



RESPONDING *to* SURVIVORS
of TORTURE & SUFFERING

SURVIVAL SKILLS AND STORIES OF KURDISH FAMILIES

KIRKUK CENTER FOR TORTURE VICTIMS AND
DULWICH CENTRE FOUNDATION INTERNATIONAL

RESPONDING TO SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND SUFFERING SURVIVAL SKILLS AND STORIES OF KURDISH FAMILIES

This publication has been created to support the workers of the Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims and others who are responding to human rights abuses in Iraq.

The Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims is a human rights organisation assisting victims of torture, persecution and violence in Iraq. We believe in a democratic society where the dignity of the human person is respected, where adults and children enjoy the right to life and liberty, and where citizens are free from torture and terror.

Dulwich Centre Foundation International (DCFI) is an Australian-based organisation that responds to groups and communities who are enduring significant hardships, co-develops culturally-appropriate and resonant methodologies to respond to community mental health issues and collective suffering, and works in partnership to build the capacity of local workers.

In November 2011 and September 2012, David Denborough from DCFI conducted workshops for the counsellors of the Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims. This publication describes a number of the narrative methodologies that were discussed in these workshops – The Tree of Life, The Team of Life, and the use of letters, documents, poems and certificates. It also includes stories from local workers about the survival skills and knowledge of Kurdish families.





PART I

*Survival: Secret knowledge and skills
of Kurdish families from the workers
of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims* ...02

PART II

Tree of Life ...10

PART III

Team of Life ...15

PART IV

*Letters, documents,
poems & certificates* ...20

PART V

*Key narrative principles in responding
to survivors of torture & suffering* ...23

*About the Kirkuk Center
for Torture Victims* ...26

About this publication ...28



PART I

SURVIVAL: SECRET KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS
OF KURDISH FAMILIES FROM THE WORKERS
OF KIRKUK CENTER FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

SURVIVAL: SECRET KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF KURDISH FAMILIES FROM THE WORKERS OF KIRKUK CENTER FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

As Kurdish people we know a lot about suffering. Our families, our friends, and this land have all known great hardship. Most of us work as counsellors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists or doctors. The people who come to see us have been through so much. We respond to those who have experienced imprisonment and torture; those who have lost loved ones due to the previous regime; and women and children who are experiencing violence in their homes.

We also work with families who were affected by chemical weapon attacks and the al-Anfal Campaign, the Kurdish genocide of the late 1980s, in which 5000 of our villages were destroyed, thousands upon thousands of our people killed, and many widows and orphans left behind. Many of us then endured the forced migrations of 1991. And then there was the civil war which tore us apart and which is still affecting our society.

There are current hardships too. Many families live in poverty and there is still considerable insecurity, kidnappings and sometimes bombings near homes or markets in Kirkuk. Due to the civil war there is still no peace between all our peoples which leads to ongoing conflict in the mountains. And as Kurdish people we're never had one homeland. We are spread between Kurdistan (Iraq), Iran, Turkey and Syria, and actually all over the world. Kurdish families know too much about suffering. Sometimes when people come to us, hopelessness has taken over their lives and all seems broken.

But as Kurdish people, we also know a lot about fighting for our freedom, about creating new lives and a new country. As Kurdish people we know a lot about survival. There are many things that families do here when times are so hard. There are many things our families turn to if they are suffering. We have included here some of our own Kurdish survival skills and where they come from. These stories were gathered in Sulaymaniyah (in the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq). We hope this document will be helpful to others. We hope you may add your own stories to it.

LOYALTY

For some of us, it is loyalty that carries us through the hardest days. I learned this when I was in a car accident and I was in a coma for six hours. When I opened my eyes I saw a friend of mine standing right in front of me and crying. I will never forget this. When I was close to death my friend was beside me.

I can trace the history of this skill to the teachings of my father who taught us to do unto others what we would like others to do unto us. There is a proverb here, 'you reap only what you sow'. Some of us are loyal to our friends and that is why we see them in front of us when we most need them.

A MOTHER'S LOVE

I am a mother. I have two bright-eyed children and a bad man. As a mother I don't let the badness of my husband effect how I raise my children. I do my best to give them my love, my mercy and my kindness. I don't let them feel the vacancy, the space that is there because of their father.

I trace back the history of these skills to my own mother and how she raised me. And now my children tell me, 'We will go on your path. In the future, we will take the path you have taken'. The love I give my daughter she gives to her doll. A mother's love is a Kurdish tradition.

LOVE FOR MY COUNTRY

When times are hard, some of us call upon our love of our country. I learnt to love our country from my father as he was a Peshmarga (freedom fighter). He suffered a lot because of being a Kurd and defending his country and his nation. He was tortured by the previous regime, dislocated and imprisoned. When I was one year old, I was in jail also, for seven months with my family. I remember, as a dream, my life in prison so that I always recognise who are my friends, who are my enemies, and not to depend on foreigners. I was 12 years old when I started to understand my country and my father's actions.

My father was showing me pictures of his friends, fighting for freedom, and living in the mountains. His stories and his experiences have made me want to do something for my country. My mother encourages me as her daughter in this skill. It is important for her too. Love of country is tightly related to our culture. There are numerous songs, pictures, poems that we share in our family about this love of our land. And I like to have the Kurdish flag in my living room. When times are hard, some of us recall our love of our country and it helps us to continue.

PRACTISING PATIENCE

Many of us spoke of practising patience. As Kurdish people we know a lot about patience. We have many different stories from our families.

I was 11 years old and in 5th grade. Due to the civil war a political party had arrested one of my uncles. He was lost for six months. We knew nothing about where he was and this was a terrible situation in our life. He was away for one year and only then was he released. These imprisonments were widespread during the civil war. Many families were without their loved ones. We would try hard to practice

patience which is tightly related to our religion. We would tell ourselves if God wants him, God will protect him. God will bring him back home. In Islam, patience is like half of belief. For sure, God loves those who are patient.

Another one of our group told a different story:

Last year I didn't make it to university because the competition was too tough. Once I would have got hopeless but this time I did not. I learned to be patient and thought about how to plan in order to get the results I wanted.

