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by Patricia Omidian, Consultant for Humanitarian Assistance, Pakistan and Afghanistan

Patricia Omidian is a medical anthropologist with 17 years experience with the Afghan refugee community. She lives in Afghanistan and speaks Dari.



My colleague Nina Lawrence and I, started teaching the Focusing process one year ago in a workshop for 11 management and health staff from an Afghan non-governmental association called Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA) in Peshawar, Pakistan. The efforts are to help Afghan refugees and Afghan aid workers working in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most of those trained in the first workshop are still Focusing on their own!

After the workshop, CHA staff immediately reported that levels of tension and anger at work decreased. CHA's director noted that the managers' problem-solving abilities have improved. One manager stated, "Old family issues and old pain about the war were weighing me down, always increasing my tension and anger. Now that is much better. The pressure is less." CHA staff continue to describe how Focusing has helped them to cope and feel hopeful for the future despite the worry and uncertainty of their situation.

This program started when I was asked to develop a program to help staff deal with the trauma of war and aid work. Afghan aid staff face the gravest dangers. In interviews most spoke about the difficulty in doing their work now because of flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, non-directed anger and depression, and fear of the future. Many of the men have been imprisoned and beaten or tortured, and found difficulty in keeping resulting anger and other emotions out of their family life. Female staff had also been harassed and beaten by Taliban or their rivals, the United Front forces. Life under the previous Rabbani government had also been brutal, with numerous human rights abuses noted by staff.

Debriefing, a process of helping aid or disaster relief workers cope with the emotional stress of their work, is standard procedure for disaster relief workers in the western world. Such service for workers is rare in Afghanistan.

The CHA program was launched with the Focusing workshop in March, 2001. Nina Lawrence followed up with 8 days, during 3 months, assisting individuals and helping train the mental health team. She is still writing to many of those she worked with and encouraging them. Because of her efforts, we continue teaching Focusing to anyone who wants to learn.

One of the stories that captured Nina and I came the first time we tried teaching Focusing and let us know we were using the appropriate mental health tool. We did

not know if it would work but we had to try. We tried some simple exercises to help them feel the felt sense and used Sufi poetry to give them a grounding point, and then did some pair work on listening and Focusing. At the end, one man looked at us with amazement. He had been having a pain in his side for a long time. He thought it was from stress. And when he focused on it, it left. He just sat there amazed and still speaks of that first time with the same amazement. He still Focuses, but usually alone.

One of the Afghan women trained in that first workshop, Mina, likes the Focusing process so much that she trains anyone who asks her for help. We have found that Focusing is very Sufi, and the Afghans respond to it with ease. One told me that he had studied Sufism for years but never understood how to get to Presence. Now he knows.

Focusing was chosen because it allows deep work on psychological issues to be done without breaching ethical dilemmas of trust and disclosure. The focuser has control over what is said. Those being treated can work on their psychological problems or needs alone, or with a listener who merely reflects back. The listener may never know the nature of the problem. Private issues do not have to be revealed, and breaches of trust are not a risk. The usual talk therapy processes are problematic here. Afghans cannot tell secrets about their families to others. It just is not allowed. I looked at Afghan models of coping and well-being. I wanted a local model that would not need a lot of introduction. As an anthropologist I wanted to see what works culturally, and promote that model. The local context is everything. Focusing seems to be perfect in most of the local contexts, especially with regard to privacy.

We train in groups or individually, even children as young as 8. I think, for Afghans, the group process while learning to Focus is very good. They like the support of their colleagues. Our only problem is that the new Focusers tend to go too deep--into trance states. I have tried bringing them into the process a bit more slowly and that seems to help. Also, making sure they talk to me as they do the process seems to help. Afghans do this very easily. I think it is because of their ritual prayers, which require a focusing level if done right.

In the training, we use the Rumi poem "[The Guest House](#)". Because Afghan culture prides itself on kindness toward guests, wanted or unwanted, this is a useful metaphor. In the latest workshop, with staff from International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Female Education Program, 6 women found Focusing very useful and something they could use in their teacher-training program on psychosocial wellness. The women recognized that they needed to help themselves and their teachers before they would be able to help the children. The aid workers have been uprooted from their homes and homelands, lost family members, lost connections with loved ones just like the refugee communities they now serve. The only difference is that these women are employed in positions that have better salaries than many in their families. This in itself can cause problems as, in many cases, husbands, fathers and brothers remain unemployed.

As we worked through the focusing process, where one meets one's felt senses as guests to the inner self, (like in the Rumi poem) a full range of emotions came up. By Focusing on them many of the staff felt a calming and release. In one session, the emotions confronted were very strong and brought back very painful memories of the war, about which the women openly talked. In the end many found some easing of pain and a cleared space to find comfort inside. All were invited to work one on one with the consultant if they wished. The stories they shared were horrifying-but they were able to talk about the cruelty of the various factions involved and how this had touched their own lives. It was a deeply moving time, filled with tears.

I find that most Afghans, after the initial training, do not like using a listening partner. Yet, recently I was asked if I would consider a weekly lunch time Focusing group session at work. I think this is a good idea. Perhaps, as a non-Afghan, I am seen as a safe person to talk to and to lead such sessions. Besides, the ones who asked me told me that they like my voice and find my tone and pitch helpful.

The staff of CHA's CeReTechs branch has translated the Focusing Guide card from Ann Weiser Cornell's sessions into Dari. We use this extensively and find it helpful with some cultural modifications. Also, we are in the process of translating Ann's book into Dari, which is about half done.

