened by the response we decided to conduct similar workshops in the northern affected areas. However, logistical issues were a major problem. Who do we train? Where will they be deployed? Who will supervise them?

Noble intentions

There is a saying in our part of the world that 'if your intentions are noble, God creates openings for you'. And so it was. Out of the blue we had the general secretary of the Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) drop by on the second day of our training. He had visited the affected areas and told us of the large numbers of people in need of someone who could listen and hear their stories. In collaboration with a non-governmental organisation (NGO), he had organised a group of about 30 volunteers who could carry out counselling of survivors in camps and hospitals. He requested us to do the training.

Three of us decided to go to the northern areas. Landing at Islamabad we were on our way to our first stop in Abbottabad, some two hours drive. In Abbottabad we saw the first signs of the earthquake. The boundary wall of the main teaching hospital – the Ayub Medical Complex – had collapsed and the upper floors of the hospital had sustained damage. Many



patients were being treated in tents put up in hospital grounds. We saw some other collapsed buildings in the city.

The next day we went to Mansehra, a town of about 100 000 people, which was spared major damage but had received large numbers of casualties from the surrounding villages. The hospitals were overflowing with patients, and tents had been set up in grounds to accommodate them.

We conducted our first training workshop in Mansehra for a group of about 18 people. They included survivors of the earthquake, people working with survivors and some from various NGOs operating in the affected areas. Some of the stories we heard from the survivors gave us an idea of not only the magnitude of the destruction but also the suddenness of the quake, which was truly amazing. There was no warning, thereby resulting in a huge number of casualties and injuries. The death toll kept climbing to almost 100 000, as more and more affected areas were reached. Tragically, half of those killed were children, most of them crushed to death in their classrooms.

The workshop went well and participants gave us useful feedback. For most this was the first time they had participated in anything to do with *nafsiyat* (psychology). They were all eager to learn and to help others but also to understand what they themselves were going through.

On the following 2 days we conducted two more workshops – one each in Abbottabad and Islamabad – to groups of volunteers and staff of various NGOs.

Weeping mountains

The following day we were taken to Balakot, a bustling town high up in the mountains, which in other times must have been a spectacular place and a compulsory stop for tourists. Surrounded by mountains on all sides Balakot is located in a valley with the River Khunar running through it. Now it seemed as though a giant had walked through it stepping on each and every building. Such was the devastation that not a single building was left standing. Many bodies lay buried under the rubble. Many people had refused to move away, waiting for the rubble to be cleared so that their loved ones could be properly buried. Many people walked around as if in a daze and others sat around staring in space. One had to be there to believe what we saw. The contrast between the destruction on the ground and the stunning scenery surrounding Balakot was almost surreal.

Landslides following the quake had shorn the mountains of their dark surface layers, exposing the lighter inner layers. From a distance it seemed that even the mountains were weeping. Yet, amid the ruins we could see signs of life returning to normal. We saw a roadside barber giving a haircut to a customer. Fruit and vegetable vendors had set up stalls in the ruins of the destroyed buildings and there were many buyers. This was only a few yards from the relief camps where anyone

could go and register and would have received free food, shelter and medical care.

Life, it is said, is relentless and people are resilient.

Stories of grief, stories of courage

We then went on to Ghari Habibullah, another picturesque place where three rivers meet, now turned into a giant relief camp catering for more than 2500 people. We met different groups of people there. There were women and men, young and old, pre-school and school-age children and elderly people. All had lost something. Some had lost their houses but their families had survived, whereas others had lost all close family members but their houses had been spared. There were many who had lost both. There were children who had lost both parents and parents who had lost infants and young children.

The stories we heard were heart-wrenching. Almost everyone we met told us they felt it was doomsday as the deafening roar that accompanied the shaking of the earth, the sight of mountains literally falling apart, the sudden darkness because of the dust in the air, the destruction around them and the fact that everyone was only concerned about trying to save himself or herself, were all things they had been told would happen on the day of judgement.

We heard stories from teachers who lost all the children in their class when the roof suddenly collapsed on them. Many told us how helpless they felt and how the voices of the children from under the rubble went on for up to 3 days before dying down. Many told us how they were haunted by the voices which prevented them from sleeping at night.

