



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

The Healing Journey

Veronica Laveta
Clinical advisor for mental health, CVT Jordan
Summer/Fall 2015

Table of Contents

1	Welcome to the Healing Journey
2	A Note From Veronica Laveta
3	Session 1. Orientation and Creating a Safe Space
5	Session 2. Using Our Resources to Help Us Cope
7	Session 3. Mind Body Awareness
9	Session 4. Honoring Our Life Story / River of Life
11	Session 5. Difficult Moments (Part 1)
14	Session 6. Difficult Moment (Part 2)
16	Session 7. Grief and Loss / Reconnecting With Memories of Lost Loved ones
18	Session 8. Living With Loss
20	Session 9. Reconnection to Self, Community and the Future
22	Session 10. Consolidating Gains and Saying Goodbye

Welcome to the Healing Journey

The Center for Victims of Torture is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to healing survivors of torture, other human rights atrocities and violent conflict. We extend interdisciplinary rehabilitative care to those who have been tortured, train partners around the world who can prevent and treat torture, and we advocate for human rights and an end to torture.

CVT Jordan extends interdisciplinary care to refugees living in Amman and Zarqa. The majority of clients are Syrian and Iraqi survivors of torture and war atrocities in their home countries. Since CVT began its program of care in Jordan in 2008, more than 3,200 Iraqi refugees have taken on the healing journey. In 2011, CVT also began working with Syrian refugees in Jordan; since then, more than 1,900 have taken on the work of rebuilding their lives through CVT's program.

In CVT's international projects, including Jordan, our healing work for torture and war atrocity survivors is conducted through group counseling. Groups typically meet for ten weeks for mental health sessions; many survivors also attend a ten-week physical therapy cycle.

In the summer and fall of 2015, Veronica Laveta, CVT clinical advisor for mental health, wrote this series of articles for the Center for Victims of Torture's web blog, one for each week of the counseling cycle. At that time, Veronica and the Jordan clinical team were in the process of rolling out a newly-revised adult group counseling model to 36 groups of torture survivors.

This series of articles describes the healing journey that torture survivors undertake in order to begin rebuilding their lives after unspeakable torture and cruelty. Veronica also describes what it is like for clinicians to work with individuals as they face their experience and take on the work of processing trauma and restoring their hope for better, healthier lives.

A Note From Veronica Laveta:

Over the past year, as the clinical advisor for Jordan, my CVT colleagues and I undertook a phenomenal effort to revise and improve our adult group counseling model, integrating current research on effective interventions with knowledge we have collected from 15 years of group counseling experience around the world. The process was rigorous as we challenged ourselves to create a new model to maximize the therapeutic benefit of the group for long lasting healing. As intense as this process was, it was only the beginning. We conducted intensive trainings with our psychosocial counselors in Jordan, Kenya and Uganda, and then this summer began rolling it out with clients. We are now gathering feedback from “going live” to smooth out the rough edges.

I have the fortunate opportunity to be in Jordan for the full 10-week group cycle to oversee the rollout of the model. It is a privilege to witness the new model come alive and be shaped by the creativity of the facilitators who bring their knowledge of healing to the table and the survivors who show us their strength and resilience.

Veronica Laveta
Clinical advisor for mental health, CVT Jordan

Session 1: Orientation and Creating a Safe Space

We started 36 counseling groups in late July in Amman and Zarqa, with groups of Syrian and Iraqi men, women, and children of all ages and backgrounds. As facilitators, trainers, and clients we shared a buzzing combination of anticipatory nervousness, fear and tentative hope as we entered the sessions, although for different reasons. I had my own fears. I was hugely invested in this new process going well and benefitting survivors. Even with a lot of thought and effort put towards developing the manual, a lingering anxiety about how it would work out remained. The facilitators were worried about using new material and were concerned that the survivors may not respond well to the movement practices that were new to the counseling model. And of course, the clients were taking a big emotional risk by joining a group of strangers who may be from other religions or sects, and possibly even from the groups that hurt them. We were all holding our breath to see what would happen.

During the first session, we start to build a sense of trust and safety in the group, and begin to generate hope. Lively introductions and collaboratively developing an opening ritual and a group name helped participants feel more connected to each other. One group named their group “Hope.” In one exercise, they came together to lift a large stone, each contributing one finger to lift, experiencing how the support of the group lightened their burdens. Setting group agreements helped create boundaries and clear expectations, promoting a sense of safety and stability. New activities in the first session include a “grounding” exercise that helps survivors feel more stable in their body, returns them to the present moment and allows them to feel the support of the ground and chair.

Our model development group also developed a closing practice that the clients do every session that integrates movement, imagery, thoughts and aspirations, feelings and interpersonal connection to promote holistic trauma healing. In Jordan, we are an interdisciplinary program where survivors go through physiotherapy (also called physical therapy) concurrently with counseling groups, so the first group session was done together with the physiotherapists.

The local counselors and physiotherapists commented on the benefits of a joint session. Islam, a counselor, shared that the “survivor now has a holistic image of the work, that we are one team,” and Raed, a physiotherapist noted, “It helps us draw the picture completely of what is involved in healing.” In reflecting after the sessions, the counselors remarked on the power of the group. Jafar stated, “I was touched seeing one person noticing the tears of another and reaching out. They give me hope; they encourage me with their energy.” Alaa was moved when a client remarked that being heard “gives me freedom, makes me feel alive again.” One survivor felt the relief of being together, “I hope we can stay all day like this, staying together in this gathering.” But another was more cautious, wondering, “How can you ask us to get together when our families and communities have been destroyed? The only thing I care about is safety and stability. Peace of mind seems far away.”

Teaching a simple grounding technique had a big effect on the group members. Although some experienced anxiety as they slowed down, many touched a place of calm and rest. One woman remarked, “I often feel like a block of wood from stress; now I feel relaxed.” Sumaiya, one of the physiotherapists commented, “It meant a lot to me when one of the clients came up to me and said, ‘I want a prescription for my tightness’ and that I was able to give it to her. Grounding helped her see how mind-body activities could help.” One of the men remarked, “It takes me away from my distracting thoughts.”

Despite the worries that the survivors would not feel comfortable with the closing practice, they seemed to embrace it. One man reflected after the closing practice, “I thank you for your kindness—I felt I was reaching for the sky and God’s grace was pouring over me and then I was able to share that with my brothers here.”

We are saturated with the daily news of so many horrific human rights atrocities, often making me question the state of humanity. These lived stories permeated the sessions this week and I felt the intense pain and saw the deep suffering etched on the survivors’ faces. Yet I was inspired over and over by their courage to show up and face their traumatic experiences. As the survivors reached out to each other from a place of kindness and compassion, fear and distrust began to be overcome, gradually lessening our collective despair. One participant said, “We want to separate from the evil that divides us and come closer to that which brings us together.” This is what we saw this week: people came together in their common humanity as men, as women, as parents, as people who like to cook, as people who have been wounded, and as people who have love and support to give.

