

Being Close From a Distance

Online support for social activism worldwide by Gestalt therapists

Version 5, august 2021



**A publication of the Human Rights and Social Responsibility
Committee of European Association of Gestalt Therapy**

March 2021

The purpose of this paper is multiple. On the one hand, it intends to provide reflections and operational tips for therapists who give online support to international human rights activists. On the other hand, some information included in the paper can be helpful for NGOs active in crisis situations that wish to improve their organizational styles and establish self-care protocols, initiatives and also regular training.

The text of this booklet includes an overview, and develops some structured analysis connected to the personal experience of Gestalt psychotherapists in their professional work or through the EAGT crisis platform that accompanies international volunteers, both with the refugee crisis (Greece mainly) since 2017 but also with the projects of Peace Brigades International since 2010.

Gestalt therapists offer voluntary support to volunteers of different voluntary organizations in the field of human rights. Most of these Gestalt therapists have their roots in social activism. They know from experience what it means to volunteer in extreme humanitarian situations. With their experience as social activists and volunteers, in addition to their professional training as Gestalt therapists, they are both an ally and a qualified supporter.

1.Introduction

In 2018 and 2019 respectively, 70,8 and 79,5 million people worldwide, as estimated by The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, fled from war and political violence. The Economist calculated that in 2018 the population of 53 out of 167 recognized countries live under an authoritarian government system. Although Hans Rosling (1) concludes in his thorough research of the facts that 'the world is doing better', a great deal of effort is still needed before people worldwide are aware that they can be protected by Universal Human Rights.

The concept of a social activist that we are proposing includes a profile of an international volunteer doing a job connected to social work, human rights and/or peace work. The concept of volunteer usually applies to volunteers from NGOs and to those from private profit led organisations or Government institutions.

The type of work that human rights volunteers do can be very rewarding but also very stressful and at times traumatising due to the stories that are seen and/or heard. A big part of the stress is said to come from lack of organisational coherence, lack of experience and the relatively young age of the volunteers, as well as an absence of mechanisms in the organisations to adequately deal with human factors. HR organisations can have different degrees (and different standards) of security protocols, country (political) violence, missions that have direct access to dramatic situations of trauma or death threats, and long or shorter duration of placements being done with a wide variety of organisational challenges (e.g. small/ big organisations, well organised/disorganised, caring/ not caring for their staff, etc.)

In a global perspective of social responsibility, people in other countries with more time and resources or freedom provide support to fellow global citizens in acquiring these rights.

Many people do take responsibility. Many young people do. Many young people travel to conflict and crisis areas in the world to offer their voluntary support to victims of political conflicts and the worldwide stream of refugees.

Many of these volunteers respond to humanitarian crises from their sense of social responsibility, as socially engaged activists. It is their expression of 'brotherhood' as written in the first article of the Human Rights Declaration of the United Nations.

Nevertheless, a variety of different motivations are said to lead a person to engage in the (risky) venture of helping refugees or human rights defenders in areas of political violence. While it may be naive to presuppose that all volunteers are led by solely generous or altruistic goals, there is an evident willingness to contribute to a positive change for people that are suffering.

In this booklet we describe the process of voluntary work from our perspective as Gestalt therapists offering online support to these social activists. After many years of offering online support to volunteers from various organizations in the field of human rights and refugee support, we have a better picture of the process volunteers go through and the challenges and risks they face. We present our insights so that: Future volunteers can prepare better, mentally and emotionally; Voluntary organizations become aware of our phenomenological findings regarding the need of emotional support for volunteers; Organizations are better enabled to qualitatively improve the process of briefing, fieldwork and debriefing; The well-being of these social activists and their beneficiaries is looked after.

2. Beyond the screen the in between

In Gestalt Therapy the focus lies on the process of a person's contacting and withdrawing from contact with his or her human and wider (social, cultural, political, ecological) environment as well as on the awareness of this process.

