

The New York Times

Khan Yunis Journal

Finding a Steadier Path in Gaza

By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)

Published: September 7, 2010



Dr. James S. Gordon, an American psychiatrist, led Gaza children in a coping technique recently in Khan Yunis.

Photo: Wissam Nassar for The New York Times

KHAN YUNIS, Gaza — Tough-looking ambulance drivers in this central Gazan city are drawing images of their fears with crayons. In the northwestern village of El Atatra, in an overheated hall without electricity, 10-year-olds are closing their eyes and imagining a reassuring place. In Gaza City, women who have lost children to political violence are dancing away their tensions, their black abayas shaking and flowing.

Gaza, the Palestinian coastal strip filled with refugees and hardship, is not generally thought of as a center of New Age sensibilities. But through the intervention of a classically trained but alternative-seeking American psychiatrist, nearly 10,000 people here have been taught techniques to reduce anger, ease family tensions and give them a sense of control in an environment known for helplessness.

“My husband is ill, I lost a dear friend a few days ago and the Israelis shelled near our house last night,” Hadba Abu Doha, who lives near the Israeli border crossing of Kissufim in east-central Gaza, said during a recent session. “Being in this group makes us feel safe, like we are on Ali Baba’s carpet. Here we can express our feelings and know that someone cares about us.”

Ms. Abu Doha and others said that the techniques, designed for people in stress and offered here free of charge, were useful not only for them, but for their children and husbands, to whom they teach the techniques.

The force behind the training is Dr. James S. Gordon, a clinical professor at Georgetown Medical School, a graduate of Harvard Medical School and a onetime chairman of the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy. He is the rare American, and Jew, who has been regularly visiting Gaza since 2002.

“We don’t have the power to change the tragedy they are mired in,” Dr. Gordon, 68, said recently on one of his trips here. “But we can help them gain a sense of control so they can look at the world differently.”

Looking at the world differently has been his quest for 40 years. Long before acupuncture or mind-over-body techniques were considered anything but quackery by American medicine, he was studying and promoting them.

Since 1991 he has run the Washington-based Center for Mind-Body Medicine, which he founded, and he has taken his techniques to Bosnia, Kosovo, post-Katrina Louisiana, Gaza and Israel. The program, he reported in a peer-reviewed article in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, has produced significant reductions in stress, depression and hopelessness among participants, both immediately after participation and some months later.

He currently has a grant from the Department of Defense to test his techniques on soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder and major depression.

The system, which blends elements of psychotherapy with classic self-help techniques, may sound a bit hokey. Participants, divided into groups of 10, meet weekly for 10 weeks and are led through a series of exercises involving closing their eyes, relaxing their bellies, “talking” to their pain, imagining a safe place, drawing and dancing.

But the program’s graduates here are enthusiastic and Mind-Body is now everywhere in Gaza, with scores of

The Center for Mind-Body Medicine • www.cmbm.org • Dr. James S. Gordon • www.jamesgordonmd.com

Original link: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/08/world/middleeast/08gaza.html?_r=4

instructors, many of them working without pay, and waiting lists of people seeking to get in.

“Counseling is new in Arab culture,” noted Shaher Yaghi, a Mind-Body counselor who works with children with special needs. “People don’t want to be seen as crazy, so they avoid therapy. But in a group there is less of a stigma. A woman can’t easily go out alone in our culture, but here she brings a friend. We show them how to cope and change their mood and gain equilibrium.”

Another advantage to such group work is that Gaza is not exactly teeming with advanced mental health professionals, and this is a program that does not need them.

According to Mohammad al-Sebah, director of mental health services at the Hamas Ministry of Health here, Gaza, with a population of 1.5 million, has a total of 6 psychiatrists and 22 clinical psychologists.

Some counselors are trained psychologists, but most are not.

Dr. Gordon, who has spent \$3 million on the Gaza program, all raised from private donors, has trained 200 group leaders here in weeklong sessions. The training is essentially an intensive version of the sessions that the counselors will later teach, along with some of the theoretical backing. The counselors continue their training in bimonthly meetings with one another.

The Health Ministry, Mr. Sebah said, had high praise for Mind-Body, and he is an instructor in its program. Dr. Gordon said the minister of health, Bassem Naim, was welcoming of his program and seemed unfazed by his being Jewish.

To ease concerns here over the music and dancing, which are part of the technique, but are frowned upon by the strict form of Islam that holds sway here, the genders are segregated and the music tends to have an Islamic or folkloric quality to it. The Dabke, a popular Palestinian folk dance, is often used.

Dr. Gordon is now talking with the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank, run by the Fatah-

dominated Palestinian Authority, about bringing his technique there, probably by having the Gazans train people.

He has also spent time training Israelis who endured rocket attacks by Hamas. With the big reduction in rocket attacks over the past year, his work in Israel has diminished, but for a while a couple of years ago, there were closed eyes and soft bellies going simultaneously in Israel and Gaza, a few miles apart.

He brought Kosovar counselors here to train the Gazans, and has brought counselors from Israel and Gaza together for training.

He plans to take them all, along with counselors from the United States, to Haiti this fall to train Haitians devastated by the earthquake. Cross-national teamwork is part of his vision for healing the world’s trauma.

The Mind-Body counselors in Gaza meet every two weeks, exchanging impressions and offering one another advice. They call the meetings their own safe place.



Wissam Nassar for The New York Times
Gazan women imagined a safe place during a mind-over-body session.

“We try to look to the light, to the hope,” said Jamil Abdel Atti, who heads Mind-Body in Gaza. “We say, ‘Take off those dark glasses.’ ”

For some participants, optimism emerges quickly. In El Atatra, a small group of 8- to

10-year-olds were in their fourth Mind-Body lesson, and had been asked to draw three images: themselves, their biggest

worry and what it looks like after their problem is solved.

Hazem, 10, drew his problem, as did many of the others, as an Israeli tank aiming its barrel at a house, something that happened in the war 19 months ago. His solution drawing, however, was unusual. It showed the soldier in the tank and the inhabitant of the house emerging and shaking hands.

A version of this article appeared in print on September 8, 2010, on page A6 of the New York edition.