

Value-based Counseling at the Psychosocial and Mental Health Center Kabul



Federal Foreign Office

ipso

International psychosocial organisation

EDITORIAL

Fifteen years ago, when I first came to Kabul as a psychoanalyst, I realized that our western view on mental health symptoms as well as their classification was not useful in understanding what could be helpful to the people who relied on me. It was a long way from this insight to what Ipso is and does today. In our Psychosocial and Mental Health Center there is a professional, committed and very motivated team of trained Psychosocial Counselors offering Value-based Counseling, there are medical doctors and psychiatrists, a management team and support staff who ensure that all is running well and smoothly. Clients are coming to the Center itself, and our counselors are reaching out to people in places such as camps and returnees at the airport in personal talks and through our online platform www.ipso-care.com. The Center is called by many visitors an “island of peace” in the middle of the bustling five-million city of Kabul. We are committed and determined to constantly improve our services for people who need support.

None of this would have been possible without the support of the German Foreign Office. We all, both the national and the international Ipso Team thank the German Foreign Office for their support and are grateful that we are able to help so many people. We also thank our governmental partners in Afghanistan, in particular Dr. Bashir Sawari, Director of the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance for their tireless efforts. [Inge Missmahl](#)



FOREWORD

In two books of scripture – the Talmud and the Quran – it is laid down that “s/he who saves a life, it is as if s/he had saved all of humanity”. I do not presume to second-guess the motivation of Ipso, but after having visited their office in Berlin, I feel assured that this is what Inge Missmahl and her team do. They help individual people to save themselves, via counselling, listening and providing peaceful spaces in a complicated environment, and those people very often save their immediate families, in ever-widening circles. They become agents for change, and agents for peace.

This is why Ipso is a longstanding and close partner of the German Federal Foreign Office in Afghanistan. For Ipso's efforts amount to peace-building and reconciliation at the smallest individual level. Through its counselling services, Ipso provides valuable measures against despair, social isolation and violence in a post-crisis environment. The Federal Foreign Office started supporting Ipso's services within the Afghan health system in 2011. It still provides an online counselling platform run from within its socio-cultural container programme. The programme reaches out to people who – for various reasons – cannot attend public health centres. Additionally, in 2016, a Psychosocial and Mental Health Clinic in Kabul has been opened. The entire Afghan public – including returnees from Europe, Pakistan and Iran – are able to make use of the private counselling sessions offered on its premises. In 2018 alone the Psychosocial Clinic has held 25.092 counselling sessions for 9.039 clients online and in person, and 4.662 sessions for support groups with 31.807 participants. Their awareness campaigns regarding the connection between psychological symptoms and psychosocial stressors like family conflicts, traumatic experiences, personal losses, sexual violence, poverty and migration reached 36.188 persons. Ipso has also created an app making it easy to directly link to a counsellor on a smartphone. Counsellors are trained to the highest standards of the profession and are superbly motivated. They are closely connected to the Afghan Health Service.

The Federal Foreign Office is proud to be Ipso's sponsor and highly appreciates the great efforts of Ipso's dedicated German and Afghan staff members to support Afghanistan in its difficult transition from conflict to peace. *Kathrin Greve, Head of Afghanistan Reconstruction and Stabilization Federal Foreign Office, Berlin*

OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL AND IN KABUL

Ipsos's Psychosocial Center in Kabul employs 25 Psychosocial Counselors, two psychiatrists, one medical doctor and six occupational therapists. The Center is open to the public, including returnees from Germany and other European countries as well as from neighbouring countries. Everyone is free to walk in for a first assessment of their needs and to take it from there. After an initial session with a Counselor, who will afterwards assess the case together with his or her Supervisor who is also a Psychosocial Counselor, a client may be offered to not only continue the Value-based Counseling but to avail him or herself of further facilities in the Center. This may be an appointment with a psychiatrist or medical doctor or participation in group sessions such as life-skill groups or occupational therapy. Clients who have lost their ability to function in daily life to an extent that makes it expedient for them to spend all day at the Center for a few weeks, can take part in a program tailored to their needs in the day care department of the Center.

