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IN 2010 IPSO CONDUCTED A RESEARCH STUDY IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN INVESTIGATING THE EFFICACY OF A PSYCHO-SOCIAL COUNSELLING APPROACH DEVELOPED BY INGE MISSMAHL AND HER TEAM, AND RECENTLY INTEGRATED INTO THE AFGHAN PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM [AYOUGHI, S., MISSMAHL, I., WEIERSTALL, R., & ELBERT, T. (2012). PROVISION OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN RESOURCE-POOR SETTINGS: A RANDOMISED TRIAL COMPARING COUNSELLING WITH ROUTINE MEDICAL TREATMENT IN NORTH AFGHANISTAN (MAZAR-E-SHARIF).

THE SUCCESS OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL COUNSELLING IN AFGHANISTAN

The results of the research project in Mazar-e-Sharif confirmed observations statistically documented over a period of six years of counselling practice (2005-2010) in Kabul, Herat, Bamyan and Mazar-e-Sharif. It had become obvious that many Afghan families were rendered at least partially dysfunctional due to continued stress, exposure to traumatising events, loss of beloved ones, homes and jobs, and poverty-related suffering. These factors have had profound effects on the mental health status of the Afghan population. As documented in the study, levels of mental health-related problems have been extremely high in Afghanistan. The interviewed women suffered from symptoms of depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress. In particular, and

were exposed to daily stressors such as poverty, insecurity, family conflicts and domestic violence experienced as overwhelming and almost insurmountable. The combination of already existing mental health problems, daily stressors and demanding living conditions puts an exceptionally high burden on Afghans. The mental health problems are experienced as disabling and have serious social consequences such as stigmatisation, exclusion, distortion of the family system and an increase in domestic violence. A low threshold for violence against family members is a commonly observed phenomenon in contemporary Afghan society. Some of our study participants reported that even the harmless fighting of children irritated them and made them lose their

temper. Such incidents serve as a starting point for domestic violence often deeply regretted afterwards. The behavioural pattern could be observed not only in men but also in women and even children. We believe such overreactions are prompted by constant high levels of stress. To sum up, mental health symptoms such as hyperarousal cause a behaviour which has the potential to substantially change family interaction and other social relationships, leading to problems including social isolation, drug abuse, community conflicts and domestic violence. These problems often have a strong negative impact on the developmental perspectives of children and adolescents, inducing a feeling of not

being able to shape one's own life, and amplifying the perception of cultural identity loss. Despite a strong need, mental health services were practically non-existent in Afghanistan, especially in rural provinces. Health staff lacked awareness, knowledge and treatment options regarding mental health issues. The study demonstrated that local physicians did not have access to information on psycho-social stressors causing mental health problems which would have allowed them to improve their treatment of mental health patients. The physicians were not trained to develop proper treatment plans for patients suffering from mental health symptoms and problems. Psychosomatic symptoms and symptoms of depression and anxiety were frequently

dealt with by prescribing available medication such as sleeping pills and pain killers, which neither offered relief from a particular situation nor helped to get to the root of a problem (see the study results). Even in cases in which psychopharmacological treatment may have eased the symptoms for a certain time, the underlying psycho-social stressors remained unexplored. The symptoms of women suffering from depression and anxiety who had, in contrast, benefited from four to eight counselling sessions with our trained psychosocial counsellors showed vast signs of improvement. In addition, they reported a reduction of psycho-social stressors and improved coping strategies.

In sum, the research study demonstrates that support to the Afghan health system plays a vital role in rebuilding civil society. Access to a qualified and substantial mental health service can help individuals to regain psychological functioning, to cope with painful experiences and, as a result, to establish healthy relationships within the family, the community and society. This forms a precondition for peace and reconciliation, and the rebuilding of civil society in Afghanistan.

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