

## **Volunteering to help Syrian Refugees in humanitarian crises while gaining supervision and leadership experience – *A reflective essay***

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This essay is about the two most interesting fields to me, volunteering to help Refugees and Psychiatry. It includes my current experience in a research called Caring for the carers. However, I thought to start by giving you a context from which I developed this interest in helping Refugees.

I was born in Iraq, and when I was only 2 years old, my family and I had to leave the country due to the economical and safety circumstances at that time. This was way before the 2003 war. We moved between many different countries in the Middle East, and I got to grow up in different cultures meeting people from different backgrounds.

In 2003, with the war in Iraq, many people fleet the country as refugees to other nearby countries where I was. In the years following that, many conflicts happened in different countries in the region of Middle East. The refugees' population expanded more and more. These people included friends and family members. I grew up watching this happens around us, feeling sad for all of the people who had to suddenly leave their homes, jobs and everything they built, to save their lives. They would then be hosted in other countries, however, due to variable reasons and restricted resources, they would not have the rights or entitlements they had back in their countries, which left them with tremendous stress of not only leaving everything behind but also not being able to start a proper life in that new place.

I completed my medical degree in Jordan, at that time, the war started in Syria. I joined an organization to help out Syrian refugees and local residents who do not have access to medical care. We helped in providing medications, surgeries and medical appointments to them. As you can imagine, It is difficult for refugees who left everything behind and currently live in so much stress, to care about their own health or think about putting the few cash they own on it, while they cannot even provide basic needs like food for their children. That was when my interest of helping out refugees grew more and more and I got to see the impact of helping and the happiness in their faces when they feel they are not left alone and that others care and feel for them.

Earlier this year, I joined this research called: *Caring for the carers: A virtual psychosocial supervision intervention to improve the quality and sustainability of mental health and psychosocial support in humanitarian contexts*. This research is carried by researchers in the Faculty of Medicine and Health, New South Wales in Australia. It is held for the Syrian refugees who are living in Syria and Turkey, where local mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) practitioners -who completed tertiary training in clinical psychology, social work or counselling- offer them support relating to their trauma. Overtime they have noticed that these practitioners are at risk to develop secondary traumatisation, compassion fatigue and occupational burnout. Therefore, the research was conducted to see the impact of running regular supervision sessions to these workers, and whether this would ultimately also improve the mental health support given to refugees in the first place.

The researchers recruited international supervisors as volunteers to run fortnightly supervision session in each 8 month supervision semester. Sessions run in groups of 4-6 practitioners who will meet for 90 minutes to discuss clinical work with two co-supervisors leading this discussion and supervising it. Something somehow similar to what we call Balint group in our core psychiatry training in UK, however it is more about discussing the clinical aspects of work and providing solutions when a practitioner feels stuck.

I was one of the volunteered supervisors. It is a very interesting experience to be in the other side providing supervision and getting to be in my clinical and educational supervisors' shoes. Initially, I was in doubt whether it is early for me as CT2 to become a supervisor, discussing this with the research leaders, they assured me and suggested to put me with another co-supervisor who has been running supervision sessions in the research for a while. Also the research has a great structure of offering resources like training, induction and supervision to the supervisors too. The program provided us with a book they authored named: *Integrated model for supervision*, which was very informative prior to starting the sessions.

This experience is making me think about what my own supervisors are offering within my core training and how that is helping me in ways I was not recognising before. I appreciate this more now. The job of a supervisor is much deeper than what it looks like. For instance, as part of my role as a supervisor, I would need to watch out for signs of mental health struggles in practitioners themselves and be aware to re-direct them to further support if needed. Also to be careful of the situations in which confidentiality might need to be broken.

This experience also drew my attention to things I would have never thought about. Like the kind of supervisor that I would want to be. The research encourages us to work in non-hierarchical collaborative model to build a good relationship with the supervisee, and to give the supervisee the sense that the supervisor is more like a friend rather than a higher authority. It encourages supervisors to be open to learn, as not only supervisee would learn from supervisors but vice versa too, which is totally my experience especially from the

practitioners' practice having some different approaches and being based in a different system than the one I work in.

I also learnt a lot about supervision, for instance, the different format of supervision that could be offered (i.e. individual, group or peer supervision) and how to make that decision based on resources and time that can be offered. Bearing in mind other factors in humanitarian crises setting, like how safe it is to have a face to face supervision and whether a group supervision could be thought as a terroristic gathering. Something you would never think about in normal setting. So it is about the flexibility that you need to have while working in such crisis.

The other hidden side of supervision is learning how to manage your own wellbeing especially while working in such circumstances. To identify that ourselves could need help and seek it when needed. You would need to sign a consent form at the beginning and you would be provided with the following information: 'if you become upset or distressed as a result of your participation in the research project, the research team will provide you with referrals to counselling or other appropriate support' and you will have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

We have to be aware that it is not easy to be the local practitioner nor the international supervisor. Due to complexity of presentation you would hear different kinds of stories from those who are suffering the most; You would encounter direct trauma from war, secondary unemployment, disabilities, bereavements, poverty, victims of PTSD and many other issues. It is not only the symptoms refugees present with, there are many different social contributing factors that surround them; some flee their homes and live in camps, some are not allowed to work anymore with the degrees they had, some lost their family members and other lost their money. It is not straight forward, the complexity of the trauma that these people go through is sometimes really difficult to comprehend and deal with.

On the other hand, the experience helps me to see how psychiatric disorders present in different cultures, it requires awareness of the culture to know how to treat those patients in each country, to understand the context and the background. I have already encountered some Syrian refugees during my work in Psychiatry in Jordan after graduation, however, others who wouldn't have previous encounter, would need some time to understand this culture and adjust their understanding to it.

I believe my family and I were lucky to be able to leave the country without seeking refugee status at that time. However, not everyone was. This gives me the motive to help out refugees. In addition to the satisfaction that you get out of putting your own time and efforts in something just to help out others rather than for a materialistic goal. Although superficially

it might sound like you are not getting much back with Volunteering, but the internal feelings that you get is better than what material can provide.