Some of us use patience within our own families, with our husbands, but it can be complex.

My husband is less patient than me. I have to have enough for two people. Being patient has been the way I could keep my family and save my marriage. It has been good to practice patience with my kids, and in my education and in my profession, but it is not always good with my husband. Sometimes I have felt worn out, or exploited, or abused. Where there is abuse, sometimes patience is not the answer.

One of our younger male counsellors spoke of two tough times in his life when patience was vital:

When I was a student, we were living under one of the two economic embargoes and it was so difficult

to continue but patience helped me to succeed. And then, my father died which made me the eldest member of my family. There was a lot of burden on my shoulders as my other family members were young or were still children. I had to work so that I could make a living for them. This was a very tough experience. However, I kept going and also completed my studies and have a successful life. The history of this skill of patience traces to my father's life. He had an even tougher life than me but always encouraged us to study, to keep going and not to drop out from school. His encouragement keeps me going even now. If my father could hear me talking about this, he would love it. It would bring him happiness.

Many of us, in Kurdistan, practise patience.

CRYING AND SHARING TEARS

One of us spoke about how tears bring her comfort. The first time I had an illness, when I explained this to a friend of mine, I cried and my tears relieved me. It can help to cry sometimes. My family members recognise this in me. They know I use crying to release my stress. For some of us, especially Kurdish women, tears can bring solace. There are differences for men. Sometimes as men we cry on the inside,

or we cry more for others than for ourselves. Sometimes, when our men were being tortured, not to cry, not to show weakness to the enemy, was an act of resistance. There is a saying that says 'men's tears are precious because men don't cry so often'. So tears have many different meanings here. For some of us, here in Kurdistan, sharing tears with others is a strength.

ADAPTING

Some of us have learned to adapt. I am a person without father and mother. I lost them both when I was five years old. I have another sister and brother and I haven't studied and I have not married. When I lost my parents, I lived in my paternal uncle's house and after a while I lost my brother in an accident.

My uncle's wife and her children are very bad with me, but I have adapted as I don't have any other places to go. This is like the Kurdish people. We have learned to adapt. Adapting is part of our social tradition and some of us carry this on in our own lives.

TRUSTING OURSELVES

Four of the men in our group spoke about trusting ourselves, self-belief and self-dependency. We have different stories about this but they all related to our fathers:

I learnt to depend on myself from my father as he would repeat this all the time: 'Do your work or do your jobs by yourself as I have depended on myself

in my life'. This has been very helpful to me. Since I was 8 years old, whenever I asked for help or assistance from my father he would tell me, 'This time I will help you, but next time you have to do it by yourself'. And then he would tell me stories from his life. From that time on, I have always asked people about their experiences to gain more knowledge, but I have done my work by myself.

I also learnt this skill from my father. He lost his mother when he was a child and he suffered lots of problems in the 1930s. Still he studied and finished intermediary school (which back then was like university today). Later on, in 1946, he participated in creating the Kurdish republic in Iran. He knew seven languages. When they ruined our house in Kirkuk, he started from scratch. He also used to write poetry and was a skilful tailor. Because of all the sufferings, he taught us to be self-dependent. I was the closest kid to him. I remember his teachings and pass them onto my children.

Another one of our group said:

When my son was struggling in school, I remembered my father who was self-confident and implanted this in me. When my son failed in six classes, I was frustrated and had hypertension but when I remember my father I could control my emotions and help my son.

Our other group member vividly remembers a time from when he was only six years old. When I was six years old I went to the market with my father. We entered a crowd and I wanted to hold my dad's hand. My dad told me not to break his glasses which were in his pocket so I released his hand and then we got separated and I got lost. I did not cry. Instead, I thought about where we had entered the market. I found a road and went back and saw two people and asked them whether they had seen a black door. And then, they helped me to find my house. My self-belief started from that date, because my father would always praise me about this day. If one of my siblings could not do something, he would tell them to look at me, how bravely I could find my way home when I got lost in the market.

Some of us have been given self-belief and it helps us to find our way home when we need to.

TALKING TO OURSELVES THROUGH HARD TIMES

When times are very difficult some of us talk to ourselves. I say, 'It's okay. I can get over this. What does not kill me will make me stronger.' About six years ago my best friend died in a car accident. I felt that I could not survive without her. But I kept talking to myself and over time life started again. I now have amazing friends and life is good even if I cannot

have it all. I first heard the phrase 'what doesn't kill you will make you stronger' from the movie the Dark Knight, but I really learned about this from my relative who lost her husband. In time she married again and she has created a happy life. Some of us talk ourselves through hard times, and what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND, TO JUSTIFY THE ACTS OF OTHERS

When someone does something wrong to me, I try to understand and to find a justification for him or her so that I don't let that wrong done against me make me so tired in my life. I have used this skill a lot, and whenever I succeed it helps me. I trace the history of

this to my forefathers and friends and relatives. They know that I have this skill and they try to do like me, but most of them cannot. This is highly related to Kurdish culture because understanding is a way of optimism for a more beautiful future.

STUDYING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

For some of us, it is studying that carries us through. The history for me goes back to when I was 15 years old in 1991, the year of massive Kurdish migration. My friends and my family all encouraged me and one

of my brothers supported me financially and in other ways. Study and learning is part of our culture. Another one of us said something similar. When I was 13, in 7th grade, I failed in all my classes.

I was so sorrowful and when I came back home my brother supported me and encouraged me to continue studying. My teachers helped also so I decided to keep striving to study so that I would not be called illiterate.

While for me, it was my mum who throughout my childhood would always say ‘through studying you can brighten your future’. There are many sayings

here about this: ‘Study because studying is like a shield for defending yourself from the enemy in all times’. The first revealed verse of Koran is ‘read in the name of your God’. And there is even a chapter of the Koran entitled ‘the pen’. Within it, God swears: ‘Noon and I swear by pen and what they inscribe’.

Many of us in Kurdistan strive to study for a better future.