By the end of the week, for all of us, fear and anxiety transformed into tiny sprouts of hope and relief.

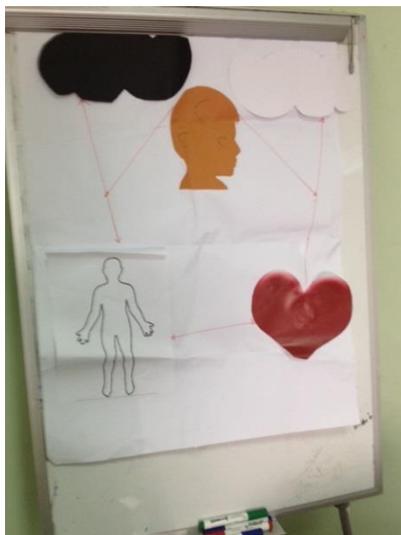
Session 2: Using Our Resources to Help Us Cope

In this session, as we continue to build safety and stability in the group, we aim to draw out survivors' internal strengths and external resources to counteract the unhelpful tunnel thinking that keeps traumatized people in a state of despair. After reviewing the grounding exercise that helps survivors feel more stable in their bodies and returns them to the present moment, the facilitators use a table metaphor to demonstrate how the more "table legs" one can develop (internal and external resources), the easier it is to carry the burdens on the table. Our innovative counselors built and drew tables to demonstrate this concept (pictured). After one group meeting, counselor Lina noted that survivors "knew they have challenges but they didn't realize they had so many strengths," and this sparked a renewed optimism for many of them.



The second exercise introduced the "cognitive triangle" (pictured), a central concept in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) which explores the connection between our thoughts, feelings/physical sensations and behaviors. The group members practiced changing their thoughts to have a positive effect on their feelings and behaviors. Here again, the facilitators engaged in the "art" of counseling, creatively developing visual representations to help the survivors understand the ideas and skills that can help them.

Two groups stood out for me as I watched them unfold throughout the week. In the self-named "Hope" group of older men, facilitators thoughtfully set the tone for empowerment and group support by having each person rotate "hosting" the group. The host hands out name badges, serves people tea and provides tissues. The host this session beamed with pride, appreciating his role. When we reviewed the grounding exercise, one man expressed strong doubts about whether this exercise could really change anything in their lives. But when he practiced it again in the session, he said, with a sheepish smile, "For the first time I felt the current of stress going down my body into the ground. This really made me feel better." Another said, "I was able to zero out my brain." I could see doubts start to melt away as they started learning that the more control they have over their thoughts and emotions, the stronger they feel.



One Iraqi man strongly resisted the idea that shifting one's thoughts could make any difference in his life. He felt very discouraged and talked adamantly about all the difficulties he has had living in Jordan, as well as losing his family in the war and being betrayed by his best friend. "I can't trust anyone. Even if God sent angels to convince me, I would not believe him," he said. He recounted that in the past his cynicism and discouragement had been too much for people who were working with him. It was immediately clear this group was not going to give up on him. The facilitators validated the pain of betrayal and the fear of new friendships and also created a safe space for him to express his emotions.

The group members reminded the man he had voted to name their group "Hope." One group member acknowledged his feelings but

nudged him to give space for hope and possibility: “I want to benefit and receive from the group. We are all humans and here to help each other.” Through the course of the group, the man began to relax his shield and started to smile and joke with the others. In our debriefing, the facilitators felt touched by this change in him. Counselor Fatimah remarked, “I was inspired by his smile and that despite his difficult story and discouragement, he could still smile.” Counselor Mohammed had a personal reaction: “When he talked about a friends’ betrayal, I had a flashback to something that had happened to me. I was disconnected for a moment but by me stepping back, it encouraged the group members to be the ‘voice of encouragement.’”

Then there was the “feisty women’s group” as I call them. These older women immediately took to the idea that changing one’s thoughts can change how one feels. It caught on like wildfire. They named the cognitive triangle “the survivor triangle” and immediately were able to come up with thoughts that felt more encouraging to them such as, “Even though I have financial issues, at least I am safe – not like in Syria.” In a role play at the end of the session, they were animatedly shouting out helpful thoughts that could support them: “We have fire in our hearts!” “We are brave.” “It was better that I came here with my daughter so I was able to protect her.”

I was astonished at the dramatic change in some of the women from last session to this one. One woman who had been kidnapped and raped by ISIS had been silent and withdrawn the last group. She sat slightly away from the other members, her body curled in and her eyes downcast. Through this session, I saw her grow stronger and taller with the energy and support of the group, and she claimed her voice, speaking out against the “voice of discouragement.”

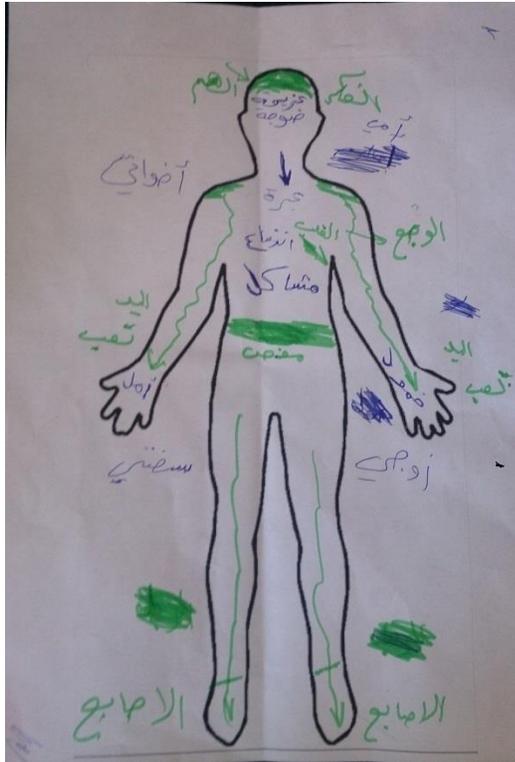
The session was very emotional, swinging from one extreme to another. The group members would burst into tears as they touched into their feelings of pain and loss. But then, just as quickly, the mood would change to lightness and laughter after they felt the relief from receiving support and validation. They deeply appreciated learning skills to help them handle their overwhelming emotions. I could see the anxiety in the facilitators when the survivors would break out in sobs, and I certainly felt my own. But then we realized that if we could just be with them and their pain, genuinely validating their suffering while gently opening up other possibilities, big emotions did not have to be a problem. Joy and sadness could co-exist and we could all ride the waves together.

Over time, I have become more comfortable with my role in the groups. Although I am not a facilitator, the participants welcome me warmly and they seem to feel comforted by my presence. As supervisors and advisors, we are seen as additional people who are caring and supporting the process. I’ve been experimenting with how to be a positive presence with my body language, providing smiles of encouragement to help create a safe space.

