



CAPACITAR



Dear Friends,

October, 2017

Special greetings to you from Kabul, Afghanistan. As the Capacitar Afghan team, Fr. George Horan and I had a valuable time here collaborating as psychologists with the Afghan Peace Volunteers (APV). During our 10 days we offered 30 counseling sessions and 7 Capacitar workshops that were integrated with relevant themes suggested by the APV youth: study and exam stress, healthy relationships; transforming depression and hopelessness with resilience; healthy and nonviolent communication; and dealing with war trauma. We also did a workshop on Team Spirit for 15 team coordinators who deal with conflict, communication and coordination challenges in their work and community outreach as Afghan Peace Volunteers in the Border Free Community.

The Reality of Kabul

Since our last visit here in February 2017, the security measures on the streets of Kabul seem to have doubled with more armored tanks, increased numbers of street barriers, and police, military, and security guards with their assault rifles. There is an increase of violence and suicide bomb attacks over the last year with the assaults at the American University, NGOs, the Kabul hospital, mosques and ministries. However, as APV founder Dr. Hakim Young said to us, the news media is currently not reporting many of these attacks and kidnappings. The evening before our departure, a suicide bomb went off in a Shia mosque near where Naser, our APV psychology team coordinator, was passing. When we talked with him that evening he was really distressed. We encouraged him to use the tapping he had just learned in our class. Three days ago two bombs went off in the vicinity of the APV center an hour after George and I had finished our work there. The sound of the explosions caused terror within the APV members still present at the center. Hakim described how the youth were running around in panic not knowing what to do. One of the youth two days ago had gone to his home village to get a document signed at the local police station. While he was with his family, a suicide bomb went off at the police station killing 200 people. One of our workshops focused on dealing with war trauma and how to live in the midst of ongoing violence. After teaching the different Capacitar practices for stabilizing a person, de-conditioning traumatic responses and active listening, the youth role-played what they could do to help themselves and help others as they experience violent incidents. It was inspiring to see how the youth responded. They felt empowered with the simple Capacitar skills and were not as helpless as they practiced what to do to stabilize themselves and others. When we talked by phone with Naser the morning of our departure, he said that the Tapping EFT exercise and the Fingerholds really helped to calm him so he could regain his balance after the terrifying experience of the suicide bomb.



Naser, psychology coordinator



APV youth practicing EFT Tapping for trauma and stress



Almost all of the youth are dealing with some level of trauma from their family history. One young person came for counseling because they felt embarrassed by their constant tears and sadness. In the course of our session the youth revealed that as a baby in their village they were left unattended while rockets and bullets passed by. Children are deeply affected by violence and often are unable to release their pent up feelings within. This unreleased trauma leads to nightmares, constant crying, bedwetting, tantrums, and other such symptoms. The more serious trauma for a child is separation from their parents. Many of the street children and youth at the APV center have lost a parent or family member during the years of ongoing war, the times of the Taliban, or because of accidents or untreated illness. With adolescence, traumatic experience is even greater, since youth usually have an understanding of what is happening to them. Their classic symptoms were often described by the youth in our counseling sessions: depression, hopelessness, helplessness, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, delinquency, insomnia, inability to focus, headaches and other physical ailments. At the APV center several of the youth have had incidents of rage and self-harm—one person repeatedly hit himself on the head, another broke all the glass and dishes at home. Another described how she tore up everything in her room after she did poorly on an exam. Many of the youth have shared their inner experience of hopelessness and depression with little to look forward to in their lives.



School Stress

The situation is all the more complex because the youth are also dealing with school stress. Many of the Afghan Peace Volunteers (aged 15 to 22) are in their last years of high school or their first years of college. Most of these youth are the first persons in their family to receive an education or to have the opportunity for higher education, so they live with high expectations from their families. Some youth from the villages spoke of how their parents or brothers discouraged them or tried to prevent them from going to school. One bright young man said that his illiterate father wanted him to stay in the village so he could work as a farmer or herd the sheep. With girls often their brothers stand in the way, as if learning new things would bring shame on the family. The youth deal with the contrast of village life with ancient social and cultural mores (especially for women) and life in Kabul at the university with new ways of thinking and interacting.



Some of the youth who attend classes at the American University described the stress they experience on campus. After the assault at the university last September where 37 people died and hundreds were injured (2 professors had also been kidnapped in a separate incident), the school was closed for a number of months while increased security measures were put in place. Now helicopters with US military land daily on campus to ensure security. One APV youth said that it is like going to class in a war zone.



To go to university, the youth must pass the “Concord Exam.” This is a 3-hour exam consisting of 160 questions covering 16 subject areas—including math, language, science, geography, history, etc. Depending on test results, they are placed in a field (law being the highest, engineering, medicine, science, journalism, psychology, and teaching being one of the lower fields!). You can imagine the level of anxiety among the youth as they prepare for the Concord exam! In elementary and high school, some teachers use corporal punishment to discipline the students. Hakim showed us one child’s arm that was deeply bruised when a teacher beat him with an iron rod. Several university students spoke of teachers who don’t show up for class. Often there are no books or materials for the students.



Our week of teaching 2-hour afternoon classes was a wonderful experience and the youth responded with enthusiasm, interest and focus. George and I integrated the Capacitar trauma healing practices in the context of themes chosen by the youth—exam stress, living with war trauma, healthy communication, etc. This approach helped the youth understand how the simple Capacitar healing practices could be used in

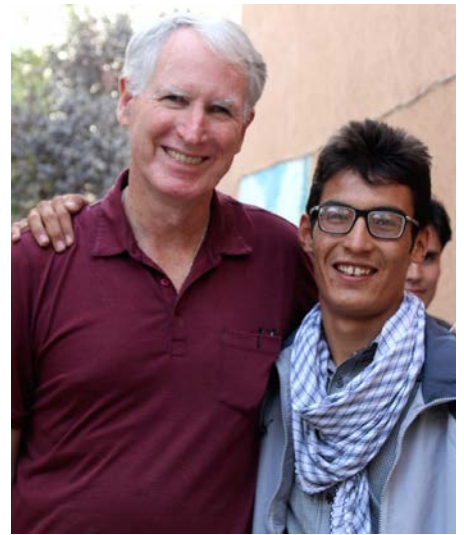


ways relevant to their daily lives and the challenges they faced. We developed our classes with lots of small group work, interactions and interesting dynamics. At the end of the week some of the youth said how much fun they had had and wanted to learn more. Two young university women whose field was psychology came for counseling and asked if we could teach them psychology because they were learning very little at school. They were placed in the field because of their Concord test scores, and had no interest in psychology. Yet, upon graduation, they would be expected to work as psychologists. One recommendation that we made to Hakim was to develop a study skills class, since most of the youth had difficulty focusing or knowing how to organize and plan their study and preparation for exams. Another recommendation was to have a class on how to write their essays for college entrance applications.

On our last day, the suicide bomb at the mosque with many killed or injured, brought home to us the reality of Afghanistan. In the midst of the chaos, violence, fear and hopelessness felt on the streets of Kabul, the APV center provides an oasis of peace and possibilities for the Afghan youth. Through their programs, APV offers a vision of new ways of working together across tribal differences, and gives valuable opportunities for solidarity and outreach to the poorest of Afghan society. It is a privilege for George and me and Capacitar to collaborate with Dr. Hakim Young and the Afghan Peace Volunteers. We plan to return in February and October 2018.

In peace and solidarity,

Pat Cane and George Horan
Capacitar Afghanistan Team



Dr. Hakim Young and the Afghan Peace Volunteer Coordinators