SERVING OTHERS WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT THE REWARD

One of us spoke of a philosophy that carries him through life. It is about serving others without thinking about the reward. Through my childhood I heard a lot about my parents and my surroundings, telling me do good things because God will reward me - I will enter paradise, and they would describe heaven for me. Questions kept coming to my mind but I couldn’t ask them. Whenever I would, I was told to be quiet because I was blaspheming. Later when I

was in 10th grade, I started to read books and to think about what I was hearing. I thought ‘Why should I do good things out of fear? Why should I think about rewards all the time?’ I think that if I am doing this then I am bargaining with God. So I developed a philosophy that has benefitted me a lot. I serve others a lot without thinking about its reward. These days my family members recognise this in me and they would say, ‘Maybe you are right’.

LISTENING AND HELPING OTHERS

Many of us spoke of how, during hard times, we try to help others. We persuade, give confidence or reconcile our friends. Many of us have learnt the power of listening which is linked to our Kurdish culture especially in some of our families. Some of us have also learned from teachers.

HOLDING ONTO HOPE

Some of us have had to learn to hold onto hope. When we migrated in 1991 from Kirkuk to Iran I got a terrible disease and I was cureless for a while. Meanwhile my mum was telling me stories emphasising that ‘after all disasters and calamities, good things will come’. She would also recite prayers and verses from Koran that helped our family to have hope in life. Eventually I found treatment.

On the other side, for a time I was a doctor travelling 150kms every day. That was an awful thing for me. But then I started thinking that nothing stays forever. This too will pass. These were my father’s words.

Another one of our group learnt the skill of optimism when he was 10 years old. This was when we were

forcibly removed from Kirkuk to Erbil. We left our home, our friends and family members. It was a tough experience but I could manage it and make new friends in Erbil because of a belief in optimism. I learned this from my family and from my grandma. She would always say one day we will be back and live in the same place: ‘a stone is precious in its own place’. I used to tell my friends in Erbil this. I would give them my grandma’s optimism. There is an Arabic phrase ‘be optimistic and you will find it’. I wonder now where my grandmother learnt her optimism, probably from her family. She would have seen a lot of hardship in her lifetime as a Kurdish woman. When I continue this optimism now, this is an honouring of my grandma. She has passed away. We owe this optimism to her.

HONOURING AND REMEMBERING KURDISH CULTURE

Throughout the most difficult of times, our families have found ways to honour Kurdish culture and traditions. Every time we honour our festivals and ceremonies, this is a form of survival. It is resistance to the Baathification and Arabization of our culture.

We maintain our poetry, our own clothes, and our dancing which is collective – we do this together. Throughout the history of the Kurdish people we have continued our traditions, our ceremonies and our culture.

OTHER SURVIVAL SKILLS

There are other survival skills in Kurdistan too:

- Some of us talked of self-control and controlling our anger. There is a song about this that says ‘Don’t get angry, don’t get angry, anger becomes fire of the soul’.
- Many of us turn to songs in hard times. Even if they are sad songs sometimes they bring us comfort.
- Another one of our group spoke of drawing pictures and pursuing one’s desires and potentials even if at first we are prevented.
- Some of us, whenever we are despairing, try to remember good times, moments shared with friends.
- One of us spoke of finding ways to relax through studying and spirituality.
- And one of us spoke of having a good social relationship with our friends and families. Turning to family and friends helps me to decrease my sorrows or problems. This is linked to cultural traditions and the holy Koran. It is also a social and humanitarian duty.

HARD WORK

Finally, many of our families have had to work hard to survive. When I was a child, the Baath regime imprisoned my father in 1988. We just had to survive and to make a living by ourselves. We fled to Sulaymaniyah from Halabja due to the chemical bombardment and my mum shouldered this burden. She respectfully helped us make our living and she

became my mentor. As with other Kurdish people, I have faced lots of pressures and hardships to make my living and to survive. Many of us, when times are difficult we work very hard and we remember those who shouldered the burdens for us when we were young.

ABOUT THIS COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE DOCUMENT

The document *Survival: Secret knowledge and skills of Kurdish families* was created during a workshop on ‘Narrative responses to hardship’ organised by the Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, on the 28-30th September 2012. This training was offered by David Denborough under the auspices of Dulwich Centre Foundation International.

Participants in the training were asked to break into groups of three to respond to the following questions:

- Describe something (a special skill or knowledge of living) that gets you or your family through hard times
- Tell a story about this – about a time when this special skill or knowledge made a difference to you or others
- What is the social history of this skill or knowledge? How did you learn this? Who did you learn it from? Who would be least surprised to know about this?
- Is this survival skill or knowledge linked in any way to broader collective traditions (familial/community) and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledges are linked?

Participants documented each other’s responses which were then translated (from Kurdish to English). David Denborough crafted a draft version of this collective document which was then read back to the participants who agreed that it was an accurate and vivid description of their special skills and knowledge. A number of participants also indicated that they wished to add further stories which have now been included. The document is now available in Kurdish, Arabic and English. For more information about this process, and about the use of collective narrative documents, see Denborough (2008).

“*As Kurdish people, we know too much about suffering. We have been through the unimaginable. But we also know so much about surviving hardship. We have included here some of the secret knowledge and skills of Kurdish families. These survival skills have long histories, as long as the history of the Kurdish people. We hope this document will be helpful to others.*

We are now planning to share these stories with the people with whom we work. We will ask them about their secret survival skills and their histories. We will ask them to share their stories of survival with us.

”

A landscape photograph showing a vast, open field of golden-brown grasses in the foreground. A single, dark green tree stands prominently in the middle ground. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The text "PART II TREE OF LIFE" is overlaid in the center of the image.

PART II
TREE OF LIFE

THE TREE OF LIFE

'Our life in Kurdistan is just like the life of a forest which has been destroyed many times by the previous Baath regime. They destroyed Kurdistan villages, forests, and agricultural lands. They created fear, terror in the mothers and their children.

But after process of liberation of Kurdistan, there is now regrowth ... new ground, new trunks, branches and leaves.

In Kurdistan, the tree is a symbol of life and of hope. Trees represent endurance, stability, power and continuation. They are deep rooted into the earth and they reach into the sky.

