

Psychologically Treating The Refugee Crisis In Europe - OpEd



Refugees arriving in Spain. Photo Credit: Pool Moncloa/Jorge Villar

As you're probably aware, extreme nationalist and populist voices are coming out of the woodwork all over Europe right now. Those voices are dangerous not only to a unified Europe, but a fiercely non-prejudiced and peaceful Europe. While anything but absent from Europe's past, these terrible voices are doing all they can to establish and keep themselves in power. Regardless, I don't think we can lose sight of the efforts being taken to fight this prejudice.

In light of this, it may be uncommon to focus on the psychological struggles refugees and migrants encounter. We seem to talk about food and shelter a lot, but what about the mental health toll? It's also uncommon to speak of the efforts taken to heal migrants from those struggles. I've put together a short list of just a few of those groups offering psychological help to refugees and what they're doing to make the world a better place in the midst of this dilemma.

BAPK Telephone Counseling

We are seeing an increasing need for psychological services for refugees. After all, they have left their homes under immense pressure, fearing for their lives. We also know that the mental and physical are intertwined, thanks to science. In Germany, the Association for the Relatives of Mentally Ill Persons (BAPK in German) set up a phone counseling service for refugees who arrive in their country.

While not a refugee focused organization, the team at BAPK saw the need for professional counseling that refugees rarely have access to and opened a phone line for struggling refugees. While some places have more counseling for those dealing with extreme racism and prejudice, this phone line may be all the refugees in Germany have. The phone line is available in four different languages, and the success they found led the team to actually visit asylum centers. While a phone line may not be the most ideal form of this counseling, it's a free service that is important and rarely available to refugees who need it.

There are hotlines for several types of mental illness, but refugees are in a unique situation where they have less resources like those available to them and are often coming to a new country without the money for proper counseling and mental health aid. What BAPK is doing with refugees could be a model for a great, free service other organizations around the world could implement.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF)

Recently featured in an article by the Huffington Post, the MSF in Sicily, Italy has been making a lot of progress with helping refugee patients suffering PTSD by using narrative exposure therapy (NET). NET helps those suffering address their memories directly rather than suppressing them in any way. "[NET teaches you that] you don't have to be afraid of your memories," says Katy Robjant of The Helen Bamber Foundation, a fellow NET-using organization.

MSF has chosen to use NET because previous efforts using the therapy have shown to be fruitful. Clinical trials have shown significant advantages in terms of patients getting over PTSD in comparison to those who undergo other therapies. MSF may be on to something that the rest of us just haven't taken the time to find

the importance in yet.

Social Workers Around Europe

In recent years, while the Syrian refugee crisis has become what it's known as now, social workers as a whole have stepped up in conscious response to the issue. In an interview with the Guardian, Ruth Stark of the International Federation of Social Workers said, "the emotional trauma of change is something that social workers know a huge amount about," though she went on to say they had a lot to learn.

Regardless, social workers' expertise makes them a great fit to help families affected by discrimination. Thankfully they are taking up arms in the best ways they know how and making progress on their own time where it is well needed.

European Network Against Racism (ENAR)

The ENAR's website describes themselves as "the only pan-European anti-racism network [combining] advocacy for racial equality and facilitating cooperation among civil society anti-racism in Europe." In short, they've been around since 1998 and work to end discrimination against minorities through organized social and legal efforts.

While they've put their focus on a variety of types of racism and phobias through the years, last year they put together an important resource regarding the refugee crisis. The resource addressed refugee inclusion in the workplace and was a guide for employers. It received support from companies like L'Oréal and Coca Cola, and focused on the importance of understanding the asylum process and helping refugees understand employment regulations. Additionally it spoke to employers creating specific opportunities for refugees and those in need of work while trying to escape war and persecution, which in turn has a tendency to help employers and economies.

What efforts do you see for people fighting the refugee crisis in Europe? Let us know in the comments!

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Source: <http://www.eurasiareview.com/13032018-psychologically-treating-the-refugee-crisis-in-europe-oped/>

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