

Report from the Field: Healing Grief and Anger in the Middle East

It's hard to find a more dramatic example of violence perpetuating violence than in the battle-scarred Middle East. Could EMDR possibly break the decades-old cycle of violence in this region?

In early 2000, a group of HAP members from Israel organized a humanitarian program of EMDR training for Palestinian psychotherapists. The underlying assumption at that time was that both Palestinians and Israelis - enemies or not - were suffering, and the need to stop the suffering should rise above politics. Unfortunately, the events that have transpired since that time have made this type of cooperative effort far more difficult. Still, many EMDR therapists stand ready to resume this work as soon as possible.

In August of 2001, just weeks before 9/11 shook the world, a joint U.S.-European team of five EMDR HAP volunteers - including two specialists in EMDR for children - traveled to the Palestinian areas to try to address the ongoing suffering. During two separate training programs in Ramallah and Gaza, we trained 59 professional therapists and paraprofessional counselors in the EMDR method for treating trauma. A specialized training model incorporating extended practice, four supervised clinical practicums, post-training study groups, and follow-up consultation was used based on its effectiveness in previous HAP projects.

In the Middle East, children and adults are directly confronted with violence or threats of violence on a near-daily basis.

A tragic cycle repeatedly plays out, of violence leading to terror and grief, which then leads to rage and to new acts of violence. Individuals caught up in this cycle are often very troubled by their feelings - their rage is frequently linked with the distress of helplessness and frustration. In these Palestinian trainings, and actually on both sides of this highly politicized divide, we have repeatedly observed that EMDR can "soften" the visceral aspects of this rage. With this emotional shift, the individual is able to more easily recognize and choose constructive alternatives for resolution of anger. In more than one instance, expressed feelings of hatred have shifted to hope.

In one memorable instance, a Palestinian father of four underwent EMDR as part of our program there. When he began the session, he was filled with homicidal rage toward all Israelis. At the end of the session, he reported feeling "much better" and spoke these words:

"You must always remember: where there is life, there is hope."

In the 18 months since his session, this man has tirelessly worked to establish EMDR programs for children in West Bank refugee camps. He has given permission for his story to be told in order that others might also have hope.

The Palestinian project includes an evaluation component designed to document the success of the mission with data collected from trainees, including the frequency of use and effectiveness based on standardized measures. Reports are that the majority of trainees are using EMDR, and are anxious to continue their training when conditions are once again safe. In the meantime, communications via email are ongoing between the trainees and members of the EMDR training team.

In the small number of Middle East programs to date, it is clear we have just begun to tap the potential of EMDR to break this cycle of violence. More extensive training is needed in all of the affected areas. HAP is committed to continuing this effort to provide the children of this conflict with better alternatives as they face the future.