In autumn, we see the leaves falling from the tree, but we know before too long there will be new leaves, new life. And when we see this new life, it brings relief and comfort.

Trees also provide for Kurdish families. They give us fruits and are a source of income for those who trade in the mountains.

There are spiritual meanings too. In the Holy Koran, there are olive trees and fig trees. In religion, the tree is sometimes a symbol of a good, reputable family.

And traditionally, trees are placed on people's graves.

What's more, we resemble trees. A tree begins as a child, and day by day it grows. Like the hopes we build in our hearts, a small tree needs protection until it grows.

And trees in Kurdistan must be strong to survive the elements. Trees teach us how to resist.

In fact, the symbol of the Kirkuk Centre for Torture Victims is a tree.'

~ The counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims

The Tree of Life is a narrative way of working that was originally designed for work with vulnerable children but is now also used with adults who have survived torture and social suffering (Ncube, 2006, Denborough, 2008). It can be facilitated with individuals, families and/or groups. Within the Tree of Life, we use a drawing of a tree as a metaphor to describe different aspects of our lives.



PART ONE: TREE OF LIFE

The Roots (heritage):

'Roots are like the cornerstone to our identity'

The roots of the tree are a prompt for the person to speak about their heritage: where they come from (i.e. village, town, country); their family or community history (origins, family name, ancestry, extended family, totem); those who have taught them the most in life; favourite places; a treasured song or dance; spirituality/religion; language ...

The Ground (the present landscape of their life):

The ground represents where the person lives at present; and some of the activities that they choose to do day to day.

The Trunk (what is valued/skills):

The trunk represents what the person gives value to, cares about, and their skills and abilities. This may include skills in physical acts, skills of caring, kindness, honesty, etc. Then we can trace the history of these: Who did you learn these from? How long has this been important to you? Where did this come from?

The Branches (horizons):

The branches of the tree represent shared hopes, dreams and wishes: for others, for themselves, for wider community. It's then possible to trace the history of these hopes/wishes: How long have you had these hopes? Where did they come from?

How have you held onto them? Did anyone introduce you to these hopes or help you to hold onto them?

Leaves of the Tree (re-membering lives):

The leaves of the tree represent people who are important to the participant. These can be people who are alive or may be people who have passed on.

If the person names someone who has passed away, we can ask:

- Did you have significant times with this person? Please tell me a story about this.
- What was special about this person to you?
- Would this person like it that you remember them in these ways? And that you place them on your tree.

This enables people to demonstrate loyalty to the memory of their loved ones.

Fruits (legacies bequeathed to us):

The fruits represent gifts that have been passed on to the person, or the contributions others have made to their life.

Flowers / Seeds (legacies we wish to leave):

The flowers/seeds of the tree represent gifts that the person wishes to pass onto others. They can also represent the contributions the person is making to others.

PART TWO: FOREST OF LIFE

In the second part of the process, where possible, we gather a number of people's trees together to create a 'Forest of Life'. This forest may be made up of family members, or friends, or we do this process in a group setting. The facilitator may also make

their own tree. Once the forest has been created, the facilitator finds a way to acknowledge something significant about each 'tree' ... so that each person experiences that that they have made a contribution to 'the forest'.

PART THREE: THE STORMS OF LIFE

In the third part of the process, we discuss the ‘storms of life’, the hardships that people face and the ways that people survive such hardships. We move between natural metaphors and people’s lives.

When working with children, we might first talk about the difficulties that trees, forests and animals face. Then we talk about the difficulties that children face and how this affects them. Finally, we explore animals’ survival skills and then children’s survival skills.

When working with adults, we explore their survival skills by asking questions such as:

During difficult times, during the storms of life, what enables you to keep going/helps lift you up? What is it that keeps you strong during difficult times? When things get tough, when you feel down, what are the things you do that help support you to stay strong; to get back on track? It might be connecting to or thinking about certain people, places, family, culture, memories of places or loved ones who have passed away? Or it might be something you do, that makes you feel strong: praying, music, talking, cooking,

cleaning, exercise, something else? What is it that helps you get back up when the going gets tough? What helps you to get through the storms of life?

Sometimes it is easier for people to speak collectively about the storms of life rather than individually.

We then explore the heritage of these survival skills:

Who are the people in your life who have showed you how to survive?

And we ask participants to tell a story about one of their survival skills/strengths. They might tell us about:

- A time when you have used this survival skill.
- How you learned this strength? Where you learned it?
- Who you learned it from/with? Who would be least surprised to know that you have this survival skill? Who recognised this skill/strength of yours?
- Are there others you know who might have that strength/skill also? Who are you joined with in this?

If possible, we document these survival skills. (see pages 12-13)

PART FOUR: RITUAL OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Where possible, we end the Tree of Life with a ritual of acknowledgement. We bring together the significant people in the person’s life (the leaves on the trees), and share the trees and people’s survival skills. We may also award certificates, or read aloud poems, letters or documents about people’s skills.

Sometimes songs or prayers or food may also be shared. These are rituals to acknowledge people’s skills of survival.

Some reflections from the counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims:



In our country, relationships between family members, friends and relatives are a sacred aspect of life. In our society, we are tightly bonded to our family and our bigger family (i.e. grandfather, grandmother, uncle, and so on). We are also bonded to our brothers and sisters. When we are working with torture victims, the Tree of Life can help us to help them draw power and stability from their family members. We can also use it within our own families to increase our knowledge about coping with trauma.



THE TREE OF LIFE IN KURDISTAN

Counsellors in Kurdistan are now using the Tree of Life in creative ways. Here is a story from Sherwan who has used the Tree of Life in his work at the Dohuk Rehabilitation Center:

I was meeting with a young woman in her twenties who grew up in a small rural village but due to poverty her family needed to move to the crowded city. This young woman has some genetic difficulties and is not married and the move affected her badly. Then, one year after moving to the city, this young woman's mother died and this was a terrible blow. They had shared a special relationship and after the mother's death things seemed to go from bad to worse. Her father also struggled after his wife's death, and when he remarried the relationship between the young woman and stepmother was not good.

