

## MEANINGFULWORLD

### **30 years of Humanitarian Relief in Armenia and the Globe: Forgiveness & Meaning-making**

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The Association of Trauma Outreach and Prevention (ATOP), Meaningfulworld, has been serving globally in 47 countries and 25 states in USA since 1988. We began immediately after the devastating earthquake in Armenia. On December 1988, a 6.8 magnitude earthquake devastated northern Armenia killing 75,000 people and leaving thousands homeless (Kalayjian, 1995; British Broadcasting Company, 2013). We began the first Mental Health Outreach Program in Armenia to assess post-traumatic symptomatology and identify factors that contributed to relief from symptoms, including meaning-making and forgiveness, and to help heal the country who was suffering. We oriented and deployed over 50 psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and nurses to volunteer in Armenia. Since 1988, we have had over 20 humanitarian missions in Armenia, and Karapagh.

In addition to the earthquake trauma, Armenia was also suffering from neighboring trauma. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Soviet Armenia, was involved in a 20-year long conflict with its neighbor Azerbaijan regarding the territory of Artsakh. With the collapse of the Soviet Union several years after the quake, much of the recovery was not completed leaving many Armenians to live in metal shelters (Kalayjian, 1995).

Our relief efforts utilize a 3-pronged approach: Healing & education, research & Publication, and policy evaluation & revisions. With an IRB approval from Luther College, we administered scientific surveys to all adults (age 18 and older) to assess the continued impact of the trauma they experienced, their level of forgiveness as well as meaning discovered. The majority expressed distress regarding the anniversary of the Ottoman Turkish Genocide commemorated on 24 April, the one-year anniversary of the 2 April atrocities caused by Azerbaijan in 2016, the earthquake in 1988, Horizontal Violence (especially related to family and domestic violence), unemployment, poverty, and “brain-drain.”

We then were invited to get involved with TARC Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission. I served as the psychologists in the 10 member men’s club involving 5 Armenian men and 5 Turkish men. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009, after months of Swiss mediation and U.S. encouragement, the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Turkey met to sign Protocols aiming to establish diplomatic relations between the two nations. The signing of these accords has resulted in mixed emotions and various opinions within both Armenia and Turkey. Emotions were high on both sides, as the neighboring

countries have a long history of strained relations. The issue surrounding recognition of the killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks as Genocide has been at the core of the emotional strife between both nations. We conducted research and published on the reactions of Armenians in Armenia as well as in diaspora (Kalayjian, A., De Mucci, J., & Toussaint, L., 2010). About the psychological and emotional impact of the Protocols on the Armenian people, there was a mix of both positive and negative emotions. Most respondents (51.7%) expressed strong negative emotions ranging from sadness to rage. Twenty-two-point-four percent (22.4%) reported feeling a mixture of negative emotions, predominantly a combination of fear for the future and rage over unjust conditions, which do not favor Armenian interests.

Starting 2004, we began working with the Iraqi Armenian who fled Iraq from the war waged by USA. Meaningfulworld worked with the Iraqi Armenian refugees, as well as the remaining local Armenians who were experiencing Horizontal Violence.

Starting in 2010, we began working with Syrian Armenians who fled the civil war in Syria. We continued large scale group healing, workshops, lectures and media engagements. Consistent with previous findings, the results confirmed that it was specifically the presence of meaning in participants' lives, and not simply the search for meaning, that most predicted relief from trauma symptoms. Consistent with Frankl's (1962) theory, findings emphasized that in order to process the painful emotions associated with post-traumatic stress, it is essential to understand and make sense of the traumatic experiences. The link between meaning-making and psychological wellbeing following a traumatic event has already been well established (Collie & Long, 2005; Skaggs & Baron, 2006; Kalayjian, Shigemoto, & Patel, 2010), as it has been described to play a central role in lowering symptoms of PTSD such as intrusive memories and nightmares. Our findings indicated that individuals in Armenia also engage in the psychological process of reconstructing a meaningful picture for their lives in order to find relief from symptoms following a traumatic event. Results also indicated that the presence of meaning in one's life contributed to lower levels of post-traumatic stress. Results showed that feeling forgiven by God affected one's meaning-making and forgiveness of others moderated the relationship between the presence of meaning and post-traumatic stress. This suggested that individuals with higher rates of forgiveness also experience a higher presence of meaning in their lives, which works to heal them from stress following a traumatic event.

In 2015 began researching and working on suicide prevention lifeline, launching hopefully in October 2019. We were disappointed to learn that there was no funding available to support this project, and the US has cut the budget to Armenia 77%, with the focus of remaining funding being on maternal and infant care. Everyone from the UN, to Ministers of Education and Health, to professors at universities, agreed about the urgency of this suicide prevention lifeline. Since volunteerism is not established in Armenia, we need financial support to pay honoraria to the volunteers who are

responding to the urgent calls. Currently, we are in the process of securing the funding.

Kindly support us to continue the following sustainable projects established in Armenia.

### **The following programs were developed**

1. Campaign on transforming Horizontal Violence through posters of lifting one another up and not being a “crab in the bucket.” Posters were donated to the collaborative centers;
2. Engaging the disabled to sew Heart-Hug-Dolls in Vanadzor, with the goal to replicate this in other areas;
3. Launching an ecological beautification project – university student volunteer project, to clean the area around the university;
4. Launching a Suicide Prevention Hotline;
5. Starting neighborhood and community associations for aesthetic and development purposes;
6. Sponsoring children in need, and expanding to supporting elders in need;
7. Engaging elders with the children in day care centers, for generational transmission of meaning-making;
8. Planting herbs (lavender and rosemary) for health and peace in every home, terrace, garden or porch, establishing “Peace Gardens;”
9. Teaching the UN declaration for Human Rights, and the most recent UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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