



MONICA LA FERRARA

Healing the Wounds

A group-therapy approach was used in assisting asylum seekers. MONICA LA FERRARA, a counsellor working with the Association of Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors in Western Australia, shares her experience.

Working with asylum seekers has been a great experience for me. I have now gained a much deeper understanding of their lives, their pain and suffering, their resilience, and the constant struggle to find a place to settle down.

Four years ago I embarked with them on what I would call “a therapeutic journey”. This journey has not ended yet as pain and suffering still haunt them.

Initially, I worked with the asylum seekers individually, and after a while in group-therapy sessions. All families I saw had suffered from trauma and torture issues in their country of origin, which they had fled to stay alive. ▶



During their journey they tried very hard to make the most of their lives but experienced all sorts of deprivations. Feeling vulnerable and rejected by unjust laws, some had tried to commit self-harm and had often thought of suicide. This came to be my biggest challenge; I had to think of sustainable solutions, like teaching them coping strategies and finding additional resources.

This “therapeutic journey” had two dimensions: The first one was the asylum seekers’ own experiences in understanding the process they were going through. The second had to do with my own ability to provide them with hope in uncertain times by using holistic techniques and a psychosocial approach.

Towards the end I felt the clients still needed the group sessions, however I also knew when it was time for them to continue this journey alone, so I decided to bring the group sessions to an end, allowing participants to face their own difficulties. At least they were equipped with the new learning experience and with a better understanding of the new system.

Facilitating group sessions

I had no awareness of the difficulties I would face when I first initiated the group sessions. I facilitated a group from Iraq and another from Latin America. Being a Latin American myself meant we could all speak our own language. This made everything easier. I am familiar with the Latin American culture so I was able to identify the barriers immediately.

By working within groups, my clients had to learn to create their own boundaries. Since I couldn’t anticipate the challenges I was to face, I could not estimate the approximate time they would take to do so. Actually, the second group was more successful than expected, and met for a whole year.

One of the main factors that made me end this group was Department of Immigration Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs’ refusal to grant one of the families a protection visa. After waiting for four years, they were told the bad news, and had to face the prospect of embarking on another journey. This had an impact on the other families as it triggered the trauma of their own experiences as survivors and the fact that they could perhaps face the same fate. We were able to address these feelings as a group.

I was committed to working with the Iraqi men’s group, especially knowing the issues they faced were very unique. These men had lost their family members in the boating tragedy known as the SIEV-X. I was very saddened by this event. While facilitating this group I would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night wondering about how I could possibly best use my skills to help them.

I felt their pain was so intense. They were not only trying to recover from their trauma and torture experiences, but also from the loss of their families, so they were experiencing a higher degree of grief and anger than usual. Counselling was my way of providing relief to their pain, but religion became a great source of support. We explored Islam together, and in doing so they taught me a lot about their faith, which at times they seemed to have temporarily lost sight of.

The group provided a space for them to reflect in a philosophical and existential way about their own religious beliefs. By facilitating this process, I tried to enable them to maintain an emphasis on their faith and ensure they kept it always present, as it provided relief from pain and suffering and helped them explore the role of God in their lives.

This group worked through the different stages of grief and loss. We reviewed the shock phase and the different experiences they had encountered. During the second phase, I raised awareness of loss and separation anxiety, the emotional conflicts they were experiencing and the effects their hypersensitivity had on them and others. I was able to use some professional tools such as drawings, poetry and visualization. At the end, they planted trees to symbolize their losses.

They went through a withdrawal period as a third phase came to an end. They had not completed the healing process as they were still struggling to get their protection visas, and their loss and they felt that their loss and in this context had never been suffering was never acknowledged or validated by the Australian society.

The Latin American group consisted of three families. They met for one year. In most cases all participants attended with great enthusiasm and were always looking forward to the next session.

They also had the opportunity to express their thoughts and emotions, and work through their anger. I created a special space for anger management and they projected their feelings on me. This enabled me to provide the appropriate therapeutic interventions. They also expressed feelings through drawing, story-writing and other creative exercises.

In both groups, I was able to address cultural and religious issues. I do believe spirituality helps asylum seekers in most cases. The counsellor needs to build on this faith to enable them to find a meaning to so much pain.

I focused on transference issues. It was interesting to explore the different interactions and dynamics created by the men and women.

There were times when I played the role of a support person, a facilitator and at other times a rescuer in other cases the transference was directed towards me as “the one who knows best and can provide an answer to their existential dilemmas.”

In our first session the group worked on understanding what it meant to them to be called “asylum seekers”. We explored the impact these words had on them individually and as a shared experience. In some cases, they acknowledged discrimination issues. Although this group had not arrived in Australia by boat, they were still called “boat people”. As a result, they could identify the barriers and issues that underpinned prejudice.

We revised anger management, grief and loss, and all symptoms related to post traumatic stress disorder. They produced drawings to illustrate coping strategies and the way they saw themselves, and established goals for the future.

In some sessions some childhood issues emerged connected with the fears of the present, and I was very cautious about exploring these further as I wanted to maintain safety within the group where projections were strongly interacting. They worked through their self-esteem and their potential, and their skills were validated.

Trust was also established by my work with both the asylum seekers and the lawyers on the legal issues, which were often overwhelming the asylum seekers. Sometimes lawyers and members of the Refugee Review Tribunal may be perceived as playing the role of persecutors rather than helpers. It is important for the counsellor to be present during those sessions to acknowledge and manage the huge emotional impact the telling of life stories can have on asylum seekers.

My greatest satisfaction was to see that in spite of the adversity they remained positive, creating projects for the future in a collective way and supporting each other.

When I decided to end the sessions many questions raced through my mind for which I had no specific answers: Will they be able to stay in the country? Why should they have to go through these terrible experiences? What makes them different from other people? I offered members of the group the option to continue to work individually with me until a decision from the government would be made in relation to their visa status.

We celebrated the end of this journey together, coinciding with the end of the year and the forced departure of one of the families from Australia. It was a very emotional experience for the group and for myself.

At the end I experienced a sense of loss but also a great sense of satisfaction, which came from my strong belief in the group participants, in their future recovery, and my belief in human rights.

The group thanked the association and me for our efforts. I was much more grateful to them for the reflections and the resilience they demonstrated throughout their healing process.