Psychosocial Counselors and Psychiatrists reaching out to people in Kabul and beyond is an important part of the work of the Center. Not everyone is able to come to the center, and those who can, need to be aware of the opportunity. Outreach work takes various forms:

- » Apart from face-to-face counseling there is also **online counseling** for clients in other provinces or for those in Kabul who prefer not to come to the Center in person.
- » A mobile team of counselors and psychiatrists visits **camps** hosting returnees from Pakistan and Iran as well as IDPs on the outskirts of the city.



MENTAL HEALTH CENTER



» A specially trained team of Counselors meets returnees from Germany and other parts of Europe at Kabul's **International Airport** to offer them psychosocial support during a major life transition and difficult times that may lay ahead.

» A **referral network** allows government and private hospitals to send patients to the Center, gives students and staff of government and private universities the option to receive counseling, and supports local and international NGOs that need to outsource professional psychosocial care for their staff and clients. Counselors visit a

range of partner institutions on a regular basis for awareness raising sessions and Support Groups that can lead to individual counseling sessions for some of the participants.

Four decades of armed conflict have had a deep impact on many aspects of Afghan society. Experience of violence and the dispersal of communities have harmed what were once vibrant local cultures and reduced the ability of extended families to act as a self-help system. Traumatic experiences such as the loss of loved ones, of homes and of places of remembrance and collective narratives have weakened the population's resistance to sectarianism and radicalism and have swept violence into the lives

of men, women and children with various knock-on effects, including an overall rise in domestic violence. Migration often seems to be the only solution but creates new problems that need to be dealt with.

For the past 17 years, the International Community has focused its transitional and development cooperation in Afghanistan on Good Governance and the development of the Afghan economy. Civil society has also been promoted, but mainly in the form of

Afghan organizations trying to influence politics and the government through lobbying. The psychological and psychosocial effects of forty years of conflict and violence on individuals, families, communities and civil society at large have received less attention. The German Foreign Office as a donor however has been an exception in this regard. It has supported Ipso's efforts to improve the Afghan health care system and to strengthen Afghan civil society since 2011.

