

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 Intro to Caring for Caregivers Duty of Care Concept	Understanding Stress Challenges of Addiction Treatment Workforce
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 rapport. **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 [duty of care](#) 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

[Dr Scott Breslin](#) is the International Director of [Operation Mercy](#) 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 [in the resource library on our website](#).