Art Therapy and Sport Activities Enhance Psychosocial Rehabilitation

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such programs offer significant benefits for trauma survivors, their families and their communities. Nearly all the survivors included in this study described an improved sense of physical and mental well-being, and felt better able to participate in rebuilding their communities and engaging in the process of post-conflict reconciliation.

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Art Therapy and Sport Activities Enhance Psychosocial Rehabilitation

The Tajikistan Mine Action Centre has worked to improve the physical and psychological health of landmine survivors through its summer camps in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Using sport activities, survivors improve their ability to function physically and learn to adjust to life with their disability, while art therapy helps them overcome fears of self-expression, enabling them to form healthy relationships with others.

by Reykhan Muminova, M.D., Ph.D. [Tajikistan Mine Action Centre]

Preparation for swimming training under the supervision of Khuramkulova Aydalan, multi-winner of the Asian para-olympic arm-wrestling championships. All photos courtesy of the author.

Muminova: Art Therapy and Sport Activities Enhance Psychosocial Rehabilitation

Tajikistan joined the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and their Destruction (also known as the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC) on 1 April 2000 and is one of the 26 States Parties with a significant number of landmine victims. The Victim Assistance Programme of the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre has recorded approximately 828 landmine/unexploded-ordnance victims since 1992, with 466 injured and 362 killed by landmines. However, the total number of Tajikistan’s landmine victims is still not known because accidents sometimes go unreported.

Survivors are often left with permanent physical disabilities, which can affect their ability to work and can lead to workplace discrimination and loss of employment. As a rule, most landmine survivors show symptoms of chronic post-traumatic stress disorder, and survivors often have reduced emotional well-being due to depression, anxiety, fear, anger, dependence on others and isolation due to feelings of shame and discrimination.

For mine victims to become “survivors,” in addition to needing medical care and prosthetic devices, they generally need psychological rehabilitation. TMAC has found that survivors benefit from peer-to-peer support (which allows them to share their experience and pain with someone who has experienced a similar trauma) to learning that they are not alone, overcome isolation, and ultimately become contributing members of society. However, in Tajikistan, like in many other post-conflict countries, the hospitals and clinics have no specialists in psychological support who can treat landmine survivors and no existing peer-to-peer support groups.

TMAC Summer Camps

TMAC, in cooperation with Tajikistan’s Ministry of Labor and Social Protection as well as a number of international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan, Canadian Centre for Mine Action Technologies, and other partners, conducts summer camps in order to provide psychological and physiological rehabilitation to landmine survivors. Since 2005, a total of 169 landmine/explosive remnants of war survivors have enjoyed two weeks at TMAC summer rehabilitation camps. Each year one group of up to 25 survivors of different ages has the opportunity to enjoy the camps which are located in hospitals and resorts in the picturesque Romit and Varzob valleys in the Dushanbe vicinity. The summer camps have positively affected survivors’ general health by bringing together physical therapy and adaptive sport in a friendly atmosphere to enhance the participants’ communication and social integration abilities. The summer camps have also provided psycho-

Figure 9. Mean change in SF-36 domains.

Figure 10. Social empowerment (interim). This data sample represents all the survivors who had both an Initial Interview and an Interim Interview completed. N=433.
During exercise metabolic processes and blood circulation increase, which improves body regulation. At the same time, physical exercise and conditioning improve efficiency of reha-
bitilation and resistance to changing temperatures and weath-
er conditions. Physical exercise contributes to functional and
morphological recovery of the affected organs and systems,
strengthening weak muscles. The medical team uses thera-
peutic exercises to stimulate the physiological processes and
to counteract muscle stagnation.

Art Activities
At the beginning of art therapy, the team provided cultural
simulation through excursions to the ancient Hisor Fort
and to the museums in the capital city, Dushanbe, where the
participants were introduced to various art forms. Most of
the survivors had not had the opportunity to attend muse-
ums or had not thought much about art. The art therapist ex-
plained to them that art has an important role in our spiritual
lives, which has a direct influence on our minds. As the
art therapy began, the participants were told that the goal of the
art sessions was to express themselves, not to become profes-
sional painters.

Sport Activities
Throughout the summer camps, TMAC uses adaptive sport activities supervised by a professional trainer and doc-
tor. Sport activities consist of morning exercises, walking,
games and competitions. Morning exercises occur every day
before breakfast with time allotted to walk around the resort
afterward if weather conditions allow. Group games include football, volleyball, basketball, tug-
of-war games, and other recreational activities. These games
help with team building and play an important role in im-
proving the survivors’ communication skills. In the after-
noon, survivors participate in 100-meter races, arm wrestling,
chess, table tennis, swimming, and other competitions. The
hottest time of the day is designated primarily for restful re-
creation—lying in a hammock or on couches or playing table
games. In the evening survivors enjoy dancing, singing and
watching movies in the front yard.

Sport activities have improved survivors’ physical and
emotional stability. Staying active strengthens the will of sur-
vivors and gives them confidence in their abilities while help-
ing them adapt to the physical stress encountered in their
everyday life. Combining physical activity with exposure to
nature makes rehabilitation even more effective.

The therapist conducted the art therapy outdoors in the
morning. However, for the survivors who needed more psy-
chotherapy sessions, additional individual art therapy and
psychology sessions were held in the afternoon.

The art therapy session usually started with 10 minutes of
meditation, during which the therapist asked survivors to
relax and think of an image that would lessen them up and
help them express themselves through painting. The

During the art therapy sessions, the art therapist asked each
central survivors painted one picture. They had to decide on the subject of
the painting and who would start. The goal of the session was to help build
respects for one another, to fa-
cilitate personal conversations, to al-
low them to work through arguments
and to support each other’s ideas.

They were able to finish the paint-
ing, and in the process, they discussed
and agreed on a subject to draw (both
genders respected the other’s ideas).
They did not use negative elements,
and they shared the tasks of drawing
and painting.

On the last day of the program, the
art therapist asked survivors to paint
a picture for a person they love or re-
spect that they could later show to that
person. The goal of this session was to
Teach survivors to express their feel-
ings toward others instead of repress-
ing feelings. This session allowed them to
give and receive love and attention.

Building on Success
TMAC’s successful use of art ther-
apy at rehabilitation camps suggests
that hospitals and clinics could also
benefit from this program. Survivors who
took the camps were pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness of the
art therapy, which helped to reduce their aggression, anxiety, and fatigue
and gave them a positive outlet for
negative emotions. Survivors found
that the therapy improved their cre-
vativity, self-expression, overall mood and communication skills.

Team-building skills were also im-
proved through the sport activities.
As survivors saw themselves growing stronger physically, the psychological
effect of that improvement increased self-confidence and motivation to help
them become even more self-reliant.

The results of this art therapy and
sport rehabilitation show that recov-
er is not just about regaining physi-
cal functions; it is also about recovering
from trauma emotionally and spiri-
tually. With this holistic approach to
rehabilitation, survivors can better un-
derstand who they are and how they fit
in with society. They become contribut-
ing members and no longer allow feel-
ings of self-pity and loneliness to dictate
their self-image.

TMAC will be very glad to share its
experience with colleagues from other
victim-assistance programs. The Cen-
tre plans to continue its projects using
art therapy and adaptive sport for many
years to come.