The feisty women’s group embraced me and Liyam, the psychotherapist trainer supervising the group, with particular vigor. The women commented that they see us as their adopted granddaughters and showered us with kisses and hugs. Their genuine warmth energized me throughout the week.

Session 3: Mind Body Awareness

In this session, we are building on the concepts and skills from session two and reinforcing the connection between the mind and the body. With trauma, we often lose touch of our bodies. Our breathing and body movements contract, which reduces our ability to cope. With a focused attention breathing exercise, we are helping survivors learn how to calm their thoughts and emotions by paying attention to their breathing. The body map exercise deepens survivors' awareness of where trauma "lives" in the body and how to use coping strategies and strengths to help counteract the physical and emotional pain. (See body map with notes on where trauma can appear in the body.)



In many of the groups this week, survivors came in feeling despondent from the news that United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is freezing resettlement interviews and cutting food vouchers. This distress presented a significant challenge for the facilitators: How do they both validate the fear and discouragement as survivors struggle to meet their basic needs, yet not let despair take over the group? These overwhelming difficulties provoked our own emotions and questions about whether we are doing enough in the face of such dire need and circumstances.

Yet, in all my years in working with trauma, it never ceases to amaze me how simple exercises in a safe, supportive environment can pave the way for clearer thinking and problem solving. After practicing some of the mind-body exercises, the comments of the survivors helped lift us all up again. One survivor said, "When I focused on my exhale, I felt my worries coming out and I felt lighter." Another shared "This exercise is reminding us that we are still human."

Reem, one of the facilitators, did not let the initial despair of the group bring her down. She intentionally provided all the group members with genuine care and kindness, reflecting the strength and dignity that she saw in each of them. I could see the group members light up in response. Justin, the psychotherapist trainer supervising the group, noted the power of the group support, "There was such a general sense of hopelessness and desperation in the beginning, with people feeling that nothing will help. But then one woman said, 'I feel strength when we come here.' I was amazed at how dramatically the mood changed in one session."

I attended a few men's groups where there were similar themes of discouragement. Many men acknowledged that the pain and stress of the torture and war had changed them negatively. They sometimes let their aggression out on their families and felt deep regret afterwards. One man said, "I don't want my family to be frightened by me."

Here again, despite the overwhelming challenges, we saw positive change. One group member last session was full of anger and negativity but this session was smiling, open and supportive of other

members. The facilitators asked about the change. He told of a big fight he had with his wife. He was furious and wanted to hurt her. But then he remembered to try the grounding exercise and took a chair outside to do it. (The grounding exercise helps survivors feel more stable in their bodies, returns them to the present moment and allows them to feel the support of the ground and chair.) When he returned inside, he was much calmer. His wife was amazed and said, "What is this, magic?" She was astonished at how much he was transformed. He was so excited that he taught his wife and friends the technique.

In the previous sessions, one man I observed was quiet and withdrawn. He was self-conscious about speaking because he had lost his teeth during the torture, and he was devastated by the loss of his three children who were killed in the war. During this session, the group broke into pairs to share their body maps. This activity allowed him to find his voice. He was able to feel safe enough to tell some of his story to another survivor. When they returned to the big group, he was active in the discussion for the first time. His body language had changed. He leaned forward and spoke with confidence. The other men showed deep compassion towards him and many remarked that they gained strength from hearing his experiences. One survivor said, "Our stories are nothing compared to his. If he can survive and move forward, so can we."

Throughout the week, we saw survivors giving examples of how they are making changes to break the cycle of unhelpful thoughts, feelings and behaviors. One survivor consciously focused on small positive events, such as giving support to a friend or hearing good news about his children, which give him strength. Another reflected on how his physiotherapy exercises were helping his low back pain and this encouraged him. One man had been distressed about how much he had been taking his anger out on his wife since his torture. He was determined to break this cycle of anger and aggression. He said, "I played card games with my wife rather than hurting her." He feels much closer to her now, and better about himself. A martial arts champion who had given up competing due to the trauma from the war has started to compete again, and the group celebrated this with him.

We are always making this journey together. Survivors bring in what seem to be insurmountable challenges and unfathomable pain and as helpers, we struggle to not descend into feelings of hopelessness. Just as we work with our clients, we also have to work with our own thoughts and feelings to consciously draw out hope and possibility. In one debriefing, counselor Lina helped us all to maintain hope as she described the change she had seen in one of the group members from intake to the third session. "When I first met him, he was unshaven, poorly dressed, and had a strong smell from not washing. He had made three suicide attempts recently. He could not focus and was not functioning well at all. He now has a new haircut, is clean and well dressed, pays attention in session and supports others. And some of his 'cheeky' personality has returned." Thank you, Lina.

Session 4: Honoring Our Life Story / River of Life

After building a sense of safety and confidence in the survivors during the first three counseling sessions, we slowly enter the trauma processing phase of the group cycle. In session four, we have them first imagine themselves as birds flying over rivers that represent their lives. They draw their rivers of life, starting with birth, placing symbols and labels for traumatic events and for times when life was calm or happy (pictured). They drew dotted lines to represent the future and were encouraged to place a symbol of hope on their river.



There are multiple purposes to this exercise. Trauma tends to cause people to focus only on the difficult moments, and they forget that their lives are a combination of difficult as well as joyful times. This exercise gives them a bigger perspective. Also, trauma fragments memories and causes confusion about past and present. The river of life helps survivors start to put their memories in chronological order. They are better able to see that these events are in the past and that they survived. By seeing happy moments represented, they can have a glimmer of hope that there may be better moments in the future. Lightly touching on the traumatic events without going into detail begins to assist group members in overcoming avoidance, preparing them for deeper trauma processing in the upcoming sessions.

In the groups, most survivors struggled initially with this exercise. I could feel and see the tension and emotions rise when the exercise was introduced. Some resisted doing the exercise at all. Some could only name the traumatic events. And others could not see any future for themselves. I noticed my own tension in my body, not knowing what would happen. This is a completely new session from what we had done in our previous counseling model and I feared that the group members would not be able to overcome their difficulties in doing this exercise.

As the session progressed, the counselors gently worked with each person individually to create a more complete picture of their lives that included some better moments and to identify a hope that even something small could get better. My heart warmed as I saw the compassion and kindness that the counselors brought to the survivors who were distressed doing the exercise. The counselors helped the survivors manage their emotions by prompting them to use the coping strategies they have been practicing.

Following one session, I interviewed counselor Ruba about her reflections facilitating this new and challenging session:

In the beginning of the session, it was difficult. But the end was more relaxed. I was afraid that the survivors wouldn't get the idea of putting their trauma experiences in a bigger perspective, that they would only talk about the difficult moments, and how I would deal with this since [their traumatic reactions] did happen. I was anxious, but this helped me tell them why we are doing this exercise, to help them understand.

