

The Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP)

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## **ATOP MEANINGFULWORLD POST CONFLICT/WAR MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH PROJECT IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

**Training, healing, empowering, and educating for continued Psychosocial Recovery in  
Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon**

**By Blanka Angyal**

ATOP Meaningfulworld's goal for this post war recovery, peace building and healing mission was to promote the advancement of knowledge about the immediate and long-term human consequences of traumatic events and educate mental health professionals, educators, doctors/nurses, or other service providers about effective methods of prevention, relief and restoration of trauma. We have been to Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon and had the opportunity to observe, learn, educate, and share our 7-step Integrative Healing Model for engendering inner peace, well-being, and prevention of trauma.

### **Palestine**

A series of programs were scheduled: A training program at Arab American University at Janine, and another at Berzeit University, as well as collaborative meetings with Ministers of Social Welfare, Diplomatic Relations, and Prisoners Affairs, and local television and newspapers. The training program at Berzeit was organized by the psychology department. Members of the faculty welcomed us with an elaborate and luscious lunch and expressed curiosity about integrative healing methods and new trends in psychology. The auditorium was filled with over fifty students and faculty eager to participate in the workshop. The main focus of the presentation was anger management, practicing forgiveness and environmental consciousness. A professor noted that it is hard to work on anger and forgiveness while the conflict is ongoing and when there is no justice or resolution, while a student recognized the effect anger has on the individual and quoted Buddha, "When you are angry, you are the one who holds a coal... You are the only one burning yourself." The students shared that the consequences of trauma is ever present as Israel continues to violate the UN resolutions, signing off for plans to build 300 new settlements near Ramallah where we worked. In addition, many Israelis celebrated when dozens of Israeli settlers and members of occupation forces invaded the Al Haram Al Sharif compound, arresting the top Palestinian religious leader and preventing Muslims praying at the holy site. This caused tremendous anger, helplessness and uncertainty, sabotaging U.S. moves to rekindle peace talks.

The students at Berzeit University were curious and enthusiastic about the integrative healing methods and excited to try some of the essential oils and partake in emotional release through chakra balancing movements.



Berzeit University



Arab American University at Janine



Berzeit University

### **Crossing the Israeli borders to go to Jordan:**

Crossing the borders from Palestine to Jordan was an ordeal since the borders are Israeli. As we concluded the workshop, a taxi picked us up and we headed towards the bridge crossing into Jordan in a rush to make it before sundown. Due to the occupation, all travels in Palestine need to be completed by sundown, and colleges, universities and companies all have to cease activities before sundown. As we neared the bridge, the taxi driver dropped us off and told us we needed to change vehicles, as he was unable to proceed with white Palestinian plates. We had to take another vehicle to cross the border and get our passports checked. I was hoping to see a literal bridge, but there wasn't any, just a highway like road, and a fence all around.

We boarded the minivan that was waiting for us there, packed our luggage in and set off. In less than a couple of minutes we arrived at a checkpoint, with officers who had big firearms. One of them came over and asked us for our passports one by one, and also asked "You have gun, you have gun?" They let us through, and a short 5 min drive followed where there were no other cars on the road but ours. It was eerie, and spooky! We paid the highest price for this ten minute ride out of the whole trip, \$100. As we debarked, unloaded for a second time and entered the facility, we were eager to get a cab to drive us to the hotel. We were directed to scan our luggage, which means loading our heavy luggage into the scanner, reloading our cart and buying tickets/checking our passports for the second time. We were becoming restless and frustrated about all the loading of bags and purchasing of tickets that we were not informed of having to pay taxes. After buying a ticket, we were directed to another booth 10 feet away where they checked our passports for the third time and followed up with other questions.

We finally felt relieved that it was over and we were done with, and tried to find a cab. However, we were told there were no cabs and the bus we needed to board to cross over to Jordan had left a minute ago. Upon socializing with some others also waiting, we found out that we were not in Jordan yet! And that there is a final bus that will take us to Jordan. After a twenty minute wait, the bus arrived and we loaded our luggage once again. We traveled for about ten minutes with the bus, after which it stopped at a booth, an officer boarded and asked us for our passports and reason for our travel. Later, holding all the passports in his hand, he counted us and handed the passports to our driver and left the bus. The bus went on for another ten minutes to a building. We were hoping this was our last ride before the cab and felt tired of purchasing tickets, paying for each ride separately, and multiple passport checks. Before debarking an officer boarded the bus and had us pay another ticket for the ride not only for us, but for our 5 big luggage pieces full of donations to the refugees. We took our luggage, went through a final scan with them, and stood in line to pick up our passports. We were finally in Jordan!!!! Finally we boarded a taxi and headed to our hotel.

This was the most unnecessary, annoying, frustrating, and tedious border crossing process we have ever experienced. By the end, we had changed 4 vehicles, unloaded and loaded our bags into cars and scanned many times, and had our passports checked 5 times, paying too

much money in three different currencies. Our sympathies and hearts go out to anyone needing to cross this border, especially Palestinians.

