

Center for the Victims of Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/red-hat>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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*This is the third article in the **Learn to Thrive Among the Rubbles** series of articles by Farah Al-Dweik, told from the perspective of clients and focused on the power of storytelling for healing survivors of torture through physiotherapy.*

See [the series here](#).

A Clients* Story:

They say that the roots of motherhood are bitter, but its fruit are sweet. I think what happened to my son planted a very bitter root on his life bitter to the extent that I don't think that he will bloom when he gets older.

My son and I arrived in Jordan in 2016 after fleeing from the war in Syria. When I went to the first intake session at CVT Jordan, I met with a gentle person who was trying to help me to pass over the ruins of war within me. As we spoke that day, I squeezed my stress ball as I recalled the most shameful chapter of my life. Here is what I told her.

It was 6:30 a.m. I woke up late. Son, wake up quickly. The van will leave after 15 minutes and you will miss your class, I called out to my son while I wrapped his falafel sandwich.

We lived in a very small village at the edge of the river. The only school in the village was destroyed by a shell that burned all the milestones around. It was a gray Monday. We dressed and I put the food in a cloth, then wrapped my black scarf around my head and ran to van. As we were running, my son yelled, Mom, your bracelet fell off you. Pick it up, kid, and move! I said as I ran.

We reached the van at the last minute. This was the favorite hour of the day for my son, as he met all the neighborhood kids in the bus. They chatted, laughing until they reach the town. And I read the morning hymns to protect my son.

Lord of peace, come down on us peace, save our children, save our days, save our homes.

A sudden interruption from a black bus on the road forced the driver to slow down and fully stop.

God what is going on!! cried the driver.

A group of men came out of the bus and surrounded the van. We were like a frightened birds nest among black wild crows. The men's eyes were filled with evil. Their eyes were hungry, but I was not able to know what they were hungry for.

Within a moment they controlled the place by force. I felt we were in doomsday, and I wrapped up my son with my arms and held him tightly. Son look at me, keep looking to your momma's eyes, I told him.

Leave the children in the bus and get off. You have less than a minute or you will be a witness to their death, cried one of them.

We will not leave any of the children here with you, said one passenger.

Their chief pointed his hand, they prepared their weapons, and started to force us off the bus without our children. I was holding my son by one hand, and I pushed and kicked the officer back with the rest of my body. I took out the wild animal inside me. I bit the man's dirty hand with all of my force.

Leave us, you bastard! Leave the boy what do you want?! I yelled.

The man gripped me tightly and kicked me out of the bus with his filthy feet. They did the same with the driver and the other families. A guard held his gun at the door, ready to shoot anyone who did not obey him. They weren't human, they were robots.

They closed the door and turned to move the bus away. I put myself in front of the bus and cried madly, My son my son! The people held me away and told me, They will smash you, they are criminals.

I watched the bus get smaller and smaller, and my son on it.

Have you ever watched a dramatic movie with a scene that makes you hold your breath the only hope for the viewers is that they know it's just a movie. But what happened was not a movie. They really took the boy.

In the motherhood world, it's forbidden for a mother to sleep if her child is sick. If your child is kidnapped, it's better for you to give up

on life.

Every corner reminded me of him, I was a woman with a hollow heart and a sense of emptiness inside of me. My feelings came out as wailing sometimes, as isolation sometimes, as desperate prayers sometimes. And always I ended up with self-talk: Why me? Why my son?

Your story is not easy, the therapist said to me. I can imagine how difficult that is on a parent, to be witness to your own child's kidnapping. She told me we would start our group therapy sessions with both me and my son very soon after the physiotherapy assessment. She assured me that the parents have a fundamental role in CVT's approach.

And I did get my son back. Since that time we fled to Amman, Jordan. Once we were safe, I knew that we both needed to heal from these traumatic experiences. We went to CVT for help.

Every day I tried to learn what happened to my son in detention. Sometimes I asked him directly, sometimes I read him a story and asked him an open-ended question to try to get information. Yet I always failed. He did not react; he was always silent. He only stared at me with those brown eyes.

It was during the physiotherapy assessment that the therapist did an assessment of how trauma affected my child's current physical health. It seemed that the therapist was trying to assess my child's ability to move by using a game.

Are you interested to play with me? she gently asked my son.

He nodded his head his words had become very limited after he was kidnapped.

I will throw the ball in different directions, and you will catch it and send it back to me, the therapist told him.

All boys get excited for ball games, but my boy didn't. Until then. Now he was ready to toss the ball with the therapist.



After the assessment, the therapist sat with me individually. My tears flowed like a waterfall. I finally found myself able to release my feelings to someone. I had been totally lost since I arrived Jordan.