I saw the biggest change in the women's group. At first, they all drew or listed just the difficult moments. We had to help them see little happier moments here and there. Then they were able to include many

happy experiences and then it was balanced. When they remembered their experiences through their life, it started to help to heal. The women said, "At first, we are a 'stuck stone,' we cannot remember." I noticed that once they overcame avoidance and added happy memories, I saw positive signs in their faces while they were drawing and re-ordering the events. It is so helpful to remember difficult and happy moments together. It resulted in good feelings. One survivor reflected after the exercise, "I have a feeling now that this was in the past and this feels good."

When we put the rivers in front of them, they liked how their lives were before, even though they experienced difficult moments. Looking back, they have a more positive take on it, saying, "We were able to overcome these events. This helps us have hope for the future." Some had a hard childhood but now feel they can be more positive. Others identified the people who helped them along the way. They remembered family members who supported them. They saw their strengths that could give them hope for the future. I had them share one of the good moments to their children. One woman said, "I want to tell my children about being with my brothers and being happy."

As the week went on, I noticed my body and mind become more relaxed as I saw the transformation from the painful expressions and emotions to relief and calm as the group members were able to gain perspective on their lives through "zooming out." The reflections I heard from the survivors as they looked at their rivers all together were truly profound: "From up here, everything seems small." "It is beautiful." "Life is short, let's try hard to be positive and make the best of life." "Whatever happened, life continues, with the joy and sadness." "Seeing what I've gone through, I see my strength." In my own life, I can so easily zoom in on the challenges, and this practice of seeing the joys and sadness gives me perspective as well. Thinking of the huge difficulties the survivors have faced, I thought to myself, "If they can make this shift, so can I."

Session 5: Difficult Moments (Part 1)

After having survivors dip their toes into the trauma waters in session four, in this session we feel we are jumping into the deep end. In session four we encouraged group members to briefly touch on their trauma without going too much into it. In sessions five and six the counselors “zoom in” and explore a “stuck memory” of one difficult moment that is causing the survivors significant distress.

The counselors describe the process to the survivors as “cleaning a wound” to help it heal properly. Understandably, we all had anticipatory anxiety about these sessions knowing we would be accompanying the survivors through the details of their horrific stories. The facilitators worried about managing intense emotional reactions, both the survivors’ and their own. The psychotherapist trainers and I entered these weeks wondering how we could best support the facilitators and survivors through these challenging sessions.

We prepared well. We did a lot of trainings and practice sessions with the counselors. The counselors conducted individual check-ins with the clients to review coping strategies and prepare them for the processing sessions. Survivors were given choices throughout the process about what to share and when to share. Some survivors were not ready to do this intense processing in a group and were given the option of processing individually.



Counselor Noor (pictured) reflected on the check-ins, the sessions up to this point and her experience in session five.

The check-in sessions gave me positive feedback about the new things we have been doing the past four weeks, especially the river of life. The survivors mentioned how they are using the cognitive triangle to manage their thoughts and feelings that were brought up from drawing their river of life. They are using their table legs for strength. One client had been having fainting spells and she realized that these were being caused by her emotions and thoughts from the trauma. Now she can manage these better and is having fewer fainting spells.

In session five, we heard a very difficult story in my group with co-facilitator Ghadeer. I knew the client before, because she and her son had been in a family session. She was so flat and depressed back then, she was numb and couldn't cry. Last session, in the difficult moments session, she finally told her story of having her brothers killed, some right in front of her. The women in the group were so engaged with her. Even when she was crying, she was also conscious about people around her. She received support. I was so admiring of her courage and patience. She managed so much when she was under stress and under fire. She was still standing. I reflected that to her.

Women can't talk about these stories at home because they don't want to burden their families. Here she was able to release all of these emotions and felt the benefit. All the clients were very engaged and supported her through the process. They were inspired and said, "We can't believe there is a woman who can tolerate all of this, the stories she told." I felt heavy but I was also amazed. After we finished, she was so relieved. She says she now trusts and believes in the process of cleaning the wound so it can heal.

In the men's groups this week, the counselors (pictured) had unique hurdles to overcome due to strong social and cultural prohibitions against men showing weakness and tears in front of other men. Furthermore, many are primary torture survivors and specifics of their torture cause them overwhelming shame and guilt that is difficult to name in front of others. This includes sexual torture and humiliation as well as being forced to witness the torture of family members and not being able to prevent it. We saw this resistance in comments at the beginning when they were invited to share their difficult moment. "Can you leave me alone?" "I can't do it." "I don't want to harm others." "I'm embarrassed to share these feelings."



The counselors normalized these fears and gently encouraged them, explaining the benefits of this process. Other men in the group powerfully shifted the reluctance to share by saying, "It is good to cry" and "We can't cry anywhere else, this is the place we can share our pain."

A few brave souls started to share. One man shared his intense feelings of guilt not being able to prevent the death of his cousin who was him killed in front of him. He said, "I have never shared this with anyone." In telling the story, the

man felt some relief from his guilt and shared his appreciation of the group. "I feel strong because of all of you. You were the hand that lifted these burdens." The survivors who helped support him benefited as well. One survivor noticed, "I feel better because I provided support." One man who witnessed the rape of a family member could not bring himself to share in front of the group and was offered individual sessions, but he still was there to support the other group members.

During these intense weeks, our group supervision sessions are critical for providing support for our counselors. In our small group, many spoke of how difficult it was to hear all these stories because of the deep empathy they feel, bringing tears to their eyes. The counselors also shared the challenges of wanting to talk about what they've heard, but also needing to honor privacy and spare family members the horrifying details. One counselor remarked, "It's like I have a secret life, I can't talk to anyone." I felt this as well as I heard many excruciatingly painful stories. It becomes hard to know where to put all these intense emotions that arise when hearing about experiences that make you question the state of humanity. Just like the rock exercise in session one, in our supervision group we practiced sharing the burden through support and exchanging ways of coping with these stories.

One counselor shared how she made sure she didn't form a picture as she was listening to the stories and this helped protect her. Another talked about using the grounding skills and breathing while she listened to stay calm. We validated the tears that come to our eyes unbidden in the face of such pain and how this deep empathy can be healing for survivors.

I brought up the concept of "vicarious resilience" and asked if they had experiences of feeling inspired in the sessions. The counselors immediately chimed in about how they feel so moved by the kindness and compassion the group members give each other, a glimpse of the best of humanity that is an antidote for the despair one can feel about the state of the world.

At the end of one of the groups this week, an elderly man burst out loudly, “Now I understand why you did the rock exercise the first session! It didn’t make sense then. Now I feel the support of my brothers in lifting my burden and I feel so much better after sharing.” Like this survivor, by the end of our supervision group we all felt lighter and were able to laugh again. We had lifted our burdens together.

