



# BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

## The role of faith in the healing process

Some time ago spirituality was regarded as “off limits” in clinical practice, leaving therapists uncertain as to how to approach it. Yet many individuals regard religion as an essential part of their lives and research has documented the benefits of faith on wellbeing. At one of STARTTS’ Clinical Evenings several therapists gathered to share stories of faith and recovery. OLGA YOLDI reports.

Freud’s scorn for religion as offering no more than comforting illusion strongly influenced the exclusion of spirituality from psychotherapy theory and practice. Jung however believed that healing the psyche needed recognition of the spirit and a religious outlook. Despite psychotherapy’s roots in spiritual healing, in the 20th century religion and psychotherapy became separate. However, a growing surge of interest in spirituality has led some therapists to explore ways to move beyond the constraints. They suggest a variety of ways of incorporating spirituality in clinical assessment and intervention in order to understand spiritual sources of distress and tap into resources that will contribute to healing, recovery and resilience.

Visiting Israeli psychologists Rachel Paran and Yishai Shalif, who is also a rabbi, are leading practitioners in the field of Narrative Practice and Appreciative Enquiry. This is a form of organisational and individual psychology that focuses on positive change through a process of inquiry, grounded in affirmation and appreciation.

“I work with communities that were targets of terror attacks, where many people were killed or suffered enormously,” says Yishai. “I find that faith does help in the healing process. When something terrible happens, the temple becomes a place of safety and peace where survivors are able to make meaning of their experiences and remain active in times of suffering .... This is something shared by many religions.”

Indeed, perhaps suffering and the injustice or senselessness of it, is ultimately a spiritual issue, something shared by humanity at large, even though it

has vastly different meanings in various religions. Jews, for instance, believe that it was through their suffering that they became God’s chosen people. The biblical story of the Exodus in which the Jewish people were led by Moses out of bondage in Egypt, is retold every year at family Passover celebrations to reconnect with that common history.

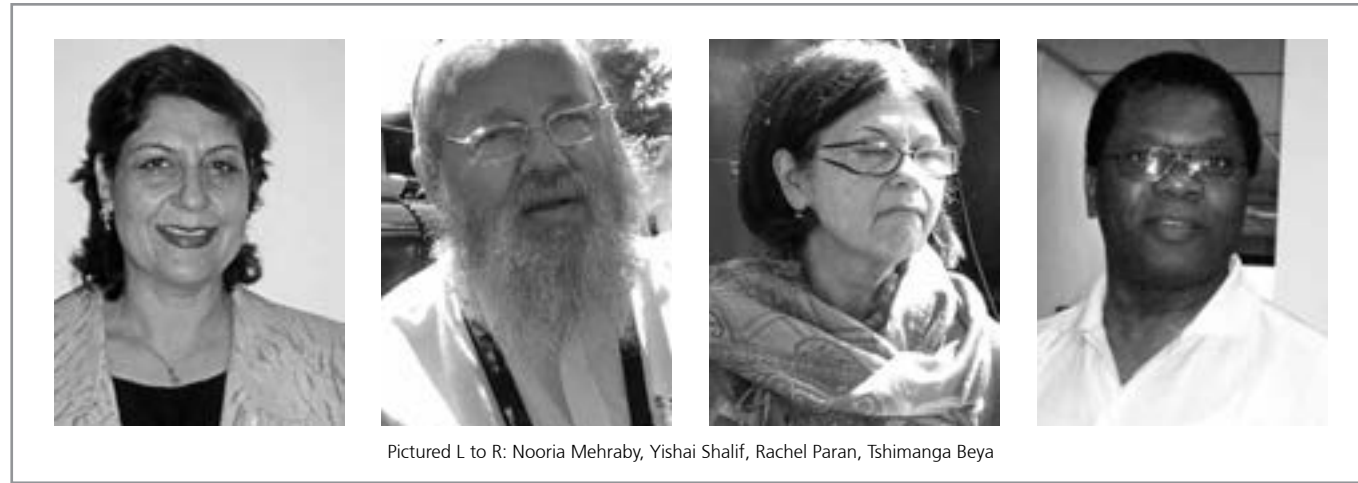
The idea of suffering in Islam, however, is based on the fundamental notion of the imperfection of human life. “Verily we have created man into a life of pain, toil and trial” (Quran 90:4). Humans are on this earth so that their faith in God is tested. A test necessarily requires calamities and misfortunes.