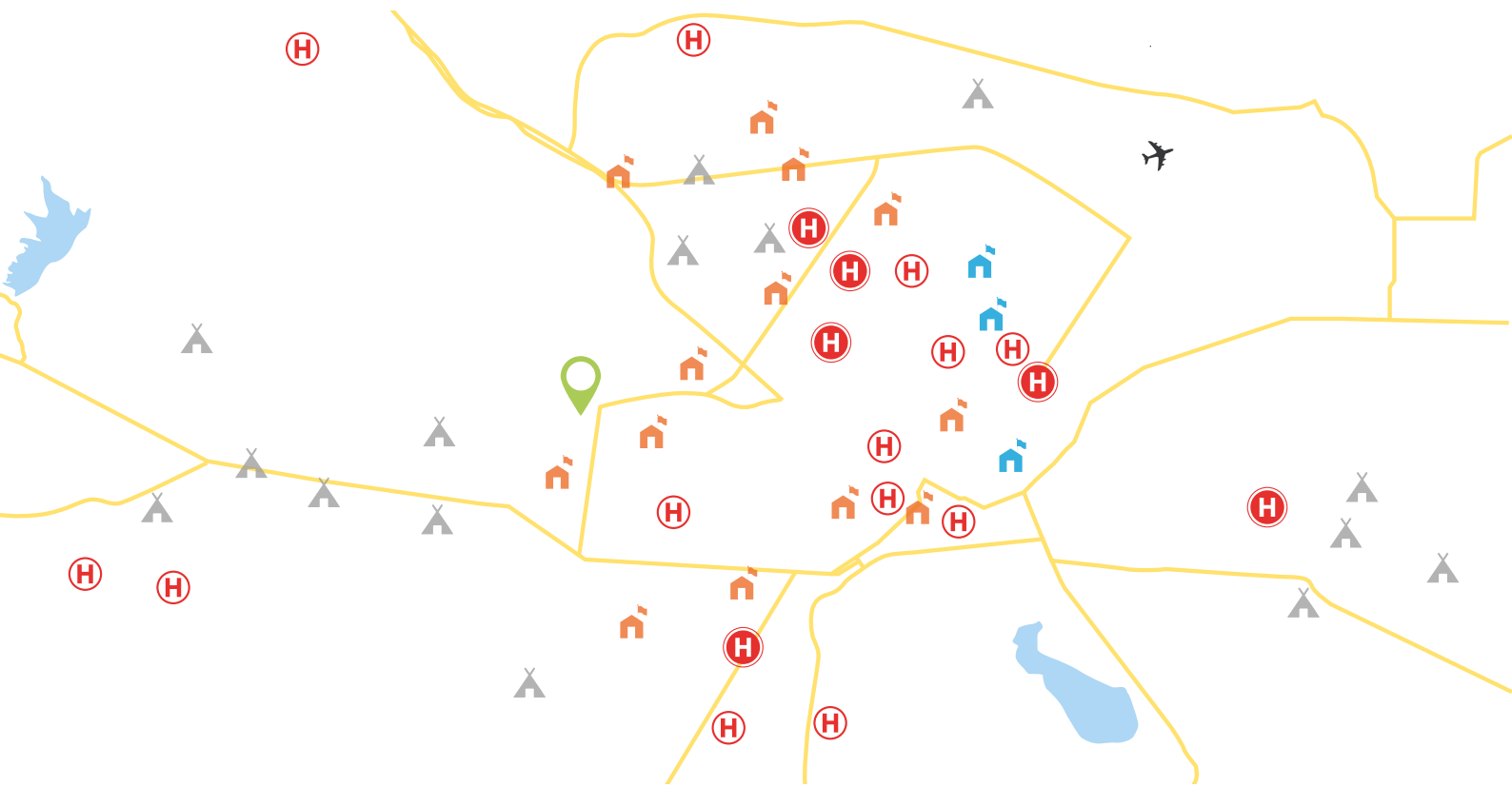


The Afghan Ministry of Health took an important step when it used European and German Foreign Office funds to introduce a psychosocial counseling service to the Afghan health care system in 2010. While its capacities at large have improved significantly over the years, they are still severely limited. The introduction of Psychosocial Counselors to Comprehensive Health Care Clinics across Afghanistan was therefore followed by Ipso's Psychosocial Center in Kabul set up for two purposes: firstly, to








create of center of excellence in Kabul as a facility that keeps standards of Value-based Counseling high, provides best practices, research, support and training, and secondly, to provide more extensive services than can be offered by the counselors working in overcrowded and overstretched governmental health clinics.



Kabul



Map of Kabul indicating the outreach of Ipsos's Psychosocial and Mental Health Center Kabul.
For security reasons the names of individual partner organisations and the exact locations of their offices and facilities such as hospitals are omitted.

-  Ipsos's Psychosocial and Mental Health Center Kabul
-  Returnee/IDP camp
-  NGO office or facility
-  UN office or facility
-  Governmental hospital; Ministry
-  Private hospital or educational facility
-  Airport

VALUE-BASED COUNSELING

Value-based Counseling (VBC) is a short-term psychodynamic intervention with a salutogenic approach that aims to improve the sense of coherence and self-efficacy of clients in the course of a non-directive but carefully structured conversation. VBC is designed for adolescent and adult clients and is based on the idea of human beings being driven by an inherent need for leading a meaningful life. What we consider meaningful depends on our personal values, hence the term “value-based” counseling.

