

The Impact of War: Mental Health of Syrian Children

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In the wake of the Syrian crisis, I started experiencing physical pain and chronic fatigue. One day I saw a neurologist who asked for blood tests and MRI scan. After examining my results, he told me I was fine and that there was nothing to worry about. For me, it did not make sense. "What about the headaches, exhaustion and fatigue I am getting?" I asked. He briefly explained that sometimes emotional stress manifests itself as physical illness. I left baffled, but deep inside I knew what was wrong with me. What my country was going through was eating me up. This incident made me wonder about the war's psychological effects on children. The war's impact must be far greater on the younger generation of Syria. Almost each one of the kids I was teaching had a heartrending story to tell and some of them witnessed unspeakable tortures. Therefore, I started raising questions and seeking answers, regarding mental health awareness among children, which I wanted to share with you.

Unfortunately, during times of war and trauma, mental health is sometimes relegated or considered unimportant. Realizing the significance of mental health might be halfway through helping children. Wendy Smith, an American therapist, discussed in a TED Talk the importance of raising mental health awareness among children:

"Millions of our kids are suffering alone because they and we lack information we need."

Therefore, a mental-health literate child can recognize his own symptoms and is, therefore, able to seek help. When I asked Dr. Tayseer Hassoun, Syrian psychiatrist, about the ways in which we could raise awareness inside schools, he suggested that:

"mental health should be smoothly integrated into the curricula. Besides, school medical officers should be trained to detect any mental health disorders among children and adolescents".

Whereas, Ms. Shirin Khalil, Syrian therapist and trainer, highlighted the importance of training all school staff. Hassoun and Khalil were in charge of training over forty psychosocial supporters. However, Khalil thinks that step to be a drop in the bucket:

"All school staff should be trained including teachers and school principals".

The problem does not only stem from the lack of mental health services. The social stigma related to mental health often prevents people from seeking help. According to the UK Mental Health Foundation, stigma might even "worsen someone's mental health problems".

Some people in our society still use terms such as “crazy, schizophrenic, psycho...etc” as insulting words. Dr. Hassoun believes that working on erasing mental health stigma won't be effective unless it is embedded in the programmes targeted towards children. It would be very useful, for instance, to discuss with pupils the importance of some stigmatized professions such as psychiatry. It seems, however, that mental health stigma in Syria has dramatically decreased.

“More medical health services are being provided and the demand for those services is increasing. Many parents are contacting me to inquire about their children's mental health state. This is an unprecedented improvement. In the past, parents never considered seeing a psychotherapist” Khalil added.

What Tayseer and Khalil implied is that looking for solutions and offering help should not only be the responsibility of Psychiatrists and therapists. Each one of us has a part to take in helping Syrian children. In fact, I have encountered many cases throughout my teaching experience in which I felt utterly impotent. After the Syrian crisis, teachers found themselves needing to play different roles in classrooms. The role of an educator does not suffice anymore. Dr. Hassoun stressed the significance of the teacher's role in improving children's mental health “since they are role models for their pupils”. He added that

“pupils learn much from their teachers' behavior and they are affected by the way those teachers interact with them. Therefore, corporal punishment and verbal abuse must not be used by teachers”.

Since teachers are the second most important care providers for children, they may either improve or worsen children's mental health”.

Nonetheless, many Syrian teachers are suffering on different levels as well. The question is whether it is fair or logical to demand them to take part in the healing process of children. Khalil argues that many humanitarian workers are helping others despite the horrors they have been exposed to since the beginning of the crisis. Thus,

“teachers can do so effectively if they are trained and provided with variant tools. Moreover, supporting children can be healing to the teachers themselves”.

In addition to the roles of parents and teachers, children can, in fact, help themselves by implementing stress management techniques. Dr. Hassoun said that

“breathing techniques, drawing, playing music, and participating in other creative activities such as acting, narrating stories and reciting poetry” can greatly reduce anxiety among young students.

In conclusion, there are so many things we need to learn as teachers. But, not getting the right training is not a justification for not acting and reaching out to children who are suffering in silence. Let's start rethinking our approach and questioning our old inherited habits. When I asked Ms. Khalil for the piece of advice she would give to teachers, she responded:

“Love. With love we can help others lead better lives”.

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Source

Stigma and discrimination: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/stigma-and-discrimination>

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