On the other hand, Christians share the belief that Christ suffered and was crucified for our sins and that one’s redemption is found through acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Even for Buddhists, life is filled with suffering. In this case it is rooted in the cravings for power and pleasure, in attachments and other worldly things. In turn, such craving condemns us to an endless cycle of death and rebirth in which our actions (Karma) may prolong our suffering.

All speakers at this interfaith night agreed that dealing with intense suffering and moving on with one’s life after a traumatic event can be a difficult and unpredictable journey, however there is light at the end of the tunnel. Research has shown the healing quality of prayer, the health benefits of meditation and the peace and solace found in spiritual communities through the rituals and symbols of religion.





Pictured L to R: Nooria Mehraby, Yishai Shalif, Rachel Paran, Tshimanga Beya

Rachel illustrated the power of religious symbolism in the case of a child, who found himself hiding during a terrible act of terror, in which a suicide bomber killed himself and others at a hotel during Passover in Israel. Passover is a family religious festival when families gather to celebrate. In the midst of the turmoil the child grabbed a religious book and found shelter under a table. A few weeks later he told his counsellor he felt terribly ashamed because all he was capable of doing during such a terrible event was hide. He felt ashamed for not protecting his family. "Children have a great sense of responsibility towards their families," says Rachel. "He said that holding the religious book helped him deal with the fear. He felt he was protecting this sacred book and the book was protecting him. To me he is a true hero."

Rachel has no hesitation in exploring religious issues with clients. "I will ask openly if it is okay for me to ask them about their religious and spiritual beliefs and how they interact with feelings, actions or thoughts concerning trauma. I ask about thoughts, practices and the meanings of particular thinking or action patterns." Rachel says her own faith in God is a motivating force in her profession. "It helps me to sustain my hope, the certainty that I will be able to help my client overcome his despair. I have a deep belief that there is a divine spark that holds in our potential to rise above the difficult times. People are not only motivated by needs and desires, ultimately everyone has the choice to step into new possibilities and choose a path in life." Yishai agrees.

"Psychologists have come to realise that there is such a thing as post-traumatic growth following post-traumatic stress and the opening up of new possibilities in people's lives." "The belief in life after death also gives a completely different perspective to dealing with loss. Loss is perceived as being much less final as there is always the hope of what is to come." This is a belief also shared by Muslims and Christians.

Muslim senior clinician Nooria Mehraby, who has a long history in assisting refugees from Muslim countries at STARTTS, has searched the Quran for answers. A refugee from Afghanistan herself and medical doctor, Nooria spoke about her experience assisting a Muslim refugee showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress. "He felt he was being punished by God for things he had done or had not done ... he was feeling guilty, suffered from nightmares and insomnia, and had intrusive and recurrent thoughts, flashbacks and lacked concentration," she says. Socially isolated and desperate, unaware of what therapy was, he nevertheless decided to seek help at STARTTS.

While Nooria used a Cognitive Behaviour Therapy framework to assist him, she also examined how Islamic beliefs in healing could guide her in assisting her client to regain peace of mind. Initially they explored the meaning of his experiences. "Muslims believe that life, happiness, sadness, everything, comes from God. So whenever someone is going through hardship, God is testing this person's capacity to endure suffering,"

she indicated. But the Quran also says, "I won't put you in a condition where I will burden you beyond your capacity to endure."