Personal values are usually connected to family values and the values of the society in which a client has been raised. Different cultures put emphasis on different sets of values, but generational conflicts, for example, indicate that none of them are set in stone. The most commonly perceived difference between cultural sets of values is that between individualistic and collectivistic societies. As Value-based Counseling does not dictate values beyond Ipso’s Code of Ethics for counselors as part of its “Do no harm” policy, VBC can be applied wherever and whenever human beings are concerned.

VBC avoids pathologizing clinical symptoms underlying intrapsychic or interpersonal conflicts, traumatic experiences, a disruptive social environment, or difficult life transitions such as migration or loss of livelihoods. The counseling approach seeks instead to understand the significance of these symptoms as an expression of unresolved social stress. The approach is based on the experience that we can discover scope for change if we understand our emotional reaction to finding ourselves at an impasse by becoming conscious of the hierarchy of our own values that triggers this emotional reaction as well as of the values of concerned parties. Our human potential for self-development and our pursuit of harnessing this potential can be used to facilitate human self-healing.

Ipsos research has shown that the success of VBC heavily depends on the relationship between client and counselor having been built at eye-level. This is only possible if the counselor forgoes a diagnosis – or refers a client to a psychiatrist if he/she feels out of his/her depth. Building such a relationship in an inter-cultural setting can be difficult because an open mind does not substitute for

an in-depth understanding of how a client sees the world through a particular cultural lens. VBC has an intra-cultural approach instead which requires Counselors to speak the native language of a client and to have the same cultural background. This approach avoids a range of problems attached to inter-cultural counseling such as the need for specifically trained translators.

Sharing a language and a specific cultural background goes a long way but is not enough especially in cultural contexts that include strictly defined gender roles and sex segregation in many spheres of life. Experiences of men and women differ substantially in such cases and communication across the gender barrier would require a client to break taboos. VBC therefore has a matching system that links female clients with female counselors and male clients with male counselors. As a result of this policy, Counselors are in a position to quickly build work relationships with clients which allow them to explore deeply personal matters from the first session onwards, and to effect positive change in the lives of clients within an average of three to five sessions.



FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE COUNSELING

The obvious format for a psychosocial counseling session seems to be a face-to-face meeting between the client and the psychosocial counselor as the most direct form of communication available. Online-counseling however is an excellent substitute, if there is no counselor available within travelling distance of a client, and is often chosen as alternative by clients even if a face-to-face session would be possible. Ipso's Psychosocial and Mental Health Center in Kabul offers Value-based Counseling both face-to-face and online.

Ipso's platform <https://www.ipso-ecare.com/> for online counseling includes features that allow clients to register with an alias, to make an initial appointment with a counselor of the same sex who speaks the same language, to make follow-up appointments with that same counselor,

and to rate each session afterwards. Counselors use the platform to rate sessions independently, to document cases in preparation for follow-up sessions and as a basis for the supervision which Psychosocial Counselors receive as part of Ipso's quality management. The software flags up inconsistencies in the rating process, such as client and counselor substantially disagreeing on the quality of a session, so that supervisors can follow up, and allows for anonymized statistics such as the number of sessions held by Ipso Counselors in 2018.

Mobile phone and internet coverage in Afghanistan is one of the success stories the country can boast of, but this does not mean everyone has the funds and/or the knowledge to access these resources. In 2018, roughly two thirds of the Afghan population

had active mobile phone subscriptions, but less than 20% of the population subscribed to 3G broadband. In 2018, Ipso ran access points to its online service in eight provinces, which gave clients who did not have the funds or the knowledge to use private smart phones, tablets or computers access to the necessary equipment and helped them to log on to the system for online sessions. Just as importantly, Ipso provided clients with a private space for their talk with a counselor working from Ipso's Counseling Centre in Kabul. Not everyone needed this kind of support, however. The number of adolescents and young adults who use their own smartphones to access the service is on the rise.