The therapist told me that trauma, transition and life change are often stressful and put a demand on you that can interfere with quality caring. She suggested that my son and I attend group sessions to strengthen our resources and help my child make a good adjustment. And so we went.

At the first session the therapists spoke to all us caregivers and children in the group about the power of storytelling. They described the way they would use a story of a character named Lina during our sessions. When the therapist described the way Lina left her country and how she felt when she arrived Jordan, my son's eyes were wide open with interest. He focused on the therapist her way of telling the story made him engage her.

Then the physical therapist spoke about feelings: Some of them are pleasant some are uncomfortable, she said. She shared a skill for us to use anytime, anywhere when we felt upset, angry, afraid or sad, as a way of helping our minds and bodies feel calm. It's called the butterfly hug.

She told us to imagine ourselves as a butterfly with wings that are soft and shiny. She said to slowly cross your arms over your chest, wrapping your beautiful wings around your body, and slowly start to tap your hands against your arms one after the other and focus on breathing slowly.

Then she had us practice this together. When I practiced with my son, I imagined myself as a big butterfly with big wings. Instead of hugging myself, I hugged the little butterfly, I spread my warmth, my love, my compassion above his little body.

Later as we were leaving, my son leaned to me and whispered to me Mom, the butterfly hug! Yes, it was much more than an exercise.

In another session, the therapist talked about recognizing emotions in our body and mind. We learned that our feelings affect the mind and body. I recognized that being kidnapped had created a deep fright in my son's heart. He crunched himself like a round ball when he sat. He tightened his hands around his body when he walked. It distressed me to see it.

So we learned that when we sit or stand for a while in an open, relaxed position, our body sends an important message to our brain which can actually change our mood, and make us feel a bit happier.

So when I noticed my son seemed to feel scared, I held his hands and played a mirror game. I would change my body position and ask him to imitate me. I changed the way I sat or stood, or I held my head high and rolled my shoulders back. The therapist said by practicing sitting or standing in this way on a regular basis, our body keeps sending an important message up to our brain to help make ourselves feel better.

My son started to become more open to other kids in the group. The sense of engagement that group culture gave us filled a missing part in my heart. I did not feel that much engagement since I left my country.

In another session, the therapist talked about how we had experienced loss as a result of the uncertainty of our situation, loss of country, loss of beloved people, or loss of identity. They told us that this can lead to distress, body pain and inability to cope. So they worked with us to acknowledge these losses, again using the story of Lina as a guide.

As they shared with us how Lina lost her cousin in the war and how she felt, they asked us to sit on the floor. The therapist said that for Lina, a simple thing like seeing a slide in the garden could recall this painful memory in her mind. Then the therapist showed us packets of colorful beads and long gold string.

We sat in small circle on the colorful carpet, and the therapist sprinkled the beads on the floor. She said to imagine that each one of these beads represents one loss for us. She said to hold it and put it on the string. Each bead represents a good memory or feeling with that lost person, place or toy. Each bead represents how this loss gives us a gift of memorial.

My son held the first bead. He rolled it between his little fingers. It was a red bead and he said, Mom, this one is for the red hat.

Which hat do you mean, son? I asked.

This is the nickname for the boy who spent three months with me in detention, my son said. Red Hat and I were close to each other. We shared the same cover at the night, and in the cold night he held my hands and told me to imagine that I was holding a warm stick that spread the warmth and heat to my body. I closed my eyes and started to imagine that. Red Hat told me to imagine that he was lending me some of his body heat. He had learned in school that the human temperature is 37.5C. So he said Imagine that I lend you two degrees from myself and you will be 41C now. I opened my eyes and said No you are cheating! I would become 39.5C now. Red Hat said, Oh I thought you were asleep and I could cheat you. Then we laughed together, and our breath under the cover made us warmer already.

I listened to my son tell this story. I asked him what happened to Red Hat? Why do you want to give him this bead?

My son said, After three months when you and dad gave them ransom to release me, Red Hats family was not able to pay. So I got out, and he did not . . .

The therapist asked him what memory Red Hat left with him. My son said, When I feel cold, I close my eyes and remember him. That makes me feel warm again.

So he gave you a good memory in your mind that makes you feel better in your body and warm, the therapist said. She then said We are going to honor our losses and the strength that we needed to keep going in our lives.

She asked us to close the exercise by holding hands, caregivers and children. We will provide a moment of silence honoring our losses, continued the therapist.

As we continued the beads exercise, we made a sparkling bracelet, full of memories and feelings. My son tied it tightly then he said, Mom this is the second bracelet that will give me power.

What was the first bracelet? I asked.

The one that fell from your hand, he said. I held it when we were on our way to the van station that day.

**Some details have been changed for security and confidentiality.*

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