Many mothers told us of how their infants died as a result of falling debris while they were outside either washing their clothes or working in the fields nearby. The bodies of some had been found but many remained buried under the rubble. There was no way to retrieve them as there was no heavy-lifting machinery available in the affected areas.

We heard stories from children whose parents had perished and who had become orphans in a matter of seconds. They had no idea what the future held for them. Some had family members who were half-buried and they had tried everything to get them out. Almost all of them had died from blood loss from their leg wounds.

We heard stories of how many women who had sustained spinal cord injuries and had become paraplegic were abandoned by their husbands who considered that they had become 'useless'. There were also stories of courage as many people risked their lives to pull people from the rubble, of how people refused to break their fast despite sustaining severe injuries and how they got organised and helped each other.

Humbling experience

Story after story. Everyone we met had incredible stories of grief and tragedy, of lives turned upside down in a matter of seconds, of the voices of their loved ones

special
articles

crying out for help from under the rubble and of their utter helplessness to do anything. However, their stories were also of courage and fortitude, of their amazing faith in their religion and God, of their acceptance of the event as an act of God, and of their refusal to apportion blame or show anger towards anyone.

We listened to all the stories. Some people were more vocal and expressive than others. Some wept openly, others sobbed silently. However, everyone we met had a story they wanted to share. Wherever we went people wanted to keep on talking and wanted someone to listen to them. We listened as much as we could. We listened until there were no more stories to tell and no more tears to shed. We listened until we were completely drained emotionally. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life.

From Castlewood to Kashmir

As I sat there in the camp in Ghari Habibullah, surrounded by the mountains and the stunning scenery, listening to the incredible experiences of these brave people, I could not help but think of my time in group psychotherapy at Castlewood Day Hospital all those years ago. All the processes experienced then could be witnessed here as well, but these were groups beyond training, beyond experiential learning and beyond role-playing.

On the long drive back to Abbottabad a thousand questions crossed my mind. How can so much tragedy

befall so many innocent people, so suddenly? What justification is there for so many young innocent children to die? How do you erase the trauma of what your eyes saw, what your ears heard, what your hands felt and what your mind experienced? How does one pick up the pieces of one's life after a calamity of this proportion? Where does one get the strength to carry on after losing one's loved ones, one's house and one's community? Can a people ever recover from a tragedy of this magnitude? Listening to the accounts of these brave people of Kashmir, there is every reason to believe this too can be overcome.

Declaration of interest

None.

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Psychiatry in post-communist Ukraine: dismantling the past, paving the way for the future

Ukraine, a nation of 48 million, became independent in 1991 following the collapse of the USSR. Ukraine still lags far behind many European countries in absolute income per capita and indices of transparency and corruption in public life, but its economy, grounded on robust industrial and agricultural resources, has grown 10% annually in the past 4 years. The extraordinary developments associated with the 2004 presidential elections and the Orange Revolution mean that democracy is now at the core of the state-building process and that Ukrainians are ready for radical changes. These changes are bound to include the principles and methods that have long prevailed in Ukrainian psychiatry.

Ukrainian psychiatry has embraced the tenets that guide contemporary psychiatry worldwide, but its roots lie in the psychiatric tradition of the USSR, where the mental health needs of the population were not always seen as a priority. Whether or not Soviet psychiatry can claim any achievement, it did play an inglorious part in the

repressive policies of the Soviet state. The collapse of communism brought this chapter to an end, but the legacy of psychiatric practices of the communist period still haunts the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Addressing the lingering consequences of this not-so-distant past plays a major part in the task of developing newer models of mental healthcare in post-communist Ukraine.

Political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR

In the first decades after the 1917 revolution, the newly established Russian Association of Psychiatrists, chaired by Professor Vladimir Serbsky, was instrumental in the establishment of Soviet psychiatry (Fry, 1969). Psychiatric services in the USSR were meant to be grounded on humanistic principles, Pavlovian biological paradigms, the universality of access and, like other Soviet endeavours, administrative-command central planning. Psychiatric care