Session 6: Difficult Moments (Part 2)

In order for all the participants to be able to share their distressing memory, the counselors facilitate “difficult moments” sessions over two meetings. We nervously wondered how survivors coped in between sessions. Not only were they dealing with difficult moments in sessions, they were also dealing with additional external challenges that affected their overall emotional landscape. The [recent media pictures of a refugee toddler](#) washed up to shore triggered strong emotional reactions, as did the news of waves of people trying to reach Europe. As conditions in Jordan become more desperate, many have started to wonder if they should try to make the journey to Europe. We are eternally grateful for our social workers who worked with the survivors during this time to help them to access resources to make their lives in Jordan easier.

The counselors asked the people who had shared the week before how they felt. The survivors described a range of experiences-- some felt their symptoms worsened at first but then were able to use their coping strategies and eventually felt lighter and freer of the weight that they had been carrying inside. Comments included, “There is some kind of happiness now that wasn’t there before.” “When I spoke I felt relieved. This thing in my chest has now been released.” “It was a hot session. I stayed bothered for two days and then I said to myself ‘finished.’ I want to live for the moment. I want to live for the day.” “I felt the pain come out of me and I feel better even though at first I didn’t want to talk.” As in many points in the group cycle where we have been holding our breaths, we were able to breathe a little more easily hearing how survivors had benefitted.



As we have mentioned before, survivors are also attending physiotherapy. I chatted with physiotherapist Kamal (pictured) about the progress he was seeing in the survivors. He made an interesting observation: “I noticed that the survivors who had not yet processed their traumatic memories were much more agitated as they had not released the power of the trauma from their bodies. The ones who had processed seemed more comfortable and stable even though they were tired.”

Those who had been adamant that they would never share their painful stories were inspired by the reports from their fellow group members. One woman had not participated much during the group, but her body language showed her distress. She finally told the story of her husband being killed. This was the first time she had released her emotions connected to this incident. The group members were riveted. They showed support through their body language, leaning in and being with her fully with their presence and caring.

Counselor Randa reflected on this experience. “At the end, I felt we needed to hold hands. I needed it. It helped us all feel the connection to each other and the support. I then had them say something positive and this lightened the mood. This story affected me a lot. As a mother, I felt her pain of losing her husband and now having to manage by herself with young kids in a foreign country.”

In the same group, Mohammed talked about his emotions hearing the story of a mother who witnessed a soldier threatening to harm her son. “The stories affect me much more now than they once did since I

am now married and may have children soon. It makes me think about what it would be like to have someone hurt my son.” After all the intense stories, Randa and Mohammed facilitated a lovely end to the group, having them reflect on how they felt. The women noticed how they felt better. “I took support instead of pain today.” “We came here and took everything inside of us out, and we feel much better.” The women smiled and beamed as they expressed their gratitude and appreciation for being encouraged and supported through this difficult journey. They chatted and laughed as they left.

I had learned that Wafa and Ruba’s group had a challenging situation in session five where one woman had some difficulties due to a health problem and the intensity of the session. The other women and facilitators gave their care to this woman, and once she felt better she wanted to tell her story. As for many, this was the first time she was able to speak about what happened to her. In session six, she thanked the group members. “This is a beautiful group, thank you for all the attention and care for me. People called me to check up on me. It felt good.” She had not been functioning well due to her depression and she reports she is now getting out of the house and making connections with others. Wafa commented, “She looks so much better. Her face is completely different. She is optimistic somehow.” Ruba noted, “The children see the difference in her. She is spending time with her children now. If she is napping, they wake her up and say, ‘It is time for group’ because they see how much the group is helping her.”

With exuberance, Wafa shared what this work means to her. “I feel so good. This is why we do this work, seeing this change. It’s like magic. Something changes within us. I feel so grateful for God to allow me to do this work. I just want to hug everyone.” Wafa’s vicarious resilience lifted me up after two weeks of incredibly difficult stories.

We resist hearing these stories survivors bring. The survivors themselves, counselors, psychotherapist trainers, me – we all have a natural instinct to want to turn away from the worst of the worst of these stories. One common theme throughout the cycle is “We are in this together.” We are all working to overcome our collective avoidance and to support each other to have the strength to face these realities. These weeks have shown repeatedly that by breaking through our fears, we can see the beauty again. I was struck by the many times I heard the word “beautiful” from the survivors and facilitators. Seeing the relief on the survivors’ faces after they overcame their deepest fears to “speak the unspeakable” and how they supported each other was truly beautiful.

Session 7: Grief and Loss / Reconnecting with Memories of Lost Loved Ones

In session seven, we focus on acknowledging and grieving the wide range of losses survivors have endured. In addition to the deaths of loved ones, survivors experience the loss of country, home, identity and dignity. Many survivors have missing loved ones and do not know if they are alive or dead. The session gives them an opportunity to talk about who or what they miss most as well as to explore ways of coping with the loss.

The sessions started with a discussion about traditional mourning rituals and the underlying purpose of those rituals. The groups that had mixed Syrians and Iraqis from rural and urban areas could see the commonalities of their communities' rituals. In the group discussions, it became clear that grieving is complicated for many survivors. Sometimes cultural norms specify a mourning period of time. When individuals experience war, torture and trauma, though, the grieving process can be more complicated and drawn out. Some survivors then feel guilty for grieving past the prescribed mourning period. Both men and women expressed feeling pressure to stay strong for their families and thus not wanting to show weakness by crying or expressing sadness. One woman who feels guilty for grieving said, "We want to hold our strength for our children."

Some survivors with missing loved ones named cultural edicts pressuring them to not grieve because if they do, it will be a "curse," meaning the loved one has died or will die. One woman, whose husband is missing, had resisted talking about her loss, because, "If I mourn for him, that means he is dead." Guilt feelings also inhibited the grieving process. Many feel guilty for not being able to save their loved ones, for having to leave people behind, or because they lived when others died (also known as "survivor guilt"). Establishing a "group culture" and normalizing all of these complicated feelings helped many of the survivors eventually share emotions that they are unable to share anywhere else.

In this group model, we purposely broadened the concept of "loss" beyond loss of people. This turned out to be important because many identified loss of country as more devastating to them than loss of loved ones, largely because it resulted in loss of identity and dignity. Sometimes refugees feel they face discrimination and don't belong in the guest country. The yearning for home is a desire to belong. One Syrian woman remarked, "I have lost everything. Everything can be compensated except for my homeland. I have been so humiliated here." Another commented, "Dignity and honor are the most important parts of yourself. But if you have lost them, what do you have? You lose your country, you lose your dignity. Neighbors say, 'You are Syrian, you must be part of ISIS and a terrorist.' This makes us grieve for our country and lose hope we will ever have a good life."

