Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Explore further the role of indigenous African counselling techniques in post-traumatic stress contexts

It is nearly two years since the horrific bombing of the UN House in Abuja, Nigeria on 26 August 2011. The bomb killed at least 23 people, and around 116 UN personnel sustained various forms of physical injuries. The Government of Nigeria and the UN agencies responded swiftly in taking care of the casualties and funeral arrangements for those killed. WHO was assigned the responsibility of coordinating the health response. Indeed, a critical aspect of the response was in handling the emotional and psychological impacts of the crisis.

Most of the 15 UN agencies housed in the UN building in Abuja promptly flew in professional counsellors from abroad to help staff, dependants and members of the deceased families cope with post-traumatic stress and other related emotional disorders. To add, one psychiatrist was locally recruited to beef up the efforts of the international counsellors. These professional counsellors, mostly of psychiatric or psychology background, undertook group counselling sessions as well as targeted individual counselling in designated places provided by the UN, or in family settings. The counselling services were available in the immediate period following the bomb incident, and on and off for several months as need arose. Even the local religious groups held several prayer sessions and carried out group and individual counselling sessions.

In addition, however, there was another type of counselling approach especially among the local communities using more traditional African methods. In this approach, close community members and community leaders took time to visit the affected individuals in their homes. They lived with them and provided help with domestic work, harvesting crops, or attending to children. They settled in for periods of between two to three months, during which experiences with grief were shared. And besides providing a holistic family support environment – considered key in reviving the social well-being of individuals – community members also encouraged and helped affected families to recount the incident, search leverage and confront their fears. Affected family members were given the opportunity to express their anger, anxiety and remorse. This usually took several sessions, as new community members joined and had to be told the same stories by the affected families, giving an opportunity for affected individuals and families to feel part of a loving and caring community.

Recently we made contact with some of the affected individuals who have started sharing their experiences. Although there has been no structured and systematic assessment of these experiences, some staff members counselled reported that they benefited a lot from the traditional African approach. Many who were emotionally and severely affected said they could not abruptly open up their personal emotions to complete strangers flown into the country to offer professional counselling services. They suggested that counselling after a crisis like this should be done in a culturally accepted manner. But others did indicate that they benefited from all forms of counselling services provided.

Undoubtedly, some lessons are starting to emerge from the health response that was coordinated by WHO. While it was clearly necessary and straightforward to plan and deal with physical injuries, the magnitude and range of mental and social well-being aspects of the crisis was variable. Because of cultural and other social norms sensitivities, there may be need to explore options for dealing with these diverse issues in this kind of crisis. Furthermore, the role of the indigenous African counselling approach in post-traumatic stress contexts, and the exact techniques involved, remain unclear and have not been given much attention and therefore deserve further exploration.

We submit this brief experience, mainly to raise awareness of the need to accommodate traditional methods/ways of counselling. This article aims to appeal for more research to formalize indigenous African counselling techniques. A review of available literature points to the uniqueness of the African context, and the need for more investigations on counselling methods using clearly defined and structured approaches that have evolved over the years.\[1\] \[2\] The technique if properly validated could be adapted for training and use in the field, instead of reliance on current and mostly unstructured community driven efforts.

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