

Psychosocial first aid

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Case study

Abdulwahid (17) has been living in a reception centre for several months after a tough journey. On registration, he is upset. He does not sleep, has nightmares. He still fears raids by militia. He is very worried about his family left behind. Living in a reception centre is busy. He avoids contact with compatriots, who cannot be trusted. His only friend recently received a negative decision and left for Calais. Abdulwahid cannot concentrate in Dutch class. He thinks he is going crazy because he talks to himself. He asks for help.

General

Psychosocial first aid is a simple and safe first response for those affected by a shocking event. How do you proceed during an initial contact or intervention? These five tips can come in handy for any counsellor:

1. Create security and trust
2. Bring peace
3. Advise and refer
4. Create connectedness
5. Give hope and future perspective

1. Create security and trust

Provide **basic safety** (physical) and **trust** (psychological safety). How to do this concretely?

- Check the interview room: is the room safe? Is there privacy? Preferably, do not let the client sit with their back to the door.
- Introduce yourself clearly and briefly. Name your task and its limits. Discuss what will happen to the information you note.
- Name things that provoke worry or anxiety. For example: talking about the procedure, talking about the past, ...
- Survey the housing and living situation. Identify elements that create a sense of insecurity.

2. Bring peace

People cannot think properly when they feel restless. How do you bring calm? To start with, stay calm yourself. Also, set aside enough time. People become calm by talking about events. You also bring calm by informing.

- Be clear: tell how much time you have.
- Let the client talk, without interrupting too much.

- Listen and take stock of the questions and difficulties.
- Explain how the body and mind react to a shocking event. What are the consequences?
- Test whether the client understands you.

3. Advise and refer

Go over what exactly needs to be done. It is best to "park" things that are out of your control, as well as things that cannot be addressed at the moment. Ask what attempts people have already made and what the result was.

- Formulate steps that are realistic and achievable.
- Think together about possible thresholds.
- When giving advice or referring: make it concrete. If necessary, contact an organisation to which you are referring someone so that you know what the client can expect.
- The main message is: there are opportunities to do something. That is more important than whether the client actually makes the move.

4. Create connectedness

Refugees become isolated. Often people do not tell all their distress: they do not want to be a burden to anyone. Sometimes people feel ashamed because they are better off than those left behind, or because they have failed, so to speak. But the most underestimated emotions are missing family and loneliness.

- Encourage the client to contact others.
- Let the client talk: who can he/she go to at the moment? With whom does he/she feel calmer?
- Your engagement also creates connection. Try to open it up to the various people around the client: doctor, social worker, teacher, ... Try to make the client feel not alone.

5. Give hope and future perspective

With each contact, place someone's situation in time. A classic approach when working with refugees is to go back in time a few years:

- How did you fare four years ago?
- How is it going now?
- What will the future bring? Of course, people do not know what the future holds, but they can prepare themselves: learn an additional language, get an education, volunteer, ...
- Also refer to your next appointment, a week from now, a month from now. That's how you create time perspective.

Applied to the case study

The five elements above are applicable in many situations. We now apply them to the concrete case.

1. Create security and trust

- We identify:
 - fear of a militia raid (i)
 - fear of a negative decision (and compulsory return) (ii)
- Which is most important? Fears about the militia are unjustified; a reception centre is safe. As long as proceedings are ongoing, Abdulwahid will not be sent back. Underline that.

2. Bring peace

- We identify:
 - the unrest at the centre (i)
 - lack of sleep due to nightmares (ii)
 - anxiety about going mad (iii)
 - concerns about asylum procedure (iv)
- Explain the reactions to a shocking event. For example, Abdulwahid can already place some of the nightmares, irritability about the noise at the centre and talking to himself.
- Do so in a didactic and simple way: *"Your fear system is disturbed, sensitive. You startle more quickly, you keep a close eye on your surroundings. These are normal reactions of our body to the abnormal event you experienced."*
- Let Abdulwahid talk about life at the centre. Perhaps there are some simple things that can make life a bit more bearable.
- Let him also talk about the family.
- Explain the procedure: as long as there was no interview at CGRS, there cannot be a negative decision.
- Don't argue, acknowledge the difficulty but delimit by naming.

3. Advise and refer

- When someone is sufficiently calm, they can start thinking.
- Which of the difficulties are most important? What could we do to change them?
- Each of the above problems presents an opportunity to do something:
 - What was Abdulwahid already trying to sleep better?
 - Which nights did he sleep better?
 - What can he do to prepare for the interview?
 - Can he prove his identity or is it better to have documents sent?

4. Create connectedness

- Abdulwahid watched his friend leave for Calais. The feeling of loneliness weighed on his wellbeing.
- Find out if there is contact with relatives and what are the barriers to contact (practical or emotional).
- Inquire with whom he does feel calm at the centre, what the relationship is like with roommates, etc. Often there are fellow residents who care about someone who is not feeling well, but this is not noticed by the person concerned. Highlight that.
- Your own engagement also breaks the isolation.

5. Give hope and future perspective

- The initial situation: someone feels upset.
- The goal: end up with someone who calmed down a bit, got leads to do some small things, felt a bit less lonely.
- Put some things in a time perspective. Refer to subsequent contact (the greater the turmoil, the sooner), but spread over longer periods.

Read more?

Basic 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.

Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers (World Health Organisation):
http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/