

Physicians for Human Rights

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

<https://phr.org/our-work/resources/breaking-the-silence-of-torture-survivors-a-psychologists-critical-role/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Across the planet every day men, women, and even children are subjected to the psychological and physical horrors of torture. Dr. Sana Hamzeh, an expert consultant on mental health for PHR, has documented more than 70 cases of torture and sexual violence and treated nearly 3,000 survivors through the Lebanon-based Restart Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, which she co-founded with Executive Director Suzanne Jabbour. Dr. Hamzeh recently joined PHR's project on forensic documentation in Iraq, where she instructed health providers and legal experts on the psychological impact of sexual abuse and torture. Helping survivors talk about their experiences, she says, is critical.

One torture survivor I worked with told me: I can't pray. After being tortured I can't pray. You know how people kneel in prayer, bending on their knees? It reminded him of when they tortured him. They would force him to bend on the ground, naked. If he raised his head, they would smash it with a bottle.

Another survivor told me he couldn't use the bathroom because the smell of his urine reminded him of when his captors urinated on him in his prison cell.

Torture permanently affects you; it is not a temporary thing that survivors can just forget. It's like a black spot on a white paper, almost impossible not to notice and attend to. Yet, victims of torture are not encouraged to talk about it and they feel very isolated.

As psychotherapists, we need time to break that silence. I document psychological torture, and my role is to find the consistencies between the story of the violence and the results to prove torture through the symptoms of a survivor. In the case of this man, when he prays, he remembers how he was tortured. He literally can't put his knees on the ground so there's a high degree of consistency between what he says he experienced and what I document.

Mental health professionals play a key role in revealing this kind of medical and psychological evidence, and, ultimately, such evidence can bolster a legal case. We allow people who have suffered torture to take the first step in learning about their rights and to shift from being victims to being survivors.

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My PHR colleagues are pioneers in the field of documentation and evidence-gathering, and working with PHR is a privilege. I feel rewarded documenting cases for survivors and helping them claim their compensation and their rights is the highlight of my profession.

Torture puts people in a state between being dead and alive. Transforming the individual's perception from broken to beautiful is what I seek to achieve; I strive to make the person feel alive, rather than a person trapped in their own body.

But after 30 years working in this field, I still sometimes pause to ask myself, Am I doing enough?

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