When I first met her, this young woman was very sad, and had little interest in life. She said she felt fierce pain over all her body, especially her chest and abdomen. All the physical tests that were carried out came back normal. She was also very shy due to her physical differences and was feeling hopeless and isolated. She said that there was no-one that can help her. She said that after losing her mother she has now lost her hope for life.

I first met this young woman ten days after learning about the Tree of Life. I learnt how the Tree of Life can be used with people who are suffering and going through hard times. So I showed her how to draw such a Tree and then asked her to draw it at home.

When she came back she showed me how she had included on her roots the particular land of her village, her mother language, and key social relationships. In relation to her trunk she spoke about particular skills and interests. On her branches (hopes and dreams) she mentioned a wish for safety and also to be successful.

What was most significant was when she named her mother as one of the key leaves on her tree. Even though her mother had passed away, this was a way to honour her. In discussing the fruits (gifts or legacies), we spoke in some detail about what she had learned from her mother. She mentioned traces of education, trust, politeness, taking care of others, and how to take care of the house and to cook. She also spoke about how her mother had taught her to be religious and how to practise her faith. Through these conversations, this young woman realised that these were all legacies from her mother that she is now carrying on in her own life.

In talking about this, she also recalled many significant experiences and memories of her mother. These were stories that she had not spoken of previously. In fact, since her mother's death she had not been speaking of her to anyone.

When I first met this young woman she thought she was lost and that there was nothing good in life. We made her Tree of Life over four sessions and by the end of this time she was much more positive than before. Significantly, she had begun to take better care of herself. She changed out of her dark clothing and dirty clothing. And she became better at resolving problems. She became much happier and began to speak about other social relationships that are important to her. Her step-mother noticed these improvements and when she asked about them, the young woman showed the Tree of Life to her to explain. So the relationship with her step-mother also started to improve.

This is an example of using the Tree of Life to assist someone who is experiencing significant grief. The young woman was able to honour her mother (through including her on the leaves of her tree) and was able to acknowledge the legacies of her mother (fruits) and how these are being carried forward in her life.



An aerial photograph of a city and valley, likely Los Angeles, viewed from a high vantage point. The foreground shows a dry, hilly landscape with scattered pine trees. The middle ground features a wide river valley with agricultural fields and a dense urban area. The background consists of hazy mountains under a blue sky with light clouds. The text "PART III TEAM OF LIFE" is centered over the city area.

PART III
TEAM OF LIFE

THE TEAM OF LIFE

'Many of us love football here in Kurdistan!

It is our chance to forget. When we are on the field everything else fades away.

It is a place for companionship, for joy. It is a place of teamwork.

It is also a theatre of dreams and celebration.

When a goal is scored we shout, clap, dance, and even shoot our guns up into the air!'

~ The counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims

The Team of Life approach uses sporting metaphors to enable people to deal with traumatic experience without having to speak directly about it. The first step is to create a 'team sheet'.

PART ONE: CREATING A TEAM SHEET



This team sheet was created by a Palestinian ex-detainee in collaboration with narrative therapist Nihaya Abu-Rayyan.

We can think of our life as a team. Who are the people most significant to you? The team members of your life can be alive or no longer living. They can be present in your life or people you have known in the past. These are the people most influential (in a positive way) in your life.

Goal keeper

Who acts as your goal keeper? This could be a person, a group, even an organisation. Who looks out for you, who guards your goals, who is most reliable, who would this be?

Defense

Who assists your goalkeeper in protecting your dreams, in protecting what is precious to you?

Your 'attack'

Who assists you, encourages you in trying to score goals?

Other team-mates

Who are some of the other team-mates in your life, those you play with, those whose company you enjoy?

Coach

Who is it you have learned most things from? It is possible to have more than one coach. And it's possible that they may or may not still be alive. What are some of the things that they have taught you?

Interchange

Are there some people who are sometimes on your team and sometimes are not ... they might be very helpful to you in life some days and then on other days not helpful at all? If so, these are your interchange team members. What sort of times do they help? What sort of times do they not help? How have you learnt the difference?

Theme song

Do you have a particular song that means a lot to you, that you could call the 'theme song' of your life at the moment? If so, what would it be? Why is it significant to you?

Supporters in the stands

When you are at your home ground, who are the supporters you imagine in the stands. Who are the people (living or non-living) who are hoping you will do well?

Key values you are defending

What are some of the important values of your team? What is this team standing for? What values are you defending? (Put these behind your goals.) What is the history of these? Have they been a part of your team for a long time?

Your position

What is your position on this team? Where would you place yourself?

First aid kit

When your team faces a difficulty (an injury/a player going down) what do you turn to? What supports your team in hard times? What is in your first aid kit?

Home grounds (fields of dreams)

What are your home grounds? Where are the places you feel most 'at home'? You may have more than one place. They may even be in more than one country. Your home ground might be somewhere that you go regularly, or somewhere that you only visit in your memories or dreams now.

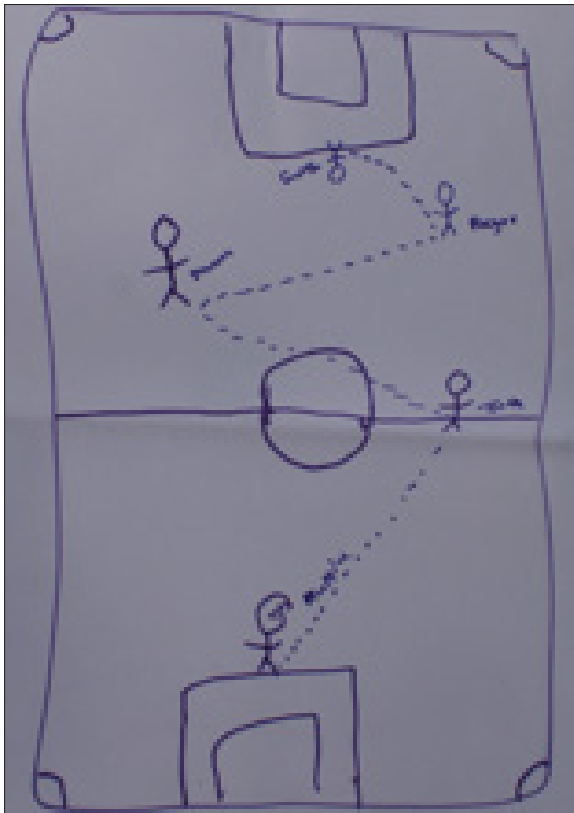
PART TWO: GOAL MAP

The second step is to talk about one goal/achievement that this team has *already* scored. What is a collective goal/achievement that has been scored by this team?