### **Jordan**

Traveling from the border to our hotel in Amman, Jordan we could already observe a change in scenery. Trees and bushes decorated the side of the streets. There was a sense of ease and relief that came with seeing many cars driving on the highway, and people seemed relaxed and socialized outside on the street. We did not realize how uneasiness and tension in Palestine surfaced through the caution of getting home before dark and not being outside in unpopulated areas. We soon got to the hotel and prepared for the next day.

We held our first workshop at Jordan River Foundation of Amman, Jordan. This organization consists of 28-39 staff members and volunteers, and it offers psychological services to refugees from Iraq and Syria. The center also hosts activities for children, women, and the surrounding immigrants. We had 22 participants who were mostly psychologists, social workers, students and practicing staff, as well as volunteers. We learned that one of the daily concerns that arise in the center is domestic, sexual and emotional abuse of women, with specific challenges in reporting abuse. The staff shared that they receive over 50 complaints of abuse. Statistically, 55% of women in Jordan are abused, with the number varying from region and the type of violence, and the most frequently reported abuse being physical abuse. Other prominent challenges were the emotional release and expression of anger and trauma by men (unacceptability of men crying) because it is considered unfitting and not manly. Dr. Kalayjian emphasized the 7-step Integrative Healing Model, including the importance of being mindful of our environment, as human trauma can impact the environment and vice versa.

The group was eager not only to share their experiences and feelings, but personal stories. Especially appreciated was the yoga, chakra balancing and healing of trauma via movement. Here, once again, we were invited to return next year to continue the training and work at the center on interventions to release and heal trauma, as well as methods to intervene and prevent trauma, such as working with the men who engage in domestic abuse.

Later, we briefly visited a Syrian refugee center, Syria Bright Future of Amman. We were welcomed by the staff who gave us a tour. The center is overcrowded and the staff is doing their best to offer medical as well as psychological services, since they are limited by space and resources. However, they are hopeful and working towards establishing more services and finding a solution to send the Syrian youth to school, who at the moment, may not attend because they have no paperwork to identify themselves. We provided the center with natural remedies for healing traumatized populations, children and adults. We also made collaborative plans to return next year to train the staff at Syria Bright Future.



*Jordan River Foundation*



*Jordan River Foundation*



*Syria Bright Future*

### **Lebanon**

We left Jordan reenergized and looking forward to getting to our next and fourth country in Beirut, Lebanon. Arriving, we observed a beautiful green city, nothing like pictured by the

media as dangerous and on the verge of collapse, with the exception of the dangerous driving. Driving in Lebanon can be an adventure in itself. There seem to be no rules, respect for a red light, lane dividers, and heavy traffic seems to be a good enough reason to take over the lanes in the opposite direction.

The work here started with a visit of the Armenian Sanatorium that was recently renovated and is housing senior terminally ill patients of which many have no family. It also has a TB building and a wing for prisoners. However, the rooms and hallways are full of patients who are sociable, welcoming, and ready to share a smile, hug and their story despite their suffering. It was touching and humbling as one of the seniors played the harmonica and recited a prayer in English, many others were sharing many genocide stories, memories, and generational transmission.

The first lecture in Lebanon took place at the Lebanese American University at Hamra, Beirut. Over 50 psychologists, student and teaching staff, including some education, biology, nutrition, and nursing students attended. Attendees presented with 60% mild to moderate and 20% mild to severe trauma symptoms. During the workshop students were engaged and yet again, the negative impact of the ongoing Israeli aggression and unresolved conflict surfaced. The students were enthusiastic and interested in trauma and healing, with a lot of questions about chakras and how to release trauma using chakra balancing. Students noted that the workshop was the most meaningful lecture they had so far and requested a longer training which we are planning to provide next year. Some attendees expressed interest in training and interning with ATOP Meaningfulworld and will stay in touch for future collaborations.

Next, about 20 of us participated in whole day training at Notre Dame University of Junie, Lebanon. Students arrived early and were enthusiastic, positive and social. Most participants were psychology undergraduate students, freshman and juniors, with the exception of a graphic design student and a political science professor. We began the day with an activity getting to know each other and sharing something meaningful about ourselves. Throughout the workshop, students remained open, engaged and curious about the model and the process of engaging in forgiveness. We worked with many examples, even a volunteer real life example of one of the faculty members, to demonstrate what empathy is and how the seven step model can be applied. In the second part of the day, students were genuine and generous in sharing their trauma, and contributed to a safe space where everyone felt open to express their feelings and where we could process and work on skills of empathy and validation. The main lesson I walked away with was "No matter how painful the situation is, do not give up and express your emotions!"