I welcome contact but may be able to respond only when I am in Peshawar--so far no email in Afghanistan for me to use. Any suggestions from others working in similar situations or with refugees, would be helpful. E-mail contact is drpat@pes.comsats.net.pk

by Nina Joy Lawrence, Trainer, USA

From September 18 through October 30, 2003, I taught four Focusing workshops, three in Kabul and one in Ghazni. We titled them Focusing and Resiliency. Dr. Patricia Omidian and I planned them together, and I taught three of them myself because Pat was so busy with her work for UNIFEM. We were very glad to be able to teach the one workshop in Ghazni together.

The support I got to do this work shows how it is valued. Quakers took the work under their care and valued it as peace building. The Afghan organizations I worked with valued Focusing as supportive of psycho-social wellness in workplaces, communities, schools and families. I did the work as an independent volunteer, and my base of operations was with Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), the Afghan NGO I had worked with in 2001 when they were still in Peshawar, Pakistan. They invited me to Kabul and provided me with office space, materials, transportation, internet access and all that I needed to run workshops. My plane trip was partially paid for by donations from my Quaker Meeting in Corvallis and partially paid for by CHA. My expenses in Afghanistan were met by CHA and Pat and my host Afghan family, with whom Pat lives. Transportation and guards for the trip to Ghazni were paid for by UNIFEM, a United Nations program for the economic betterment of women.



Nina's e-mail is nina.lawrence@cmug.com. In between her work with Friends, with therapists in Oregon, and with people in Afghanistan, she would be glad to respond to encouragement, questions, suggestions.

Two mixed gender workshops were taught for the men and women of CHA, with 22 total participants, primarily top and middle management of this large, all-Afghan NGO. One workshop for Afghan Women's Network was presented for 18 women from all over Kabul. This was a mixed age group of urban women, housewives, some professionals, and students, one as young as 11. The fourth workshop, the one in Ghazni, was for UNIFEM, and included 7 women teachers of different educational levels and two young male translators, who became participants.

To teach Afghans Focusing we use Focusing-like excerpts from Sufi poetry, written by Jelaludin Rumi (translation by Coleman Barks in *The Essential Rumi*, Castle Books, NJ, 1997). Rumi was born in the Balkh Province of Afghanistan 800 years ago. This way the participants don't feel they are having Western things pushed at them; rather, they are reclaiming something of their own. As a support for ongoing practice, Ann Weiser Cornell's *Student Manual Part One* was provided for all CHA participants after the workshop.

Here is the part of the Rumi poem we use to teach Presence:

This we have now is not imagination.
This is not grief or joy.
Not a judging state, nor an elation, nor sadness.
Those come and go.
This is the presence that doesn't.

And the part of his Guest House poems that point to a process like Focusing, include the lines:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all.
...Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Focusing practices I was able to cover in the Afghan workshops were:

Presence (how to be with what is inside you)
Noticing the Inner Guests (becoming aware of the felt sense that comes in you)
Nurturing the Guests Through Simple Listening (how to partner a Focuser and how to spend time with the felt sense)
Listening and Reflecting (how to say back a bit of what you hear and check it inside with the felt sense)
Focuser's Guest is the Guide (what happens when you check a reflection with the felt sense)
How to continue Focusing practice

In her work with Afghans, Pat Omidian has found they need other basic information to make the Focusing practice more helpful, so we included basics about resiliency, and biological and psychological stress responses. I inadvertently found a way of checking whether people were understanding Focusing. To provide a break towards the middle of the second workshop day, I offered participants a chance to draw a picture of what it felt like inside to spend time with the inner guest, the felt sense. As each participant shared about their picture, I found I could tell whether they were understanding how to use Focusing or needed some more help.

Many people felt Focusing would be easy to continue in conjunction with their prayer times. Many were more comfortable doing it by themselves than with someone else, although if the people were already trusted friends, they felt good about being reflective listeners for each other.

Comments participants made showed the value of Focusing for them.

"Focusing is in the history here. It is in the literature, the poems. Mohammad even sat in the cave before becoming the messenger of God doing something like Focusing. So what have we been doing these 1000 and more years? Why doesn't everybody know this? "

"I've been doing this, but I didn't know how to be with the guests. I thought it was bad to go inside and see these guests. I thought it would make me worse. Now I know the Focusing method, and I find out it is good to be with the guests this way. I'll tell my mother. She will be glad too."

"My heart wanted me to be in love with myself after the workshop, and I do feel that I got what my heart wanted."

"We need to have the plan and the curriculum to pass Focusing to master trainers, to trainers, to clinics, to village health workers, to villagers." This was said by the head of the government health program in four provinces.

"I listened to my wife for the first time. She was really surprised and pleased."

"Inside I find sadness, great sadness, that people have spent so much energy on getting things, material goods, capital, instead of learning this kind of practice. Where would we be now if we had spent the last hundreds of years in our society learning and teaching this kind of thing?"

"This was the most useful workshop we have ever had. We went home even after the first day and were able to use it immediately to make things better in our families. We need more of this."

"We can use this everyday in our school classrooms, in our families, and for ourselves."

"We don't just need two day workshops, we need three week workshops. Please come back."

"We need everyone in our society to know how to do Focusing."

Since this time Pat Omidian has become the country director in Afghanistan for the American Friends Service Society, the social action organization of the Quakers. The Focusing work, translated into Dari, has been included in a training manual for community development and is being used in a variety of settings. We hope this can become a model for use in other countries.

*For other articles on Focusing and social issues see [A Better World](#)
Other Afganistan articles see: [A New Use of Focusing by Afghan Aid Workers](#)*