This could include goals such as:

- surviving prison
- staying together through hard times
- keeping children safe
- getting an education

A 'goal map' is then drawn.



Here is an example from a young man, a refugee in Australia, who described how his family had stayed together through hard times: his aunty kicked the ball to his sister, who then passed to his mum, who then passed to his father (who is deceased), and then onto the young man himself who 'kicked the goal'!

We ask the person to:

- Draw a goal map that indicates the different contributions that people made to the achievement of this goal:

Can you describe who was involved in the scoring/attaining of this goal? Was it a solo effort? Or did other members of your team of life help out? How? Did your coach encourage you or help you with tactics?

- What parts did everyone play in this? Go through each theme (homeground, goal-keeper, defence, attack, teammates, etc.)
- What skills or knowledge or values did you or others use in the scoring of this goal?
- Where did these skills/knowledge/values come from?
- What training did you and others do to make it possible to score this goal? How often did you do this – each day, once a week? Where did you train? How did you learn how to do this training? Did anyone show you?
- Draw a scoreboard on one corner of the document and mark up this goal!

PART THREE: GOAL CELEBRATION

Often people who have endured torture have never had other people witness or honour their survival. Through the metaphor of football we find ways to celebrate the significant goals that individuals, families, friends and communities have achieved.

Once the goal map is drawn we ask:

- How do you celebrate goals when they are scored in football? Go through all the different ways ... these might include clapping, shouting, dancing, jumping up and down, even 'shooting our guns up into the air!'

- Which of these would be most appropriate to use to celebrate this goal?
- Then we re-tell the goal (as a commentator would) or re-enact it with different people playing the roles of each person on the team.
- And the rest of the audience cheers, or dances or shouts ... whatever has been decided they will do.

This process can be both light-hearted and profoundly significant at the same time, particularly when the 'goals' being celebrated relate to survival.

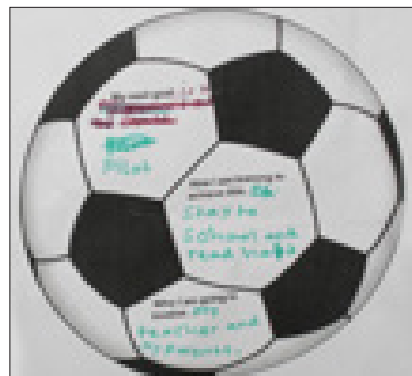
PART FOUR: LOOKING FORWARDS

Only after people have a ‘heritage of achievement’ is it possible to look forwards.

After we have celebrated each person’s past goal, then we ask:

- What is the next goal you are planning to achieve?
- How are you training to achieve this?
- Who are you going to involve?

Where appropriate, people sometimes write these future plans onto drawings of footballs:



PART FIVE: TACKLING PROBLEMS/HARDSHIPS

We can also use football metaphors to talk about ways of tackling/overcoming problems and hardships. We can discuss the ways in which football teams and players have to overcome difficulties.

We can then use the same sorts of questions listed above in the ‘Storms of Life’ section to honour both the sufferings people have endured *and* their survival skills.

Some reflections from the counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims:

“ Some Kurdish people do not like to speak about their painful experiences. In our country, it can take a long period to build up trust to talk freely without any partitions separating them and us. This Team of Life approach can help us to get rid of the shame. Without talking directly, we can still learn about hidden points in the client’s life. And most importantly, this can help put the family members and the relatives in the exact place that they deserve, and clarify the efforts that they need to reach their goals and to overcome hardships. We can build teams of support, teams of families and friends. ”

A photograph of ancient ruins, possibly a Roman or Greek structure, featuring a series of arches and a brick wall in the foreground. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, and a bright, circular sun is visible on the left side. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

PART IV
LETTERS, DOCUMENTS
POEMS & CERTIFICATES

LETTERS, DOCUMENTS, POEMS AND CERTIFICATES

Within narrative practice we can also use letters and poems in our work. These may be poems that we write using the words of survivors of torture or suffering. Or they may be letters or certificates we create to give to those with whom we are meeting. As there are rich traditions of poetry and writing in Iraq, we can use these mediums in our practice. We use these forms of the written word to acknowledge people's skills, knowledge and abilities. Often the people we work with have never received any such acknowledgement which means these letters, documents, poems and/or certificates are quite precious.

MOHAMMED'S LIST OF PRISON SKILLS

Mohammed is 27 years old and has spent about five years in prison. He has been free for four months.

Coming out of prison is difficult. It brings difficulties for the future concerning – work, getting married and having a family. Sometimes people feel after being in prison that they have fallen behind other men their age and this can lead to having a 'bad sense of yourself'.

While Mohammed was in prison there were particular skills that he used to get through the difficult times. This is Mohammed's list of prison skills:

- 1. My time in prison taught me to be patient. I used skills of patience while I was inside.*
- 2. I learned to be strong while living in a very bad situation. I was very good at being strong while in prison.*
- 3. I developed friendships in prison. I used skills in friendship.*
- 4. I received good training in Palestine's history and politics.*
- 5. I learned through the hardship of prison that I wanted to change my life to have a better life.*

These are five signs of strength and power in Mohammed's life.

