

Children's wellness and Focusing Project in Gaza

Focusing Training Programme in Gaza City, Gaza, Palestine

29th December 2011 - January 4th 2012

This is a report of the first Focusing training programme delivered in Gaza between December 29th and January 4th 2012. A team of 4 from the UK, Ireland and Palestine travelled to Gaza via Egypt to deliver a 4 day training programme in 'Using Focusing for Yourself' to staff and volunteers from NGO's operating in Gaza. The team were hosted by the Palestine Trauma Centre – Gaza who recruited learners, sourced the venue, and provided welcome hospitality.

Planning

This project has been 3 years in planning including preparation and translation of training materials, testing the materials with Arabic speakers, and pooling approaches to training to come up with a training programme we could own jointly. The Focusing Institute provided some funding for developing and translating materials with subsequent funding from individual focusers, Quaker Peace and Social Witness (UK) and Irish Quaker Faith in Action. There have been a number of delays due to border closures and difficulties obtaining visas. This gave us the opportunity to fully prepare including a test run with members of the Board of PTC - UK in Hatfield.

The Training Programme

The course was attended by 21 people including a number of senior staff from local agencies including the head of school counselling from the Ministry of Education, a project manager in Mercy Corps and the programme director of the Centre for Mind Body Medicine and members of the PTC-Gaza board. The majority of participants were field workers such as psychologists, social workers, and animators.

The objective of the course was to teach people to be able to use Focusing for themselves and companion someone else in a Focusing session. The programme was varied with a range of activities including drama, drawing, using objects, breath work and movement. The main focus was on practicing Focusing skills one to one. Topics covered included presence language, pausing, resiliency, safe place exercise, and reflective listening.

The course received an enthusiastic response with Ahmed, the local organiser saying it had exceeded his expectations. There was general agreement that Focusing would help people in Gaza and they were keen for us to return and provide additional training.

Impressions of Gaza

Gaza is 46 km long and 10 km wide and is home to 2 million people. It is densely populated and many people live in camps as displaced people - most of which were set up around 1948. Some camp houses are very make-shift with corrugated roofs while others have rebuilt their camp dwelling with a more permanent house. We were shown large areas where homes, mosques, schools and hospitals had been destroyed in the 2008-9 war. The procedure for crossing the border is long and drawn out and we were told that the 4 hour wait and 6 passport inspections we experienced was a smooth crossing and it could take much longer. There is a quota of Palestinians allowed into Egypt each day and people can have to wait up to two weeks for their place.

Next Steps

At a meeting with PTC on the last day we agreed to work with them on a strategy to develop Focusing in Gaza, and in particular, work with a core group who can be trained to introduce Focusing to others and provide supervision. We also agreed to fix a date to return to Gaza to provide further training to the same participants.

We were impressed with the sincerity of the PTC board and all the staff and volunteers we met and their general desire to help their fellow Palestinians. We think PTC will be a good partner to work with to develop Focusing in Gaza.

The group we trained need further training to become more proficient in using Focusing for themselves and supporting a companion in Focusing. Then a core group will be trained as Focusing Practitioners.

Background

Palestine Trauma Centre – UK was set up in 2010 with the aim to:

- Build a network of specialist trainers in trauma therapies
- Provide emergency aid techniques for Gaza's mental health workers
- Design, deliver and evaluate training courses.

A visit by PTC board members in 2010 assessed the feasibility of travelling to Gaza and offered an introduction to Focusing and other techniques. This visit to teach Focusing is the first training programme to be delivered in Gaza on behalf of PTC-UK.

Dr. Mohamed Altawil is one of the founding members of PTC – Gaza and PTC – UK and the Focusing project is a step towards realising his vision to provide people in Gaza with skills to help them overcome the trauma of war and isolation. His research that found that more than 50% of children in Gaza are showing signs of post traumatic stress disorder. His search for ways of helping his people led to a meeting with representatives of the Focusing Institute to discuss whether Focusing could help people in Gaza.

Focusing is a way of becoming aware of our feelings and how we experience them in our bodies. It is a way of putting us in touch with our own body wisdom for healing. Community Wellness Focusing was developed in Afghanistan as a way for communities to support wellness by teaching Focusing as an approach that local people can promote and develop. It is currently being used in Afghanistan, Pakistan, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and South Africa.

Conclusion

We were amazed at the hospitality we received with an invitation for a meal at someone's house each night. All in all this was a rich experience and we have been challenged and changed by what we encountered in Gaza. We are full of admiration for a people who were working hard to rebuild shattered homes and lives with an uncertain future ahead of them. All in all I am left with an impression of a warm and sincere group of people who are struggling to support their community through times of unimaginable difficulty.

Jerry Conway - February 2012