Advantages of the online service are twofold: firstly, the low-threshold access in remote or conflict areas which do not allow for face-to-face counseling, and secondly the fact that counselors are removed from the every-day life of their clients and therefore could not share highly personal issues of their clients with family and community members even if they were allowed to do so. This is particularly important in areas where mutual trust has been undermined by armed conflict. The virtual space in which the counseling takes place is owned by both the client and the counselor. This supports the conversation at the eye-level that is so important in Value-based Counseling.

Ipso's Counselors in Kabul, who have extensive experience both with face-to-face and with online counseling, have found that in general, clients

find it easier to open up online than face-to-face. Most of them are young educated Afghans used to social media and to sharing personal matters online. Being able to contact a counselor from home, their workplace, a park or some other space of their own choice helps clients to relax. Feeling in control because they can end the session at any time is also helpful. As a result, counselors find that all in all, they need fewer sessions with clients online.

Many young people who live in Kabul and could go to the center for face-to-face counseling if they wanted to, chose the online option for additional reasons. They prefer not to be seen to frequent the Center because they fear stigma and, usually being short of cash, are happy not to have to spend the money and the time to negotiate their way to and from the Center using what passes for 'public'

transport in the notoriously congested center of a city with an estimated 4-5 million inhabitants.

Ipso's Psychosocial and Mental Health Center would however fail its mission if it catered only to the preferences of young educated Afghans. Instead, it spends a lot of resources on reaching out to parts of the population who are reliant on personal contact because they have neither the education nor the equipment to access the online service out of their own accord. It is important that Psychosocial Counselors visit clinics and institutions across the city on a regular basis for awareness sessions and support groups, and that the mobile team serves camp dwellers on the outskirts of the city as some of those who are most disadvantaged in Afghan society.

RETURNEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE



Until the war in Syria, Afghans had formed the world's largest refugee population for 30 years, with the majority living in Pakistan and Iran. Voluntary returns peaked in 2004 when hopes were high for rebuilding the country, and involuntary returns spiked in 2016 under pressure mainly

from Pakistan. IOM statistics suggest that between 2012 and 2018 roughly 1.5 million Afghans returned from neighboring countries and abroad, while about 900,000 left Afghanistan. Internal displacement has been a huge issue as well. IOM counted close to 1.9 million internally dis-

placed people (IDPs) who had freshly arrived in a new location in the same period. This number however does not include the protracted displacement of people in camps who for years have found nowhere else to go.

IDPS AND RETURNEES FROM NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

Reaching a camp can be a relief after an arduous journey, but camps are far from safe havens. Covering basic needs such as food and shelter is usually difficult, and finding paid work a challenge. Some manage to replace tents with more permanent structures, but generally without permission of the landowner and therefore without tenure security, and also without access to infrastructure such as fresh water supply and sanitation. Psychosocial Counselors working in camps do not only deal with issues that caused people to leave their original homes but also with problems that arise in the settlements themselves, tented or otherwise. From a social viewpoint, they are ghettos with an enormous potential for social conflict. Afghanistan is a culturally diverse country, and while people tend to build support networks based on family or at least tribal relations, families with different traditions and values are often forced to share facilities in cramped living conditions.

The world outside a camp usually offers little relief because local communities tend to view newcomers as

competitors not only for jobs but often for basic needs such as fresh water, agricultural land or building plots. Those who come from abroad find themselves being treated as foreigners in their original home country, while IDPs, who usually fled their village from draught or armed conflict, lack life skills required in an urban or peri-urban environment. Being discriminated against by local communities as ignorant beggars at best and potential criminals at worst makes it not only difficult to find work but also to find schools for children and to access health care. Government services are stretched as it is and are not designed to respond to additional challenges such as unplanned urban growth in the shape of camps on the outskirts of urban centers.

The mobile team of counselors and psychiatrists which forms part of the services that Ipso's Center in Kabul offers visits a range of camps on a regular basis. They raise awareness of mental health issues and psychosocial stressors common in camps, such as domestic violence, family conflicts and discrimination. Generational conflicts arise from traditional values clashing with the new environment children are exposed to. Abject

poverty, often linked to drug abuse, causes downward spirals for entire families, including negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage for girls or forced prostitution. Low self-esteem and loss of hope for a better future are widespread among camp dwellers.