CERTIFICATE OF HONOUR

Here is an example of a certificate given by a narrative therapist to three women:

This certificate is awarded to:

Zeynep, Leyla and Gülnaz

Three Kurdish women who today shared tears, stories and knowledge about what it is like to miss family members and the ways in which they:

- Hold onto hope for the future*
- Live their daily lives*
- Build friendships*
- Share things they love*
- Do things for those far away*
- Understand each other's tears*

Signed 4th November 2011

Documents or certificates can also be used in work with children. Here is a picture of South African children after they have received their Tree of Life certificates (Ncube, 2006, p. 16):



The following document was created from the words of Palestinian children about ways of managing the effects of a military attack:

HOW TO MANAGE THE EFFECTS OF A MILITARY ATTACK: TIPS FOR CHILDREN FROM THE CHILDREN OF THE AIDINI FAMILY

During the Attack

- It's important to support each other, to catch each other. Look at each other's faces, if you see that someone is distressed talk to him or her.
- Keep your mind on the future, imagine the day when you'll be safe again.
- If you have no food, remember Ramadan. It is possible to go for long periods without any food or drink.
- Practise patience.

After the Attack

- Make sure you have times to be together and laugh.
- Talk together.
- Invent games that make you laugh and help you breathe.
- Keep studying - this is a good way to fight.
- Practise patience - patience is the key to wellbeing.
- Care for each other. Invite kids who are suffering to play with you.
- Eat olives - the olive tree is the tree of peace. (Mitchell, 2005, pp. 108–109)

In narrative practice, sometimes we also find ways for people to share these documents with others who are also going through hard times. In this way, people share their hard-won knowledge with each other and contribute to each other's lives.

Some reflections from the counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims:

☞☞ *Kurdish culture is very rich in proverbs, poems, songs and stories which we can use in this method. These can assist us to support and encourage clients ... to let them be satisfied and proud of their own abilities. We can use letters and poems to help people charm themselves in the best way.*

When we are working with children, we can use drawings, paintings, and simple symbols. In our country, we are also dealing with large numbers of people who are illiterate. So we may need to use few words, or find ways for them to listen to the letters, documents and certificates, rather than have to read themselves. We can use stories and landscape songs.





PART V

KEY NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES
IN RESPONDING TO THOSE
WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED
TORTURE & SUFFERING

KEY NARRATIVE PRINCIPLES IN RESPONDING TO THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TORTURE AND SUFFERING

The following narrative principles inform the Tree of Life and Team of Life approaches.

- Our identities are shaped by stories. Some stories of identity work for freedom and opportunity of the individual. Other stories of identity have negative consequences.
- When people come to meet with us, their life is often overshadowed by a dominant problem story of identity: ‘I am a failure’, ‘I am broken’, ‘I am crazy’, ‘I am defeated’, ‘I am hopeless’, ‘I am weak’, ‘I am shameful’. The aim of torture is often to try to bring about this sense of brokenness.
- Overtime, these dominant problem stories of identity can become reinforced and experienced as ‘chronic’ and long-lasting. For instance, we work with people who were exposed to chemical weapons in 1988, the Anfal (genocidal) operation in the same year, and those who were tortured during the Saddam regime. Some of the people we meet have been suffering for many years.
- Sometimes, when people are suffering a lot, it is very difficult to talk directly about the difficulties. In these situations, we can use methods like the Tree of Life and Team of Life to create a *safe territory of identity* before we talk about hardships. We can speak through metaphor.
- Arabian scientist, Ibn Sina, spoke of how we must meet face-to-face with the client. There is me, there is you, and then there is the illness. If we can make an alliance between us, then we can weaken the illness. In narrative practice we call this ‘externalising the problem’. The person is not the problem, The Problem is the problem.
- We negotiate an *externalised* name for The Problem in the person’s own words. This naming might be ‘The Hopelessness’ or ‘The Despair’ or ‘The Suffering’.
- We ask questions to discover what influence The Problem is having on the person’s life, identity and relationships:
 - *When did ‘The Hopelessness’ first come into your life?*
 - *How did it come into your life or into your family?*
 - *What effect does ‘The Hopelessness’ have on your daily life? On your marriage? On your hopes and dreams?*

- *What are the times when ‘The Hopelessness’ is strongest?*
- *What strategies does ‘The Hopelessness’ use? What does it make you think?*

And so on.

In this way, we richly acknowledge the effects of the externalised Problem. This enables people to describe their experiences in a fresh way. They are no longer fused with The Problem.

- We then start to look for ways in which the person is having an influence on The Problem. This involves *double listening*. We listen not only for the problem story but also for openings to a second storyline:
 - *You have told me about the times when ‘The Hopelessness’ is strongest. When are the times it is less strong?*
 - *What are you/others doing at these times?*
 - *How do you keep ‘The Hopelessness’ at bay during these times?*
 - *What skills are you or others using?*

This second storyline will consist of what the person gives value to, their skills, abilities, hopes and dreams.

- We notice and acknowledge the ways in which people are responding to the traumatic experiences they have been through. People always respond to hard times. They do things to protect themselves and others. These responses are rarely acknowledged and yet they are clues to a different storyline of identity. They are clues to people’s hopes, values and skills. For example, despite a sense of ‘brokenness’, a mother or father might still be finding ways to care for or provide for their children. This is an opening to a second storyline.
- Overtime, we start to build a rich/vivid/strong second storyline of identity so that it becomes more influential in a person’s life. There are many different ways of doing this in narrative practice. We discover people’s skills in getting through hardship and we can trace the history of these skills:
 - *You say that it is ‘Determination’ that has kept you alive. Can you tell me a story about this ‘Determination’ ... about a time when you called upon it ...*

- *Can you speak about the history of this 'Determination'? When did you first become aware of 'Determination'? When did it come into your life?*
- *Is this 'Determination' linked in some way to your family, your community, your faith or your culture? Are their proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images with which this 'Determination' is linked?*

This is about assisting people to get in touch with particular aspects of their history. We can 'rescue' people's own words and include these in letters, documents, poems, and so on.

- One way of building this second storyline involves linking it to the memories of treasured people who have passed away:
 - *When you say that you use Determination to keep 'The Hopelessness' at bay, who did you learn this Determination from?*
 - *Even though they are no longer alive, what do you think they would say to you if they could see how you are now using the Determination they taught you? What would they think about you carrying on their legacy in this way?*

This enables people to demonstrate loyalty to the memory of their loved ones.