It is a challenge for volunteers to adapt creatively to a new social, political, cultural and ecological environment. It is not always easy to step from a relatively comfortable home-situation into a sometimes extremely uncomfortable and threatening situation. It depends on the volunteers' flexibility, creativity, capacity and adaptability if they are able to fully connect with the new situation. If not, they are at risk of developing survival behaviour symptoms by closing themselves off from their sensations and their (body)awareness, a process or situation that can lead to serious psychological, emotional and physical disorders.

Online support differs greatly from real-life support. We are seriously hindered in sensing each other. Our senses form the bridge with our environment, with the other. Our senses are the 'in between', where we touch each other.

In an online encounter the emphasis is mainly on the visual and hearing senses. This is a major limitation in a dialogical relationship – as the heart of our approach - where we want to be present and available with our whole being. We find ourselves in an encounter with one of us where we are separated by a screen, each one of us in its own space. Everyone's image and voice are sent separately. This asynchronicity puts the brain to work and

eventually exhausts the senses. By framing the flat, two-dimensional image, only part of our non-verbal communication is received and there is an obstacle in giving meaning to the body language.

However, it is our experience that we can create conditions to overcome this separateness and lack of deep contact. Of course we have these limitations, but isn't it equally wonderful to be in such close contact across such distances?

First it is important to pay attention to the technical aspects of online contact. There are different services that differ in quality. Many times e.g. WhatsApp is more stable and with a low delay as compared to other asynchronous options.

In addition, also contracting deserves some time. The limited amount of sessions (see annexes) requires more than the usual attention towards goals, expectations, possibilities and limitations. Taking some time in the first session to set a framework about these items, can provide a lot of ground for what follows.

Thirdly, it is crucial to agree on good social hygiene. Taking time between listening and speaking not only avoids disturbing interruptions but also has a meaningful function in increasing awareness. By delaying the verbal exchange, visual and auditory information can take better root on a somatic level. Sometimes it also helps to temporarily turn off the camera, so that the a-synchronization can be stopped. Attention and energy should go better to hearing, not only the words themselves, but also between and below the words, the unspoken words.

However, despite the admittedly limited visual input there is a lot to be gained by making the other aware of his or her body, how he or she sits there and what is going on.

It also creates the opportunity to name more parts of the ongoing process than we would in a face to face setting.

A non-formal tidy place with a peaceful background is important for both the volunteer and the therapist to keep their attention on each other and not be distracted.

'I remember very well the moments that both me and the volunteer 'forgot' that we were meeting online. There was such a deep contact, whereby our limited senses were compensated by others. We had the experience to be in the same room, in a moment of full contact. As if we met beyond the screen'.

A therapy room as a background can be very inviting as a place that feels cosy. The background space of the volunteer can sometimes also be a stepping stone to bringing important themes into dialogue.

The online support given to volunteers often serves as a strategy to give a sense of meaning to what they are doing, to provide a safe place to express their inner emotions and also to establish contact with an external person that can act as a presence, advisor or as a person

to talk to without judgements nor expectations on whatever is significant to them in the here-and-now.

From our experiences we conclude how important this distance support is for volunteers. They often work under emotional pressure in the field, and are part of a team 24 hours around the clock. In this way they remain in the 'working position' continuously. During the online sessions they can enter an open field for a moment, in which they are invited to share their experiences, concerns, emotions or whatever. For a while they can step out of a stressful and traumatizing situation, to breath and to connect with a human being who is close by from a distance.

As will be elaborated on later, the most important interventions during these online sessions are a no biased presence and availability, a listening ear, supporting the volunteer in making ground and reconnecting with his/her bodily sensations.

3. Brief introduction to our platforms and environment

The current online Gestalt therapy platforms of Human Rights and Social Responsibility Committee aim to provide support for volunteers who apply for help from two types of Human Rights work and two completely different realities. Human Rights Volunteering on the Greek Islands and human rights volunteering by Peace Brigades International volunteers.

