

# **Let's talk about Gaza**

## **Work realities of a physiologist in the Gaza Strip**

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Since its foundation in 1990, the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) has been aiming at enhancing the community's capacity of the community to deal with mental health problems in the Gaza Strip. Bessan Shehada, project coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip talked to Hassan Zyada who works as a physiologist at GCMHP. Hassan described the mental effects of the siege and his work at GCMHP, its realities and challenges.

### **How does the imposed siege on Gaza Strip impact people's way of living?**

Due to the oppressive measures the Israeli occupation has imposed on the Gaza Strip, people have been affected on all levels. During the past 10 years, the siege itself has not been the only kind of oppression; a lot of attacks, assassinations and wars have been carried out on Gazans. Accordingly, common feelings among the people here are helplessness, hopelessness and frustration.

### **How do Gazans react to the hardships induced by the siege?**

The deterioration of all aspects of life in Gaza has been increasing, and people try to find ways of adapting to it and living along. However, there have been no positive results to these attempts. Instead, people in Gaza have been becoming even more hopeless and lost, which makes them unable to think creatively and innovatively. Even worse, people tend to have more negative feelings and to show symptoms of depression.

### **What are the main effects of the siege on the people?**

On the general level, people tend to complain by blaming 'the other' for bearing the responsibility of their own misery. Furthermore, you find political intolerance and short handing of identity among the people. Let me explain this: Identity usually consists of several lifestyle factors such as political, religious or social. In Gaza, some people have overdeveloped some factors whereas some factors remain underdeveloped. Accordingly, the more politically involved the people are, the more sensitive and intolerant they become. This has driven people to act violently and to commit crimes. This phenomenon is called masked violence: It means that people have started to neglect and to feel irresponsible for the public. This leads people to not paying bills or even destroying public facilities. Also, employees don't perform well professionally or take advantage of their positions to feed personal interests. In general, people here started feeling that Gaza is no place to live in and some of the people are even thinking of ending their lives. The new generation mostly thinks about a future outside of Gaza.

### **What about the personal level?**

All these pressures also affect personal relationships. Verbal or physical violence might be translated by the unemployed husband into hatred towards his wife or children. Also, the wife might get violent with her children, and children might become violent outside of the house. There is also an obvious increase in health problems. We can see a clear decrease in life expectancy due to the fact that there are now more young people who suffer from diabetes, heart problems, digestive problems and blood problems. All these health problems are caused by negative feelings and pressure; it is psychological.

### **How has the siege been affecting the youth in Gaza?**

Regarding future plans, youth have started having second thoughts about marriage for example. It takes a lot of effort and money, so they feel upset and hesitant about taking this decision. Moreover, divorce cases have been increasing which affects youth's decisions. We receive a lot of complaints and consultations on violence related problems. On the level of psychological sufferings, there are a lot of problems that the youth has been suffering from such as depression, fear, trauma, compulsive obsession and body disturbance, which people most of the time don't recognize as serious problems that should be taken care of.

### **What about children?**

Children make up the weakest part of society. They are the most sensitive and the most severely affected by pressure. They are the mirror that reflects the conflicts and sufferings that exist within their families and generally in the community. Most of the complaints we receive concerning children are related to their academic performances, attention and focus, sleeping problems, violence, communication, discipline and bedwetting.

### **What programs do you have for helping them?**

Our programs work on several levels: awareness, first aid, and specialized interference. We try to spread more awareness and knowledge about the effects of the situation from a psychological perspective. There are people who most likely develop psychological syndromes especially after the last war during the summer of 2014. Hence, we attempt to deal with them in the first stages and target them in special programs. We also have programs that target parents, children, and kindergarten care-givers. Some programs target school students: We observe children and try to recognize syndromes or side effects of psychological problems so we redirect them to special programs that are able to deal with them professionally. Furthermore, we have programs that target professionals working in the health, legal, security and media sectors.

### **Who are the ones that seek help at your facilities the most?**

I don't think there are any differences between types of people: Men and women, old and young are seeking help.

### **Do you prescribe sessions or drugs in order to cure these cases?**

It depends on the level of side effects and how far they affect the patients' daily activities. For most of the children, we engage in sessions and activities. In rare cases, we prescribe drugs. The same applies for adults.

**In such a situation, care-givers in the health sector are also exposed to the same dangers. How do you deal with them?**

There is a professional monitoring over people who deliver health care. In our case, we as doctors have been victims alongside with the people we work with, so we have to switch from being a victim to care-givers. This is difficult. There are also programs at the center for dealing with care-givers, as we also encourage other associations and centers to target those persons in such support programs. Obviously, we can't send our teams to take care of people when they themselves need support.

**What can you say regarding suicide? How has its rate been evolving in the past 10 years?**

There are a noticeable number of suicide cases but it cannot be called a phenomena. It's true that depression and hopelessness are increasing but there are also reasons for people not to commit suicide such as being educated, religious and responsible. People are more aware now of death; and they don't want it. People want to live more than anything else. Most of the people who committed suicide must have suffered from severe psychological syndromes that no one had recognized before. Committing suicide requires planning, and depression itself does not lead to planning suicide; a syndrome can.

**What is your advice to people on how to release stress and be healthier on their own?**

Accept value and appreciate the experiences you go through. Express yourself more, especially to people close to you such as you family and friends in order to release negative energy. Try to understand and explain to the children why they can't get what they want when the parents are poor. Children are very sensitive about asking for things, so they should be appreciated and psychologically supported. People should focus their energy on building positive contact with their children, connecting with friends, and taking advantage of the things they have. Networking with each other doesn't cost money so it should be appreciated more. The Israeli occupation is always trying to strategically weaken the connections between the people in our society. They aim at pushing people into a state of helplessness, which makes people lose their energy for living and standing strong.

**Why are Palestinian people still upholding their appreciation and acceptance for themselves?**

Because they are still living the life of the occupied which provokes them to resist and to stay alive. People's engagement in resistance is psychologically supportive of maintaining social connectivity, which the occupation always tries to break.