

Working with persons who have broken family links

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Refugees are members of families. Some had to leave alone; some together with relatives – but in all cases they have left behind people they love and they will miss. Most refugees have to deal with mayor loss.

In psychotherapy we learn about family members, who were victims of political violence: our clients have seen how their loved ones were killed, they were separated and don't know what has happened, they had to save their lives without any chance of farewell and sometimes without any chance to perform the last rites. When we see these clients we always meet members of families and social networks: and we always see them mourning for the lost relationships.

This process of grief becomes nearly impossible in cases of “disappearance”.

In this workshop I would like to share with you some practical experience and theoretical ideas about psychotherapeutic and psychosocial work with family members in crisis:

- Assisting broken families to be (a new) family again: Working in areas of crisis and after mayor disasters we observed many cases where surviving parents were so much in shock and grief for the lost partner and family members that they were not able to see their surviving child(ren) anymore or the parent became very violent against the surviving child(ren).

Psychosocial assistance should focus on these families: who can support the child (who also has to deal with severe loss) and help parent(s) to be able to be as soon as possible in a position to be a “good enough mother/father” (Winnicott) for the children again.

“Disappearance” of family members is definitely a ambiguous loss: is it needed to mourn or keeping the hope – and search – alive? We will discuss how families deal with such a situation – special as refugees far away from any chance of direct search.

About Hemayat:

Hemayat was founded in 1994 and has established itself in Vienna as a centre for medical, psychological and psychotherapy treatment of survivors of torture and wars. Hemayat is a non-profit organisation.

As a specialised service for survivors of war and torture, Hemayat treats clients living in the Vienna region. Hemayat is also linked to other integration institutions in Vienna and offers its services to other NGOs, government bodies, as well as hospitals.

Our work is aimed at anyone who has suffered extreme traumatisation from torture or war. Our clients come from many different countries. In 2008 we treated 684 clients from 47 different countries.

Our service is basically free and independent of whether people are medically insured or not; it is available to people from all over the world.

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