3.1.Human Rights Volunteering in the Greek Islands

The platform provides accompaniment to volunteers belonging to a wide variety of organisations that provide direct or indirect help to asylum seekers who have left their countries. During pandemia the support is also online. Refugees are suffering from deterioration of their rights and a deterioration of their economic and socio emotional status, as well as from human and cultural (psychosocial) bonds. The volunteers and workers dealing with them are exposed to hearing their dramas and accompanying them in different respects. They can teach them social skills, provide them with training courses to learn a new job or even English, but also they can give them legal advice or information to improve and support their integration as refugees. Other sorts of help can be in the form of psychological support or acting as cultural mediators (translators)

3.2.Human rights volunteering by Peace Brigades International volunteers.

Additionally, there is the work of human rights defenders in their countries of origin who face direct violence, threats and other violations of human rights. There are organisations that accompany these human rights defenders by means of volunteers and staff. One is Peace Brigades International. PBI is one of the examples used. They accompany physically threatened human rights defenders, they make reports on security, they create a network of solidarity and awareness raising and they also meet with the authorities.

4.Phenomenological findings of the volunteering process

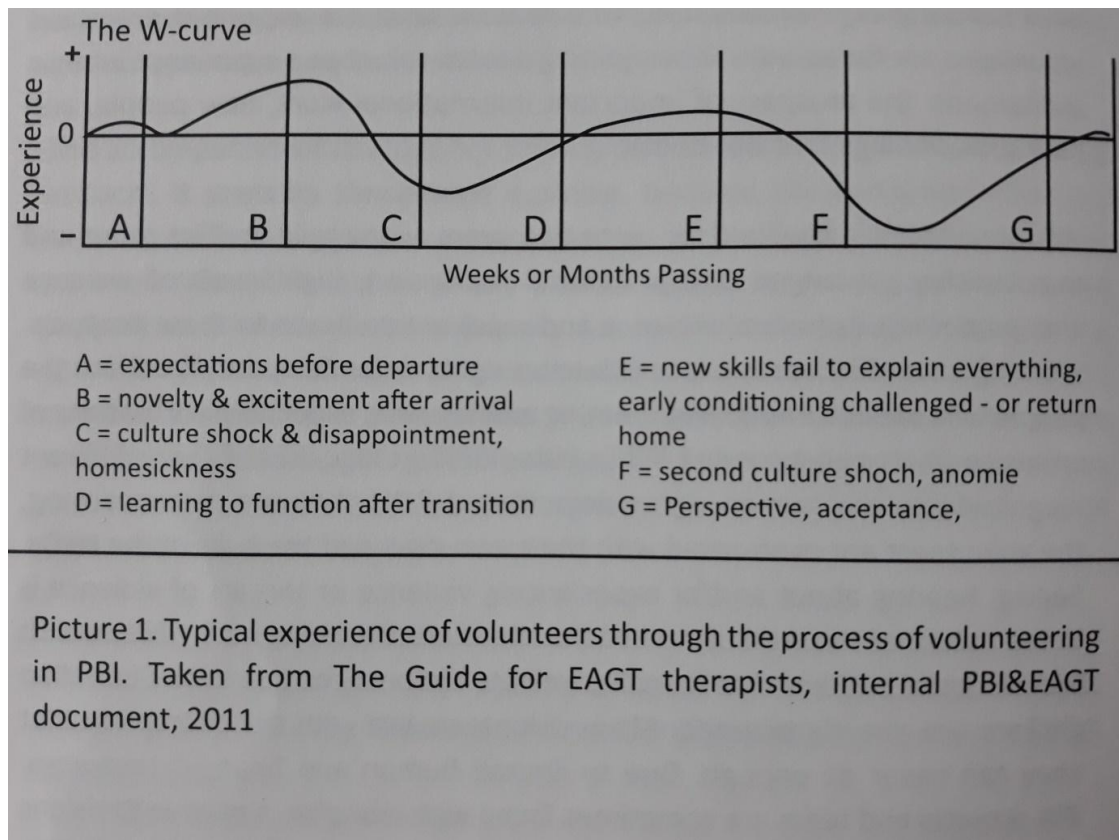
4.1. Volunteering as an emerging process