As camp dwellers lack the funds to visit Ipso's Center, the mobile team uses a van as a mobile space for counseling sessions and for consultations with their psychiatrist. This is an essential part of the service because the camps lack spaces offering the necessary privacy. Improving the sense of coherence and self-efficacy of clients is an enormous challenge for Psychosocial Counselors working in such an environment. Many camp dwellers have had to rebuild their lives before in Pakistan, Iran or in a different Afghan province. To start all over again, they need to be able to reconnect to their own potential. The Counselors' success is strongly linked to the basics of Value-based Counselling: Empathy – not pity – offered at eye level, and a conceptualization of clinical symptoms underlying intrapsychic or interpersonal conflicts, traumatic experiences or a disruptive social environment as a result of social stress.





RETURNEES FROM GERMANY AND OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The team of Counselors that meets returnees mainly from Germany but also from other European countries at Kabul Airport has been trained to support Afghans who were either deported, or assisted in a voluntary return. Some returnees are relieved to be back in their home country because exposure to European culture has made them realize how much they value certain aspects of Afghan culture. Most however return with a sense of shame because they did not fulfil their own expectations and in many cases those of their extended families. The shame is particularly deep, if their families had sold assets or borrowed money to be able to pay human traffickers, and had hoped for a return in the shape of a family member who would be able to find work, to pay back the debt incurred, to support not only himself but also his extended family financially and, if at all possible, pave the way for family members to join him in his new life. The Ipso Counselors meeting these returnees at the airport are fully aware of these issues. They know that returnees and their families believed that it would be possible

to find work in Europe more or less on arrival instead of having to wait for a lengthy period in shelters to have one's case assessed. They are aware that many Afghans left for Europe without realizing that their lack of education meant they were ill-prepared for the integration and language courses that could have paved their way to a new life. The Counselors have been told by many returnees about a sense of frustration once the relief of having survived a dangerous journey had worn off and they found themselves in a waiting loop, unable to start their new life as they had imagined it. If a Counselor is told by a returnee had he felt unable to tell his family about the unexpected difficulties he had faced after his arrival in Europe, and that a sense of isolation and hopelessness led to alcohol and drug abuse, the Counselor will not judge the client.

Ipso's Airport Team is familiar with the issue of cultural adaptation that migrants face in Europe, especially in regard to gender roles being very different, and the way conflict is handled. The Counselors are aware that deportation is often the result of a jail sentence, and that such jail sentences are usually the result of

violent behavior in the context of domestic violence or because perpetrators had felt that their personal honor was at stake. Most importantly, the Counselors know that many deported Afghans return to Kabul with a sense of dread and despair and that in terms of reintegration much depends on how they are being treated on arrival and what kind of psychosocial support they are being offered. Returnees are being informed of the services Ipso's Center in Kabul offers and can have individual or small group counseling sessions before they even leave the airport. If returnees cannot join their families immediately after their return, IOM offers accommodation for a limited period of time to allow Returnees to find their feet. During this period and beyond, these and all other returnees are invited to make use of the full range of services offered in the Ipso Center. Many returnees from Europe, as much as IDPs and returnees from neighboring countries, need to be able to reconnect to their own potential to be able to reintegrate into their own society. Many discover that their time in Europe has provided them with an experience of life and with skills that can help them to make a new start.

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Purpose:

Ipso is specialized in the field of mental health and psychosocial care, in developing locally adapted concepts, delivering trainings for psychosocial counsellors, medical doctors, nurses and community health workers for treating mental health-related problems including depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress following war, insecurity and challenging living conditions.

Furthermore, it aims at strengthening the cultural identity of war-torn societies through cultural programs, which is a precondition for peace and reconciliation, and the rebuilding of civil society in the aftermath of a civil war and natural catastrophes.

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