In one of our men's groups where the participants never hesitate to share their opinions, an unexpected conflict broke out about whether it was worse to lose one's country or one's family member. One man started by saying, "Losing our country is worse than losing our brother." Another countered, "What is the reason to live in your country if your whole family is dead?" The first man replied, "Country is always more important than your son's death." At this point the facilitator intervened and encouraged them not to compare, reinforcing that the experience of loss is unique to each individual. Another group member consoled those who feel isolated and alienated in Jordan, away from their homeland by saying, "It is up to each person to create relationships. I am your brother, we are your brothers. We are here for you."

In the second part of the group, the survivors broke into pairs to have a chance to share with a group member what they missed most about the person or other loss. Breaking up into pairs allowed survivors to make a more personal connection with another group member, to have more time to discuss their loss and also to empower the listener to provide support. We are preparing the group for the time when the group is over to be able to continue supporting each other outside the group. The partner discussions laid that foundation.

This exercise had a tremendous effect on one father who had lost his wife and is struggling to support his kids. Loss also often puts people in unfamiliar family roles. The man had previously been the primary provider and hadn't had much of a role in parenting his children and running the household. He shared with his partner how he missed his wife who was "funny and lovable" and also how hard it is to manage the home. His partner was impressed with him, saying, "I don't know how you make it on your own. I can only imagine how hard it is. How do you cook and clean? I wouldn't be able to function!" The father said, "It made me feel so much better to hear him say I was doing a great job with the kids. I used to think what my wife did was easy, but it is not easy!"

Others commented on their experience after the pair work. "When I opened my wound, it is as if he is the doctor helping me heal the pain." "I feel more relaxed. You opened your heart and the support helped me be patient." "I feel his pain when I listen to him, but I feel good that I can give him encouragement." "I felt his pain is my pain. We are helping each other."

Many of the groups had a lovely silent candle ritual at the end that allowed them to remember their loved ones and silently grieve with the support of the group. We all participated, reinforcing that we have all experienced loss and this common experience brings us together. They were also able to silently say something to their loved ones they had not been able to say due to the suddenness of death. I felt the power of this ritual and the solemn but sweet mood of the group as we remembered our loved ones.

Session 8: Living with Loss

In this session, we work with the survivors to identify what they have learned and how they have gained strength from those they have lost, to begin to restore some of their losses and rebuild their lives. In sessions seven and eight we use a story of a survivor, Cynthia, to highlight issues of loss and coping. In the first part of the story, Cynthia's husband and middle daughter die in a war. Cynthia survives torture and lives with her young son. She is separated from an older daughter because of the war. Following the story, survivors discuss what Cynthia lost, what helped her to bear the pain, and how she recalled positive memories. Survivors can relate to her losses, torture and uncertain future. In the second part of the story, Cynthia begins to rebuild her life, using the strengths she learned from her lost loved ones.

As we saw in session seven, grieving is complicated for survivors. Restoring losses and rebuilding lives can also present dilemmas. Many survivors spoke of being expected to stay grieving and not move on, facing judgment or worse. One man noticed, "Some people stay in mourning all their lives. My mother still wears black after many years, even to weddings. She seems stuck." Many widowed women expressed being pressured to stay loyal to their dead husband by not moving on. One woman lost her husband and has been raising her kids alone for years. She would like to re-marry, but her in-laws are threatening to take the kids if she does so.



Alaa (pictured), a counselor, spoke to the dilemma that many women face in terms of moving on or even taking care of themselves.

When we read the second part of Cynthia's story, how she found a job and started to form new relationships, the women had a lot of ideas of ways Cynthia could move on and still have a good life despite her losses. They put a lot of options out for her. But when we moved the conversation to talking about themselves, they only talked about what they could do for their children. I encouraged them to think about themselves but they had a hard time doing this. Arabic women feel it is their mission in life to take care of their children and they feel selfish if they focus on themselves. I think focusing on their kids is also a way for them to push back their pain.

Eventually the conversation started to shift. One woman said it helps her kids when they see her wearing make-up and taking care of herself. At the end, they started to talk about future plans and how to use grief to empower themselves. One said, "I need to do something to feel good, to remember my husband and to do something for him. He would want to see me have a good life, feeling happy. He would want me to go to this wedding and feel better."

In session eight, we try to convey that we can hold two processes at once: grieving and honoring the memory of our loved ones while at the same time rebuilding our lives. Alaa mentioned that in this group, as facilitators, she and Jafar, another counselor, had inadvertently helped normalize grieving and sadness. "The women said they feel validated when they see me and Jafar tear up. This makes them feel there is hope, that there are good people in the world. This made me feel very good." I saw over and

over again in groups how this genuine presence and the qualities of the facilitators created this wonderful healing environment.

The survivors brought symbols of the “lessons learned” or strengths of the person or country they have lost. Those who had lost their countries mentioned songs, traditions and local sayings to help them reclaim their pride and dignity. Others discussed positive learnings from those family members they have lost. One man said, “I learned from my father all his principles and these are what has helped me become self-sufficient.” A woman told the group she was married at 14 years old and her mother-in-law “taught me everything. She always taught me to do the right thing.” One man, whose son had died, remembered that his son used to say, “If God is for you, who can be against you?” and this reminds him to say this to himself. Some commented that they have learned from their family members to “love well” and are focusing on loving the family members who are still alive, because, after all, “war doesn’t end love.”

One woman is very concretely using what she gained from her father to make a better life for herself and her family here in Jordan: “My dad was a photographer -- this is what I took from him. Now I have started to do photography and my kids benefit because of the income. His qualities strengthened me and gave me confidence.”

We often make reference to the “toolbox” or “suitcase of coping skills.” The survivors are adding skills and strengths as they go through the group cycle. Now they have consciously added to their suitcase the lessons they have learned about how to live and love well, values, and qualities and are able to apply these to their current challenges.

In many of the survivors’ comments we hear echoes of the river of life. In the bittersweet mood of the group many survivors remarked, “Life goes on...life continues.” Indeed, life continues with sadness and strength, joy and pain, doubt and confidence. I saw a calmness and grace in the survivors as they held these qualities together.

Session 9: Reconnection to Self, Community and the Future

In session nine, we aim to help survivors reconnect with their dignity and identity and look towards the future. We use the metaphor of a tree that may have had undergone stress and lost leaves and limbs but still remains a tree with strong roots and resilience, sprouting new life. In the second part of the session, we use a “ladder” to help survivors look to the future and set goals, building on the skills they have learned and instilling confidence that they can create a better life for themselves.

In the check-in discussions in the beginning of the 9th session, we saw “sprouts” of encouraging change emerge from the challenging trauma and grief sessions. We saw grief transformed into a source of strength and commitment to moving forward. One woman reflecting on session eight commented, “I still remember my daughter and smell her scent on her clothes. But now it makes me smile, not just cry.”