From our experiences with online support, we have discovered and describe different recurring themes during volunteering as an evolving process. The experiences that volunteers go through can be easily placed in the transformative contact cycle used as a theoretical framework in Gestalt Therapy. It encompasses all stages of volunteering from the early idea of wanting to become active in the field of human rights to the eventual return from the field and reintegration into one's own situation. It is a representation of an organically evolving process which is in tune with the universal rhythm of emerging, into being, reaching one's (volunteers') full growth and existence, integration of experiences and transformation. This process is depicted in the W curve picture 1 (taken from the Guide for EAGT therapists, internal PBI&EAGT document, 2011)

Volunteering in the field of human rights means working in (political) conflict areas and situations of humanitarian suffering and traumatization. It requires volunteers to adapt creatively to a new social, cultural and political context. How great the human adaptability can be is described by therapists in a report: *'For me personally these meetings were surprising, nourishing, hopeful and mature. I became aware of my own bias – any person after three years of field work near a refugee camp must be secondary traumatized and at least flirting with a burnout experience. Well chapeau to human resilience'*.

However, being confronted with (imminent) violence and dehumanization can have a big impact on the volunteers' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. It can deeply affect the organismic process of volunteering and severely block growth and development as a volunteer and as a person. Early recognition of these confrontations and paying attention to these interruptions is important to prevent volunteers from being affected by burnout, depression, secondary traumatization or post-traumatic stress.

picture 1



4.2. Major blocks/interruptions to creative adjustment in different stages of volunteering

We describe the most recurring interruptions to creative adjustment to the field of protecting human rights in which volunteers work. Obviously, they are not the only factors, but they have been observed in almost every situation where volunteers turned to online support.

4.2.1. Denying one's own vulnerability and need for support:

Volunteers leave for crisis areas to help others, based on a strong social commitment. The focus, however, can be so one-sided on the fellow human beings in need that their own vulnerability in a crisis area disappears into the background. They are there to help, to support others, not to be helped, not to be supported. Unconsciously, a split is made between the volunteers as 'strong' and the people in need as 'weak'. Savior behavior hampers their capacity to experience their own vulnerability, which can be a danger for (symptoms of) burn-out.

Working in a different culture under often dehumanized situations can have a major impact on the well-being of the volunteer. An unspoken culture often develops between volunteers to keep up appearances where realizing and showing your own vulnerability is perceived as weakness.

“To work here you have to be a commando” one of the volunteers says. You cannot make it otherwise. The fact that a “commando” is trained for a job that a volunteer is not seems not to be considered.

4.2.2. Overestimating one's influence to change the situation:

Depending on the policy and the degree of maturity of a volunteer organization, a good introduction period may or may not have taken place before volunteers go abroad. This pre-phase is important to ensure that expectations are as realistic as possible. Many (young) volunteers express a strong commitment for social change, to stop human suffering or to support human rights defenders in non-democratic countries. They are highly motivated, sometimes with romantic enthusiasm or overestimating themselves about changes they want to bring about. Then it is a hard confrontation to realize that the influence as an individual or as a team is limited. That there are always strong opposing forces in the field. In conflict countries, external forces are even stronger than in non-conflict countries, where most of the volunteers come from. *‘During a meeting with local authorities, we were suddenly locked in the building by rebel gangs. Outside we heard gunfire. We could only hope for our own safety. It was only after 24 hours that we were able to leave the building unharmed and with fear in our bodies. I had never had such a profound experience before.’*

The degree to which volunteers are concerned about the situation of refugees and the oppressed is often many times greater than the influence they have in changing the situation. Realistically recognizing their own limitations to influence and adapting their commitment and sense of responsibility to this is a challenge they face in order to protect themselves from cynicism, disillusionment and bitterness and to be able to continue to see the value and 'success' of their own presence and – however modest - contribution. Also, to be aware that in the end they have no influence and control over what happens with their efforts after their voluntary placement is equally important. This type of activism can turn against their own institutions not seeing and accepting the organizational limits.