Psycho-education was part of the intervention. "The client needed to understand and make sense of what was happening to his mind and body and the impact of his traumatic experience on these. After all, seeking knowledge about oneself and others is the obligation of each Muslim," she said. According to Nooria, as soon as he began to understand what was happening to his body and mind he began to relax. She then suggested he recite the Quran as a means of relaxation. Muslims pray five times a day. It is a body related prayer where certain verses from the Quran are repeated through certain actions, which require intent and concentration. She said that the client's concentration improved through such repetitions and by remembering the 99 names of Allah. "When someone is praying the person is not isolated. He is connected to God and disconnected from others," says Nooria. "Through prayer your heart finds rest in Allah ... by reciting certain verses before going to bed, the client felt safe and protected and as he progressed through the course of his therapy he found peace."

The Quran says that peace comes after hardships. But it also says, "I will not change a condition unless you bring changes to yourself." Nooria said that gradually her client started to take responsibility for what was happening to him and for his health. He came to terms with his guilt for having survived when

others hadn't. Nooria worked on issues of loss and grief. She mentioned to her client that the Prophet Mohammad had lost his mother when he was a child and that every time he went to his mother's grave he cried. So if the prophet was able to cry so could he.

Nooria mentioned that reorganising the client's destructive thinking patterns took time. However, he attended the Mosque and re-engaged with others and gradually the symptoms disappeared and now he is a man of peace.

As barriers constructed between spirituality and other aspects of people's experiences are dissolved, it becomes possible to advance a holistic view of the individual, his suffering and healing potential. Christianity can also help in this journey.

Tshimanga Beya sees Christianity as a powerful tool for healing. However, he is careful to point out that: "It is not about imposing the clinician's belief system on clients. It is about understanding the frame of mind of the client in order to better communicate with him and tap into his inner resources or develop new resources," he says. "The Christian mindset says: no condition is permanent. Good times come, good times go, bad times come and bad times go." Tshimanga worked extensively with churches of various denominations in Africa, Europe and Australia. He studied Theology and Psychology and he now provides counselling to newly-arrived refugees at STARTTS' Early Intervention Program.

"The bible contains many stories about torture and trauma. But it is also a source of inspiration for survivors on the path to recovery," says Tshimanga. "The bible gives you a realistic perspective of the world. It is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but a balanced view ... it contains many cases that illustrate the hardship of life." He cited the Book of Job which introduces the supernatural dimension of suffering. Initially Job blames God for his misfortunes, but gradually he finds the power of acceptance by realising there is some bigger purpose to his suffering so his belief in God remains

intact. "Acceptance increases the capacity to tolerate," says Tshimanga.

What does Christianity actually offer? For a start Christians can identify with Jesus. "The cross of the Calvary is a powerful symbol of suffering. People can say Jesus knows what I went through because he suffered as I do. This allows the client to reframe the experience of torture and trauma as a personal trial that is there to be overcome. How could Jesus survive the brutality of the crucifixion? It demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit," said Tshimanga.

There is no hope without resurrection. It symbolises hope, recovery and a new beginning. "During resurrection the body disappears and so it demonstrates a greater power that can overrule the intent of those that inflicted suffering on me ... God raised him from the dead, he freed him from the agony of suffering. This is inspiring. There is a verse in the bible that says: "If the spirit that freed Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead, will give you life through his Spirit that lives in you."

Tshimanga says: "Hope is a powerful antidote to the helplessness and despair associated with major trauma and loss. Where there is hope the work of the therapist is almost done."

If Christ is a survivor, we find every reason to survive torture and trauma. After all, as Tshimanga puts it: "We are hard pressed but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned." It is the power of God working through you. The bible refers to the fruits of the spirit (joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self control). "These are powerful antidotes for survivors," he says.

And what about the power of forgiveness? According to Tshimanga forgiveness is a powerful resource in dealing with the bitterness and guilt associated with torture and trauma. "If God forgave his torturers, those that inflicted his pain on him and ultimately his death, why wouldn't we forgive ourselves and others?" ■



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