Another woman was dramatically transformed by having “permission” to not stay trapped in a grieving process that was preventing her from fully living her life. She exclaimed, “I’m tired of grieving, I’m letting go. I went to the hairdresser and had them cut and dye my hair. I wanted a change, not to be stuck in my grief. I sprayed perfume and put on make-up. I want to go on. I’m different now. I laugh. I am much stronger and can move forward with my life. I still miss my mother, but I’ve had enough of being stuck. I say to myself, ‘Whatever has conquered you, you can conquer.’ I may cry still sometimes but that is ok.” With a huge smile and bursting with enthusiasm, she stood up and posed for the group, showing off her new look. All the women applauded and drew inspiration from her.

Of course, the survivors are also facing on-going challenges. With the increase in news coverage of refugees making it to Europe, more are considering moving on despite the risks. One mother despaired that her son might attempt the journey to Europe soon and is very worried. “I don’t want to go but feel I would need to go with him.” As in all the groups, there is room for joy and sorrow and the group supported her in this difficult situation.



cut off, dead leaves and scars on the trunk. But the roots went deep into the ground and new leaves and fruit were emerging.

The facilitators led discussions that became quite profound at times, starting with the question “Is the tree still a tree even when it has lost its limbs?” The survivors were quickly able to make the connection

To prompt a meaningful discussion using the tree metaphor, our counselors unleashed their endless creativity and artistic flair (pictured), painting illustrative trees with all their brokenness and beauty. One group used a large plant to bring the metaphor alive. They presented a tree that had been broken in places, limbs

from the metaphor to their lives, as one reflected, “This tree resembles us. We are injured, broken in places but still alive with the ability to thrive again.” They identified their roots as what makes them strong and what they carry with them wherever they go: family and ancestors, upbringing, ethics, values, culture and faith. They named patience, good deeds, dignity and identity as the qualities of their trunk, the core of who they are. The survivors recognized that they can reclaim these internal strengths even in a new place with difficult circumstances. Their “fruits” were what they contribute to others: teaching, parenting, spreading good values, giving strength and courage to others as well as accomplishments, or “fruits of their efforts.” Many facilitators asked the survivors, “What kind of tree are you?” One woman replied with a smile, “I am a date tree, the roots and trunk are strong and the fruits are healthy and beneficial to others.”

In these conversations I could see the survivors shed some of the pain and shame that bent their trees. Their posture straightened and their faces blossomed as they restored their dignity by connecting with their resilient and generous essences. The survivors resonated with the hopefulness of the metaphor and commented on the new leaves and branches growing on the tree. One woman remarked, “It is going to regrow. It is like a human, it falls and grows again.” Another said, “I can make my dreams happen anywhere, no matter what has happened.”



The facilitators transitioned to talking about goals as a way to “grow fruits.” The facilitators first had to clarify the difference between unrealistic dreams that they may not have much control over (such as resettlement or being able to go back to Syria) and short term goals they could accomplish and make their lives better no matter where they are. They identified a goal at the top of the ladder, and then the facilitators instructed them break down the goal into small achievable steps. To help support success, the facilitators asked, “Who supports you?” to remind them of external resources and “What if a step is broken?” to help them think about overcoming potential obstacles.

In the teen girls group, the girls recognized the benefit of focusing on goals even though they may want to eventually be resettled in another country. One reflected, “We want to be resettled in the U.S. but don’t know when that will happen. I want to make the best of my time here.” They set goals of continuing their education, studying music, learning English and learning to cook. In a men’s group, one of the men made a drawing of everyone’s goals, symbolically represented as if they were climbing a mountain together, supporting each other along the way.

In sessions eight and nine, we saw a collective shift. Those in session four who could not see any future for themselves are now seeing new sprouts -- the new life that is possible. One man referred to the river, “Just as the river keeps flowing...life continues.” He made the point that since life continues he may as well try to influence his future, setting goals to create more “moments of joy” on his river. I could feel the energy generated as survivors were moving from paralysis and despair to action, taking back the power that was taken away from them and once again becoming agents of change in their lives. Dignity reclaimed is a spectacular sight.

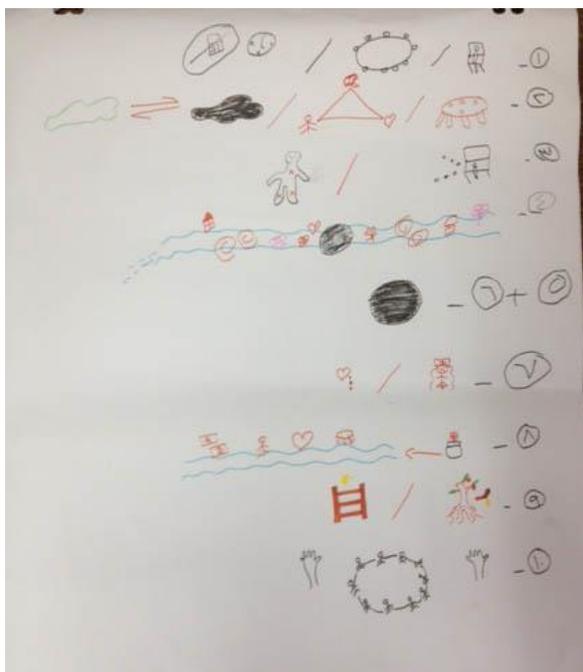
Session 10: Consolidating Gains and Saying Goodbye

In the final session of the counseling group cycle, we provide survivors an opportunity to say a “good goodbye” to the group. With war and displacement, many of them were unable to say goodbye to people they have lost. Also, by reflecting on what they learned from the group and gave to each other, they take these lessons forward with them as their [river of life](#) continues. Given all the contextual difficulties for clients, we wondered what would be the fruits of the group? Across the sessions, story after story, what we heard amazed us beyond any of our expectations.

After a discussion on the meaning of goodbyes, the facilitators reviewed the group sessions. Counselors Islam and Wafa wonderfully adapted the review to their group of elderly women who could not read or write, drawing creative symbols for each session (pictured). The facilitators asked the groups what touched them the most and what they would carry with them. Many of the facilitators had been concerned at the beginning of the group cycle about whether the clients would understand the cognitive triangle ([“Triangle of Life”](#)) from session two. In fact, survivors identified that the concept of thoughts, feelings and behaviors being connected was incredibly helpful to them, regardless of age, gender or education level.

Reflections on the group

The survivors mentioned that by actively working to change their thoughts and to make better choices about their behaviors, they significantly improved their well-being and feel empowered to make positive changes in their lives. One survivor used imagery to help him deal with unhelpful thoughts. “The triangle is always in my mind. When I have a negative thought, I call the fire brigade and put water on it straight away.” Some survivors are taking steps to improve their lives. “I’m taking action rather than sitting around and waiting.” Others are controlling their anger so as to not hurt themselves or others or taking steps to improve their health. Several survivors are rediscovering their passions, “It is because of the group, I want to play music again. I am no longer drowning in negativity.”