4.2.3. Withdrawal into oneself, isolation:

Sometimes volunteering is a way of dealing with unfinished personal life issues. These are often enlarged in stressful situations during voluntary work rather than met with a solution.

Especially with the current world wide Covid-19 pandemic we observe growing feelings of isolation. This feeling of loneliness, due to the world wide lock down, brings strong restrictions and a decrease of contacts in the field. *‘Because of the restrictions I have been doing research work in the office for weeks now. I hardly have any outside contacts, only for groceries’.* Volunteers express that they experience and added difficulty with added personal problems that they thought they had left behind at home.

But even outside the Covid pandemic situation, it is often not possible (due to security restrictions in the context of human rights defenders) to speak freely with family and friends in the volunteer's own country. The conversations can become superficial. Volunteers don't want to worry families and friends about their situation. Their painful confronting situations that they go through are not always expressed to them. *‘Usually the conversations are about*

how it is at home, not what I experience here, or just the fun things I experience. I say something superficial like *I am ok*. In combination with a team culture of keeping yourself strong, this reinforces the feeling of personal isolation.

4.2.4.Lack of differentiation:

Volunteers always work in a team and live under a common roof. Teams are often composed of international staff. Although this in itself can be an enriching experience, over time it can be difficult especially for Western-oriented volunteers from an individualized culture to have so little personal living space. *'I suffocate here now and then, I am not alone for a moment. And it is always about work, work and work.'*

The restrictions for individual living space are often also reinforced for strict security reasons (especially in areas of political repression), for example not being allowed to go out alone. In wanting to keep harmony, fearful of creating team conflicts by differentiating themselves from others, volunteers adapt to the unspoken team culture, developing feelings of loss of autonomy. Not wanting to be "less" than their colleagues, for example, work becomes permanently central, and their own needs to relax are ignored. *'I live and work with the same people. It is difficult to hang out only with one person from the group. It usually creates conflict with the rest of them.'*

4.2.5.Neglecting the need for self-care

In an environment where you are constantly confronted with the needs of others, your own needs easily disappear into the background. In this process some volunteers may rely on or build an emotional shield (and a body armour) in order to show strength and control of the situation. In these contexts, showing strength tends to be overvalued while showing vulnerability undervalued if one wishes to be "professional" or capable of doing the job. It is not always easy to allow themselves to pay attention first to a minimum of personal comfort before responding to the needs of others. Volunteers can experience this as selfish, even though good self-care is an important condition for being able to be present in supporting the other. It is a challenge to keep doing activities that contribute to personal well-being also in the country of conflict or humanitarian emergency situations. *'I almost forgot here what was so nourishing at home, listening to music, my daily yoga exercises and reading a novel.'*

4.2.6.Feelings of shame and guilt in saying 'goodbye'

Returning to their country of origin can be one of the most difficult moments in a volunteer's experience. It is not without reason that many volunteers ask for support in this last phase.

Sometimes feelings of guilt can arise when the return to the country of origin is imminent. A volunteer expressed: *'I feel guilty that I can take the plane to a safe home leaving the people here in shit who have no choice'*. Also, volunteers are sometimes ashamed to receive the gratitude that beneficiaries express to them, even in some form of a little gift. However difficult to accept, not shamefully rejecting but rather receiving gratitude is an expression of

equality, reciprocity and an affirmation of human dignity, bringing a balance of giving and receiving.

