The iACT Way

Trauma-Informed Approach to Humanitarian Action
Introduction

Over the last several decades, our understanding of trauma—how our body is impacted by trauma, and how we might provide people with resources and tools to bring themselves back into the present moment and live a fulfilling life—has substantially evolved. While scientists were making astounding discoveries about the brain, neuroscience, and trauma, the number of people displaced around the world increased dramatically. In 2018, 65.8 million people were forced to flee their homes. Each of those 65.8 million people is an individual with a personal story of displacement, all too often a story that contains violence, fear, or pain and results in trauma.

Broadly defined, trauma is anything that overwhelms our ability to cope or respond, leaving us feeling hopeless and out of control; this includes shock, developmental, systemic, and institutional trauma. To compound this, refugees and people on the move often experience the compounded effects of trauma as living in an uncertain state of displacement strips away a person’s dignity and challenges our resilience as individuals and communities. While one can never assume that those who have been forced to flee their homes live in a prolonged state of trauma, we as humanitarians and organizations serving people on the move can and should ground our programs in trauma-informed approaches that serve to empower each of us to live our fullest lives.

Psychologist and yoga teacher, Hala Khouri, M.A., SEP, E-RYT 500, states that trauma-informed approaches are quite simply people-informed approaches. As iACT has evolved from an advocacy group to a humanitarian organization, we have organically and intentionally grounded our refugee-led programs in people-informed approaches. These approaches are simple, and at the heart is the necessity to see one another clearly and compassionately.
Compassionate Listening

In 2010, international humanitarian aid organizations working in refugee camps in eastern Chad began leaving, often suddenly, without warning, and without handing over programs, infrastructure, or materials to refugee communities to sustain. iACT’s Founder, Gabriel Stauring, asked Darfur refugees, “What do you want the world to know?” A Darfuri leader responded, “Mr. Gabriel, you are the only one who has ever asked us that.”

Listening to, and actually hearing, a person is the foundation for rebuilding the dignity and choice that is often lost through the journey of displacement. True listening involves creating purposeful spaces where individuals can share, be heard, and, most importantly, where we don’t come to the table with our own outcomes in mind. The intention of physically gathering together is to learn from one another and create change together as equals. To listen compassionately involves self-reflection and mindful communication. It also requires trust and for those in a position of power to remove their hats of authority. Helping to restore dignity by listening is essential to putting humans at the center of humanitarian efforts and helping individuals and communities to recover from the effects of trauma.

In practice

iACT continues to evolve and recognizes that not all approaches work with every community. This is why each of our programs begin with listening to the community. In 2011, while walking in refugee camp Goz Amer in eastern Chad, Gabriel and I entered a small straw kiosk and a group of children began to sing. Our now Refugee Camp Coordinator, Oumda Tarbosh, said the children were singing about their need for preschool education. After substantial research, iACT discovered that few refugee-focused early childhood preschool programs existed. This began the co-creation process of the Little Ripples early childhood development program with Darfuri refugees. Shortly after, as food rations had drastically decreased and Darfuris were living even more on the edge of life, we asked Oumda to think about how iACT could help support their livelihoods. After thinking about it, Oumda suggested a donkey and plow program where by Little Ripples families could use the donkeys and equipment to increase their farming yield by up to six times, keeping some for their family and contributing some to the Little Ripples meal program. Since then, the Donkey Ripples program has substantially expanded solely through the efforts and leadership of the community.
Mindfulness, Mindful Movement, and Choice

Trauma affects a person’s ability to self-regulate. Dutch psychiatrist, author, and educator, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, explains that “…trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by the experience on mind, body, and brain.” These imprints vary from person-to-person; they can be deeper for some and surface more often for others. Symptoms of trauma can be emotional, physical, mental, behavioral, or even spiritual. If we are not resourced—if we do not have tools to use when our stress response is activated—our intelligent mind can be overcome by our emotional mind and we can become reactive and impulsive; we feel we have lost control.

By integrating tools like mindfulness and mindful movement into humanitarian programs, choice can be returned to an individual; the choice that is sometimes lost through displacement. Mindfulness is the practice of intentionally being in the present moment, aware of self and environment, and, perhaps most importantly, experiencing that moment without judgment. Mindful movement is the practice of intentionally unifying breath and body; it could be yoga, or tai chi, or dance. The development of these practices offers an opportunity to be resourced when our stress response is ignited. These practices can create a moment before our emotional response takes over, a moment where we can access our intellectual mind and choose our action. Returning this choice back to an individual is a critical part of living mindfully and healing from trauma.

