

Israeli 'mental first-aid' method offered to attack victims abroad

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An Israeli who developed an unorthodox model for treating mental trauma and preventing post-traumatic stress disorder during his years in the military is now sharing it with first responders in other countries.

Moshe Farchi says Israel's decades of conflict have afforded it "lots of experience" in dealing with trauma, leading to effective and science-based models of work.

"We made many mistakes and are learning from them," the head of stress, trauma and resilience studies at Israel's Tel-Hai College told AFP.

Farchi's model was developed during his years in the Israeli army, where he served as a mental health officer.

He saw shortcomings in such treatment because it "failed to reduce the element of anxiety and perception of the event as traumatic."

Farchi, a clinical social worker by training, also utilised his experience as a volunteer first responder in emergency medical organisations.

His principles are simple, easily applicable and, to the layman, possibly counterintuitive.

They are employed in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event such as an attack, serving as mental first-aid.

"One thinks that a person in distress should be contained, held," he told AFP.

But providing emotional support activates the recipient's emotional part of the brain at the expense of the area responsible for the ability to think and make decisions, he said.

'Resetting' the brain

Thinking and making decisions are what the person needs to do in order to be freed of a "sense of helplessness."

"The given is that we can't stop the threat—the rocket has hit, the event has taken place," he said. "What we can do is stop the helplessness."

"The opposite of helplessness is effective action. That's why first of all we need to activate the person, to diminish the helplessness," Farchi said.

Activating the person includes asking concrete and factual questions, giving him or her the ability to make decisions—initially easy ones, such as if they want to drink a glass of water or take a break.

The idea of "resetting" a person who underwent a traumatic event using Farchi's method can have both immediate and long-term positive effects, according to the psychiatrist who currently heads the clinical branch in the Israeli army's mental health department.

"The two main goals are to quickly return a person to being functional in a way that would reduce the risk of getting killed, and reducing the risk for more serious disorders" in the future, such as PTSD, said Lieutenant Colonel Dr Ariel Ben Yehuda.

People in life-threatening situations tend to feel confused, lonely, frozen

or disoriented, said Ben Yehuda, and "Farchi's method addresses these issues."

"This isn't psychiatric treatment, rather something very focused. You can do it in two minutes, but the idea is to 'reset' the person," Ben Yehuda noted.

The system is currently being implemented as part of soldiers' medical training, and takes just a few hours to teach.

'Not left alone'

One place where Farchi has taken his method is the British city of Manchester where a suicide bombing killed 22 and wounded more than 100 on May 22.

The attack came as Dov Benyaacov-Kurtzman, a Scotland-born social worker who had lived in Israel for years, was working in Manchester on establishing a centre to provide emergency response for stress and trauma.

Benyaacov-Kurtzman had planned to launch his organisation, called Heads Up, in six months.

But the Manchester attack galvanised him into starting work and reaching out to Farchi to help with training the group's professionals and volunteers.

"At that moment they called and said 'come'," Farchi said recently in Tel Aviv before flying to Manchester.

Farchi has already trained local professionals who can carry out a "cultural translation" of the method in countries such as Germany, the

Philippines and Argentina.

He was also set to travel for training in London.

A key aspect of Farchi's method is that it should not be reserved for professionals, but spread to as many people as possible.

The 2014 conflict between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip was an opportunity to examine Farchi's method.

Residents in Ofakim, an Israeli town that was subject to heavy rocket fire from Gaza, underwent Farchi's intervention, showing no occurrence of PTSD in the months following the war, Farchi said.

"The chance that a person (experiencing trauma) will be next to a professional is very small, but that a layman will be next to him is very high," Farchi said.

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