



Operation Mercy Who cares? Iran's amazing social workers and addiction counsellors

Introduction

In August 2015, Dr Scott Breslin, International Director of Operation Mercy, led a five-day seminar in Tehran (Iran) entitled "Caring for Caregivers". The idea came from Operation Mercy's in-country leadership team. The Iranian Government Minister who supervises NGOs approved the idea, which illustrates the trust that the team has built with the authorities who must provide their consent and approval throughout the whole process.

The participants consisted of 65 Iranian social workers, addiction counsellors and managers from more than a dozen Iranian non-government and government organisations.

Scott gives an overview of the workshop and shares his reflections on it below, demonstrating that learning can be fun. It provides a compelling illustration of the importance of effective cross-cultural communication in capacity building and staff empowerment activities (even more so when reaching out to local female staff).



Operation Mercy's self care poster in Farsi

There is another benefit in this narrative as it also reminds us all that duty of care goes beyond the legal requirement but is also a key element of any organisation development agenda in order to nurture staff and support engagement and motivation. Through this training, Operation Mercy wanted to also promote self care and organisational staff care policy. These are all key themes for the <u>CHS Alliance</u> and our quality and accountability agenda.

Who Cares? Iran's amazing social workers and addiction counsellors!

<u>Operation Mercy</u> has over thirty staff in Tehran where it operates a variety of programmes, one of which involves organising capacity building seminars for local civil society organisations. This was my third time leading a training event with our local staff. Previously I led seminars on NGO Leadership and Leadership Ethics. One of my biggest impressions from my previous two visits was the **participants' appetite for learning and professional competence, especially the women who made up 85% of the course participants.**

This course, on *Caring for Caregivers*, was similar in size and gender ratios to my previous two seminars but different in that the topic was something I aspired to, rather than something that I or Operation Mercy was particularly good at. And while I have a Master's Degree in counselling, and have always been deeply concerned about staff welfare, the focus of my career has been project management, organisational leadership, and professional development.



I felt a bit humbled (maybe insecure is a better word) to be asked to lead this workshop by my Iranian colleagues in Tehran. They had been talking with local organisations and determined that there was a lot of interest in this topic. So, together with my staff in Iran and with helpful coaching from fellow University of Edinburgh graduate, Psychologist Dr Alice Gritti (who I met through the CHS Alliance) I began to put together a curriculum. I pulled from my own experience and did a lot of research. I appreciate the emails I exchanged with various CHS Alliance staff who pointed me to some good resources.

In the end, in consultation with our staff in Iran, I settled on the following topics and organised them as follows:

	Morning Sessions	Afternoon Sessions
Day 1	Welcome/Introductions/Icebreakers	Understanding Stress
	Intro to Caring for Caregivers	Challenges of Addiction Treatment Workforce
	Duty of Care Concept	
Day 2	Self Care Strategies Part 1	Understanding Compassion Fatigue
		Understanding Secondary Trauma
Day 3	Self Care Strategies Part 2	Understanding Burnout
Day 4	Staff Care Policy and Practice	How to Lead a Debrief (After Action Reviews)
Day 5	Staff Care & Leadership	Group Presentations
		Closing

I led the morning sessions and my Iranian colleagues and an Iranian psychologist facilitated the sessions in the afternoon. Fewer than half the class was fluent in English but most participants had at least some basic English so the workshop was run part in English, part in Farsi. And more importantly, there was a commitment to keep it interactive and engaging, regardless of the language used or the trainer facilitating a particular session. For every minute of lecture, we planned a minute or more of discussion or breakout groups to process and practice what was discussed. This allowed enriching conversations, space to process the knowledge and practice the learning. Most participants were intensely engaged the entire five days, which was a great source of inspiration.

Outcomes

Meeting and connecting with new colleagues was a great outcome for this seminar. Before it, very few of the participants knew each other unless they belonged to the same organisation and did not often have time or the opportunity to attend networking or professional development events. So, one important outcome was for social workers, counsellors and managers in the addiction treatment sector to meet one another and build peer networks. It was inspiring to see new friendships and collegial relationships form. While this may seem like a secondary outcome, I look at it is one of the most important aspects of our capacity building programme. Also, when you consider that affirming community and camaraderie helps reduce caregivers' vulnerability to "unwellness", it becomes a special outcome of such events.

Mr Zardouz, Operation Mercy's Deputy Country Director in Iran: "It was the first time that many of the participants heard that they needed to take care of themselves and their colleagues; I was, indeed, astounded by how the participants responded. Subsequent to the training workshop, whenever I see the participants in other events or meetings, they keep telling me how this training event has truly changed their perspective on their service providence, work and personal lives."

It is too early to know if this seminar will have a long-term impact for Iranian caregivers and their



managers. We know for certain that the seminar was greatly appreciated and people left with new knowledge, ideas and tools regarding self care and staff care. We built post event homework into the curriculum. Each person and/or organisation that participated in the seminar needs to send a letter to our Operation Mercy Iran office to describe how their self care or staff care practices have changed as a result of the seminar. When we get their letter, then we send them their certificate of completion, and not before. It is a small incentive to help keep self care and staff care high on personal and organisational agendas.

To date, a high percentage of participants have sent back their self care and/or staff care plans. Stress and burn out self-assessments are used to increase awareness levels.

Personal Reflections

For me as a trainer/facilitator and leader in a mid-sized NGO, I had three personal outcomes.

First, I was reminded of the **importance of verbal affirmation**. I felt one of the most important things I did in Iran was to continuously affirm to the participants that they were in a **noble profession**. A profession that is hard and prone to discouragement but critical to human thriving. Caring professions are typically underpaid, underappreciated, and difficult. That is no less true in Iran than the rest of the world.

Second, in spite of the language, cultural and religious differences I felt a unique 'spiritual' connection with those in the seminar. Somehow it felt that we had all made a commitment to a similar purpose. We had all dedicated our lives to improving the lives of others.



I experienced a deep sense of camaraderie that superseded all our differences and allowed us to enjoy a great deal of report. **There was a mutual sense of learning**. I have led scores of leadership seminars in scores of countries but this was something special.

Third, I was reminded how much more progress my own organisation needs to make. Talking about it is easy, but making the necessary budget, procedural, and structural changes to help ensure that my own staff are cared for is much harder than I anticipated. Fulfilling a legal obligation for <u>duty of</u> <u>care</u> is not enough. Most people want to be part of an organisation where they can thrive. I want Operation Mercy to be such a place.

About the author

<u>Dr Scott Breslin</u> is the International Director of <u>Operation Mercy</u> a Swedish-based international NGO with 300 staff in 12 countries in Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. He is regularly invited to facilitate capacity building workshop by his colleagues in the field. He also teaches two courses a year at Orebro University School of Business in Cross-Culture Leadership and International Management. Additional resources from Scott Breslin can be found <u>in the resource library on our website</u>.