- One of the common effects of torture and suffering is to isolate people. In our work, we seek to link the person with some form of collective. Often it is easier to talk collectively about hardships (the Storms of Life) and ways of overcoming them rather than having to individually disclose.
- An important antidote to 'brokenness' is to experience making a contribution to the lives of others who have also experienced torture and suffering. We seek to enable the person to make a contribution to the lives of others. We find ways that a person's hard-won knowledge can assist others.
- It is vital that our ways of working fit with local Kurdish culture. We want to use aspects of local folk culture as our starting points for practice. The Tree of Life builds upon Kurdish honouring of trees. The Team of Life builds upon our love of football. As poetry is also a treasured aspect of Kurdish culture, we can also use the written word as part of our practice. In this way, we can use people's own histories and Kurdish culture to respond to torture and suffering. Narrative practices can assist in this process.



ABOUT THE
KIRKUK CENTER
FOR TORTURE
VICTIMS

ABOUT THE KIRKUK CENTER FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

The Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims was established by Salah Ahmad and Michael Lehmann in 2005 with support from the Berlin Center for Torture Victims, a leading European institution caring for survivors of torture, persecution and genocide. At the time, the Kirkuk Center was the first rehabilitation centre for survivors of torture in Iraq. Since then, our team of health professionals and human rights advocates has been able to assist thousands of traumatised men, women and children.

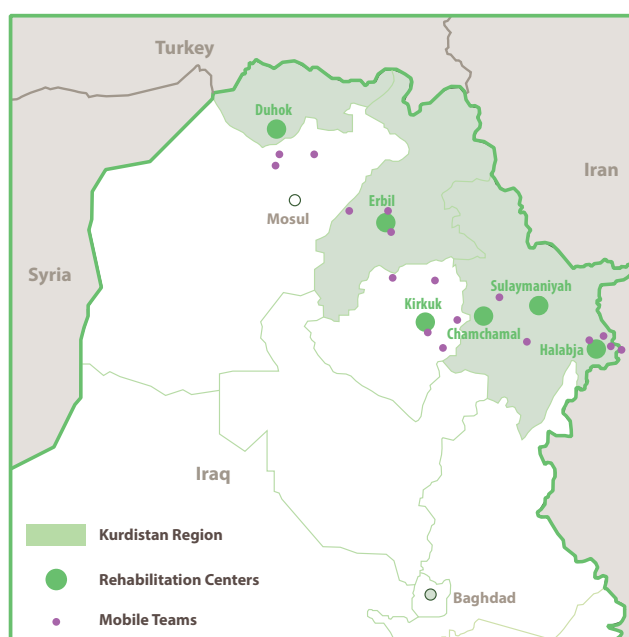
As a human rights organization based in Iraq, our organisation supports victims of severe human rights violations, including those that have experienced torture, genocide, political persecution, domestic and gender-based violence, and terrorist attacks. We believe in a democratic society where the dignity of the human person is respected, where adults and children enjoy the right to life and liberty, and where citizens are free from violence. We respond to victims regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity or spiritual beliefs.

Since 2005, our staff have established

- multidisciplinary rehabilitation centres for traumatised victims of human rights abuses in the cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Chamchamal, Halabja and Dohuk
- departments for traumatised children and young people
- programs for adult women affected by domestic violence
- mobile services for victims living in remote rural areas of central and northern Iraq
- outreach teams for juvenile prisoners
- awareness-raising and human rights education programs for families, teachers and students
- internet-based counselling services for victims of violence in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

Between July 2005 and June 2011, a total of about 9500 direct beneficiaries (victims of human rights violations) immediately benefited from our rehabilitation services: 50% were female adults, 20% male adults and 30% children and young people. The number of indirect beneficiaries, including family members and members of local communities, is estimated at 30,000. Direct and indirect beneficiaries included individuals of Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen and Assyrian origin as well as internally displaced persons and members of religious minorities.

At present, the Kirkuk Center employs 120 staff in Iraq (medical doctors, psychotherapists, counsellors, community health workers, researchers, project managers, administrative staff).



The ways of working described in this publication are based on narrative therapy and collective narrative practice approaches.

For more information see: Dulwich Centre website: www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Denborough, D., Freedman, J., & White, C. (2008). *Strengthening resistance: The use of narrative practices in working with genocide survivors*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Foundation.

Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Mitchell, S. (2005). Debriefing after Traumatic Situations – Using narrative ideas in the Gaza Strip. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), pp. 23–28. Reprinted in D. Denborough (Ed.), *Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience* (pp. 103–113). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life Project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), pp. 3–16.

White, M. (2004a). Working with People who are Suffering the Consequences of Multiple Trauma: A narrative perspective. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), pp. 45–76. Reprinted in D. Denborough (Ed.) (2006), *Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience* (pp. 25–85). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Yuen, A., & White, C. (2007). *Conversations about gender, culture, violence & narrative practice: Stories of hope and complexity from women of many cultures*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

For further information about the work of the Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims see: www.kirkuk-center.org

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This publication has been produced by Dulwich Centre Foundation International and the Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims. It was written by David Denborough in consultation with Beyan Azizi, Dr Omed Qadir Taha, Dr S. Al-Jaf, N. Hameed, R. Bahadeen, Dr Jamal Omar Tawfeeq, Hozan Faraidoon Penjweni, Friederike Regel and Salah Ahmad. It includes words spoken by counsellors of Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims during a workshop in Erbil in November 2011.

Photographs were taken by Leif Hinrichsen and Friederike Regel.

Designed by Kate Le Dan.

Arabic and Kurdish versions: Delman M. Kareem

This production of this publication was funded through the Australian Government's Direct Aid Program.



Kirkuk Center for Torture Victims
Teyeran Square (near Qorye Police Station)
Kirkuk, Iraq
Ph: +964 770 9361514
or +964 748 1107144
E: help@kirkuk-center.org
www.kirkuk-center.org



Dulwich Centre Foundation International
Hutt St, P.O. Box 7192
Adelaide, South Australia 5000
Ph: +61 8 82233966
F: +61 8 82324441
E: dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au
www.dulwichcentre.com.au



Copyright 2012
Dulwich Centre Foundation International

ISBN: 978-0-9871058-0-6