The skills the survivors learned and practiced in group helped them cope better even in the face of ongoing stressors and losses. “CVT has helped me find more balance in dealing with reality. I just found out my friend was killed in Baghdad and I am sad. But I know I can cope with things that I’m facing.” They are less focused on what they cannot control (such as resettlement) and more energized to take action to make their lives better in the present. Many are doing this by connecting with others. “Previously I faced ‘blackness’ and depression, but now I connect with my wife and go out with my family.” One elderly tribal leader proudly talked about his increased engagement with social media which makes him feel less alone. “I used to have only 15 friends on Facebook. Now I have 500 friends because I started to ‘like’ and ‘comment’ more on other people’s posts. I could only do this by changing my thinking

about things and trusting more.”

For some, [the river of life](#) was the most powerful session. By seeing the pain and joy of the river, they gained a sense of peace and acceptance. “Life is sweet and hard but life continues...” For many others, the difficult moments sessions changed them the most. “The difficult moments session was the best. I was able to say what was in my chest. I realized I am not the only one going through this. I have more perspective now.” Many had been trying to stay strong for their families but the effort at keeping everything in literally made them feel they could not breathe. One man noticed a rejuvenation after he shared his difficult moment, “It has been like oxygen. When we have come here and been able to speak about everything, it has been like breathing fresh air.” They spoke of being released from a burden. “There are things I can speak here that I can’t speak anywhere else. My problems are lighter. Trust has been most important. The weight upon our hearts has become lighter.”

Many of the comments pointed to overall improvement in confidence, hope, strength, inner calm, humor and functioning. “I was always confused and depressed, but this has gotten better. I can focus better, and I have more energy.” We saw increased resilience in the survivors. During the check-in, one man described stressful events from the week before. He was caught working and went to jail where authorities threatened to deport him to Syria. These difficulties did not stop him from laughing and joking throughout the group. He commented, “I feel good to make you laugh. Before, you couldn’t pay me to come, but now I come eagerly for free.”

Shored up dignity and internal strengths were evident in survivors’ smiles and appearance. Most of the survivors dressed up for the last day, and we all enjoyed singing and dancing. One member played the oud, a traditional musical instrument that he had stopped playing due to trauma, while another sighed contentedly, “This is a once in a lifetime experience.”

Group support

Beyond the skills that the group members learned, the group support exponentially maximized the benefit. Throughout the sessions, the facilitators encouraged the group members to connect with each other outside of group to add to their [“table legs”](#) of external resources. We heard many stories about how they visit each other and call if someone doesn’t come to a session to check on them. Some have coffee after group. Many group members formed “WhatsApp” (a social media tool) groups to communicate and they have plans to continue to meet and visit each other. Although the group was ending in its official form, one survivor suggested we call the last session the “See you soon group”



rather than the goodbye group. The survivors have aspirations to gather their resources to lift the burden together as they deal with the many life challenges. One man rallied the others, saying, “We should do something practical together, to bring us to another level.”

Nothing can properly convey the enormity of what it meant to survivors to be accepted for who they are, even after exposing their most vulnerable, pained selves. In one group, two men wept openly at the prospect of saying goodbye as they talked about how the acceptance from the group touched them deeply. One

of the other men leaned forward and gently said to them, “Your tears are precious for us” reflecting the warm, embracing culture of the group that allowed men, many who are leaders, a place to be vulnerable. “This is a safe place to cry. I’m more compassionate now. My volcano of tears exploded and no one judged me.” Another man said, “I express myself and people listen. I haven’t been able to cry. Here I was able to cry, and I feel better. Otherwise, I would have exploded inside.” Humor and laughter permeated the serious moments as one man said to others, “You are my brothers from another mother.”

Transformations

The stories of profound transformation left me the most speechless: Survivors feeling human again, breaking cycles of violence in their homes, challenging their own prejudices and reconciling with those who they perceived as enemies. These changes create ripple effects of hope and healing through families and communities.

Some survivors stated they are different people now as they rediscovered their identity and humanity. One man had been a very convincing voice of discouragement in the beginning, struggling with anger and depression. He recounted, “Before, I felt I was an animal. I just ate and slept. I didn’t trust anyone and wouldn’t talk to anyone, even my remaining family members. Now I talk to my sister. We walk together. My thinking has changed. I can be empathic to others and so can deal with people better. I have more energy.” Another said, “At the beginning, I was nothing. Now I am a person I can be proud of.”

Due to traumatic reactions, the stress of displacement and changing gender roles, many survivors had talked about an increase in their physical aggression towards others, particularly family members. This caused a lot of shame. In the last sessions, an overwhelming number of parents talked about how they have changed and stopped hurting their children and spouses, thereby stopping cycles of violence. Several parents shared, “I want to raise my children right. I have been neglecting them. I want to understand them and give them my best instead of hitting them.”

As we can recall from the first group session, entering a group with people from other religions and nationalities was very scary for survivors. Overcoming their own assumptions against the “other” was a theme we heard in many of the groups. One woman described her journey of transforming her fear and prejudice. “At first I thought she (another group member) was a terrorist! I was afraid of her and avoided walking with her after the group. Now I call her over as soon as I see her and give her a kiss. Imagine what a separation there was between us! Now we love each other.”

One man used the [“triangle of life”](#) to change his negative thinking towards other groups. “I used the triangle to change my thoughts about Iraqis and Sabeans and this helped me cure my own discrimination and inability to cope with differences. We are Syrians and Iraqis, we are here together to support each other.” He went on to say that he feels “free as a bird” now that he is less angry and distrusting of others, and he has redirected his anger into wanting to “strengthen the well of goodness in others.” He expressed big aspirations for reconciliation in the region, saying, “We want the Arab world to come together like before and for foreigners to see us other than terrorists.”

Conclusion

An ending wouldn’t be an ending without a visit to the feisty women’s group, the last group on the last day of my time in Jordan. They greeted me warmly, saying, “We are the naughty group.” They demonstrated this throughout the group by singing “racy” lyrics, trying to marry off the facilitators, and

making risqué jokes with a wink and a smile. Of course, this laughter was woven through the waves of tears and intense emotion that took us all on the emotional ride. The room was full of hugs and tears as we shared a meal to honor each other and celebrate and to say goodbye. They celebrated in good form, singing, dancing and sharing appreciation of each other. A small, wrinkled Iraqi woman with beautiful eyes and a strong voice started serenading the group with traditional love songs, singing through her sobs. Joy and pain, the splendor of reclaiming dignity and finding voice, the transformative power of love and connection, were all encompassed in this moment. I am tearing up as I write this and remember my heart vibrating with gratitude for all of those who allowed me to be on this voyage with them. Bearing witness to this capacity to tolerate pain, to overcome prejudice, to reach out with love and compassion, and to overcome the most unbelievable adversity transformed me. I am different.



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

CVT International Headquarters

2356 University Avenue West, Suite 430

St. Paul, MN 55114

612.436.4800 – cvt@cvt.org

www.cvt.org

©2015 The Center for Victims of Torture