“Trauma creates change you don’t choose. Healing is about creating change you do choose.”

Michele Rosenthal, The Chalkboard Mag

In practice

iACT’s Little Ripples teachers and Refugees United Soccer Academy (Academy) coaches are practitioners and leaders of mindfulness in the classroom and on the field. Every day at Little Ripples begins with an opening circle and a mindfulness practice grounded in breathing and centering. Throughout the day, mindfulness games are used as transitions between activities. Similarly, every session at an Academy starts with a mindfulness circle that unites the coaches and players together and creates a space for play and joy to surface. These tools have helped iACT’s refugee-led programs become islands of peace in the midst of displacement, uncertainty, and violence.
Restoring Relationships and Community

Survivors of identity-based violence, mass atrocities, and genocide have not only been targeted individually, but can also be targeted as a group or community. Trauma resulting from violence can continue to tear relationships and communities apart long after the fires have extinguished and weapons have been put away. Central to restoring a person’s well-being is rebuilding relationships and community.

Offering opportunities for communities affected by trauma to gather, learn, work, and grow together is essential for recovery. These points of gathering offer opportunities to build capacity, for community members to support one another, and to rebuild trust. Building or rebuilding understanding and connection between people through meaningful, equitably created dialogue and trainings can break down barriers and humanize new groups. By integrating restorative practices into community-based work, there can be a stronger foundation for a more peaceful future.

In practice

After a year of leading Little Ripples in refugee camp Goz Amer, Darfuri refugee teachers and iACT gathered to reflect. The teachers mentioned that they wanted to be leaders outside of the classroom and in their community, but lacked the tools to do so. They requested help in developing courage, confidence, and more leadership skills. Together with the teachers, as well as experts in restorative practices, storytelling, and social justice, iACT co-developed LEAD with EMPATHY, a leadership development and human rights curriculum. LEAD with EMPATHY sessions are peer-led in a circle and always begin with mindfulness. Those in the circle develop leadership skills, learn about their human rights, connect with others in their community, and are guided step-by-step in identifying and implementing a solution to a community challenge.
Purpose

Purpose, participation, and contribution are some of the universal human needs that fall under the broad need to live meaningfully. That these needs are universal to all people is an underlying assumption of nonviolent communication (NVC), a practice that supports meaningful engagement with conflict. NVC inspires compassionate connection while offering processes that center and value everyone’s needs. From this framework, consensus-based community agreements and interpersonal accountability arise within a community of care where everyone’s needs matter, even if they cannot always be met. If we understand the human need for purpose and integrate that into all we do with refugees and communities affected by trauma, then we begin to co-create the opportunity for individuals and communities to move forward meaningfully. Providing the opportunity to live with purpose is a trauma-restorative practice, upholds an essential human need, and creates the foundation for NVC as a tool for conflict transformation and prevention.

In practice

iACT’s model always begins with listening and asking community members about their needs. Essential to this is the pause that must come after the initial response. Conversations must not be rushed and moments of silence in a safe and open space can sometimes invite more thoughtful and meaningful dialogue. Additionally, central to iACT’s work is providing refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced communities with opportunities for dignified and meaningful work. When possible, iACT will always compensate refugee staff members for their work. iACT also aims to strengthen refugee staff teams by providing scarves, name tags, notebooks, t-shirts, and other unifying symbols and tools so that they can share their pride and be seen as leaders in their communities. It is essential that we ask ourselves whenever implementing a program in a humanitarian context: can a community member do this work? What skills do they need? What is their opinion? Then we can begin to offer opportunities for purpose.
At iACT, we believe that each and every person deserves to live a meaningful life. One becomes a refugee because they were forced to flee their home in search of safety and protection; for no other reason are refugees seeking refuge. All humans—refugees and non-refugees alike—deserve to be treated with dignity and be offered the opportunity to live with purpose. Building communities grounded in people-informed approaches—and thereby trauma-informed approaches—offers us this opportunity.

Among others, this article has been informed by survivors of mass atrocities who I have had the honor to work alongside for more than a decade, Hala Khouri’s Trauma-Informed Yoga Training, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk’s work on the healing of trauma, Off the Mat and Into the World’s Healing Yoga for Refugees, the teachers of InsightLA, including Trudy Goodman, Jocelyn Hitter, and Maureen Shannon-Chapple, iACT Board Member Stacey Martino, and the iACT team.