The day ended with a Heart-to-Heart and Ubuntu circles, where students expressed their thankfulness and hope for more training programs, as well as a couple of students seeking internship opportunities with Meaningfulworld. We are looking forward to returning and continuing the training programs at Notre Dame.

We left the workshop at Notre Dame University uplifted and energized, and headed to Haigazian University. Here, two psychology faculty members and 10 clinical psychology graduate students participated in the workshop. We received a warm welcome. The focus of the workshop was the seven step model and forgiveness. Yet again, we were able to observe and experience how difficult it can be to think or talk about forgiveness and peace when the conflict is ongoing and no resolution has been reached. We found this group had a higher level of trauma, as exhibited in the extreme feelings of misplaced anger and hatred expressed during the workshop and the difficulty conceptualizing forgiveness and peace. Some felt that anger and

hatred is necessary for their survival. We are hoping to return next year for two full training days since students and faculty expressed an interest in receiving more experience and hope to become Meaningfulworld Ambassadors.

We held our final workshop at the America University of Beirut (AUB). A group of 15 doctors, nurses and psychologists participated. While our time here was short, took place in a very spacious auditorium we had the opportunity at the end to answer questions and address many concerns. Some of the staff brought up the idea of vicarious trauma and the need for self-care, at times the need to protect the self from the cruel things health professionals are indirectly exposed to, and the value and nature of true empathy. We also established contact with a videographer interested in collaborating and recording the work and change we initiate and inspire in the community. The professionals who are serving the population are carrying not only their own experiences and traumas, but are undertaking and carrying those of every patient they meet. This places them in a unique position to work and aid in healing the trauma. Thus, we look forward to return and work with the medical staff in training them in the 7-step Integrative Healing Model, so they may have effective skills of working through their own emotions and aiding their patients to transform the chronic trauma that all Lebanese have been facing since 1976.



*Notre Dame University*



*Notre Dame University*



*Lebanese American University*

### **Searching for the Forgiveness Garden:**

Our last day, after finishing the final workshop, we began our search of the Forgiveness Garden that we knew about from the Forgiveness video we used in our training. The students we worked with were not aware of it and upon doing our own research online; we found that the building of the garden had been halted in 2006. We knew the approximate area where the garden should be and were certain that we could ask for directions and find it once there. We asked security guards, park staff, store owners, police officers, military, restaurant staff, students of the street, tourists, locals of which no one, except one person has heard about and knew the location of the Forgiveness Garden. Having found it, we burned candles and incense and lead healing prayers outside the garden, since the garden was closed. We reached the conclusion that embracing and finding forgiveness in the midst of conflict can be difficult, and our minds may even attempt to expunge the idea of forgiveness. Therefore, there needs to be a conscious effort towards embracing forgiveness and raising awareness about the benefits of it.

While some of my thoughts are reflected above and description of our work throughout this mission, there was an intense emotional journey we took, that left its mark on us. Dr. Ani Kalayjian describes it eloquently in a poem entitled “Let’s Pull Each Other Up, Say No to Horizontal Violence in the Middle East.”

In conclusion, our mission was successful and collaborative; partnering with community leaders, non-profit organizations, academia, governments and the media (both Newspaper and Television) to aid the delivery of psychosocial support and psycho-education to the surviving

community. We have observed the great need for mental health professionals, especially in Palestine and Jordan.

Our team was able to share knowledge with a message of peace through the practice of forgiveness, compassion, empathy and gratitude, transforming horizontal violence and being mindful of the positive role of empathy. We have sown seeds of collaboration with local Ministries, academia and NGO's towards the long term rehabilitation and empowerment of the communities. Additionally, we conducted initial meetings to establish Meaningfulworld Organizations in Palestine and Lebanon, as both countries are suffering from long-term trauma of war and oppression. Skype follow up meetings are taking place to guide and mentor professionals in their quest for developing these local organizations. Consciousness has shifted, and follow up e-mails indicating a palpable transformation are pouring in. In all of our contacts we were requested to return quickly that next year is too long of time to wait, as the need is immense. Thus, your tax-deductible support is appreciated and needed. Kindly visit our website at: [www.Meaningfulworld.com](http://www.Meaningfulworld.com)

Founded in 1990, the Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention (ATOP) Meaningfulworld, a charitable organization affiliated with the United Nations Dept of Public Information, has achieved international recognition as a leader in training humanitarian outreach professionals as well as responding to two decades of global and local disasters. ATOP is committed to health and global education promoting state-of-the-art scientific theory, peace, forgiveness, consciousness research, internship, and the development of technical skills committed to service the self and humanity. Meaningfulworld Humanitarian Outreach teams have helped rehabilitate survivors of more than 45 calamities, making a daily difference in people's lives and helping transform tragedy and trauma into healing and meaning-making through post-trauma growth, resilience, emotional intelligence, mind-body-eco-spirit health, visionary leadership, empowerment, and artful collaboration through a new world view.

**Our Motto: When one helps another, BOTH become stronger**