It often happens that there is a lack of farewell rituals in the team. Volunteers come and go, the team composition changing regularly/continuously. The team members who stay are already adjusting to new volunteers, even before the leaving member has had a meaningful goodbye ceremony. This can cause feelings of uselessness and disappointment at the lack of appreciation for their work.

4.2.7. Resistance to re-integrate in one's country of origin

Returning to the country of origin, the volunteer is confronted with a second culture shock and a sense of alienation. Arriving back in their own country is often more confrontational than going abroad. The prosperity that is taken for granted, the dissatisfaction and criticism of family and friends about their own society is in stark contrast to the situation in the former work area of the volunteer. Ex volunteers experience that people are concerned about trivial matters, not about essential questions of life and death. *'I was shocked at my friends' disinterest about the upcoming election. They have no idea of the value of the right to free speech. For two years I worked with people who are at risk of being killed if they demonstrate.'*

Back in the country of origin they can often feel more like an observer rather than actively engaged with family and friends:

'My friends still want to go out on the weekends. I don't feel comfortable with that'.

'I feel so lucky that I have a friend close by who also was in Lesbos with me. It means so much to be able to connect with someone who really understands. Because as well as my friends and family mean, they just don't...'

The disappearance of tensions and a daily focus at work can lead to feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness and even lead to feelings of depression. New values are acquired from their field work that do not necessarily apply to their own country of origin.

This can be more than a confusing time in which, in order to escape this feeling, people start looking too quickly for new challenges and perspectives:

'I'm bored and all I'm doing right now is searching the internet for new volunteer projects'.

'I do not want to become like an office clerk – work, home, going out, playing tennis on the weekend and fit into this routine. It makes no sense anymore. This is what most of my friends do. I am the weird one'.

It takes time and attention to meaningfully assimilate positive and negative experiences from fieldwork.

5. Most important interventions in online support

Our online support can best be described as one of the elements of a psychosocial approach in which there is accompaniment from a distance. It is an active form of standing next to the volunteer to support him or her during and after the voluntary work. The core of the accompaniment focuses on assisting the volunteer emotionally and mentally to remain human and healthy in inhumane and unhealthy situations. It is less about the content of the work than about restoring a healthy relationship to oneself and the dehumanized context. The therapist-companion serves as a witness who observes the process the volunteer is going through and what kind of support (environmental or self-support) is needed in the given situation and which sources can be tapped.

It mainly has a preventive character, to protect the volunteer against burnout, depression, moral injury or PTSD. We describe the most common and effective interventions.

5. 1 Presence

Our attentive presence is the best we can offer. The first thing we do as a Gestalt therapist in our role as companion is to start from the volunteers' situation, from the ways he or she experiences him/herself in his/her voluntary work with people in an emerging situation. We lend an ear, not only to the spoken words, but especially to the underlying need that has not yet been expressed.

With our –non judgmental- curiosity about the volunteers' situation we help create conditions for the volunteer to open up. We co-create a new field, an open space, – next to the direct work situation of the volunteer - in which he/she can share his/her experiences, thoughts, feelings, worries, fears. This sharing in itself has a healing effect.

As far as Peace Brigades International is concerned, given the nature of their work in terms of security and political connotations a greater tact, sensitivity and political correctness may be needed compared with volunteers from other organisations in other fields. Confidentiality may not be enough. For security reasons, it is obviously not advisable to bring into the therapy room questions on the nature of the work they do, the people and organisations they meet and their names, and/or places and hours of trips. With issues connected to political views, volunteers expect that the therapists understand already, without previous explanations, the culture, values and ethics of PBI. The high standards of the EAGT therapists and the briefing carried out before by us (EAGT) has catered for these issues. This may be part of the reason why the EAGT has managed to maintain a cooperation with PBI which has lasted more than 12 years!

5.2 Awareness

From the perspective of the Gestalt cycle of experience, most volunteers are in the mode of action. This can be explained by their motivation to do something concrete about reducing human suffering and contributing to the confirmation and restoration of human rights. Very often voluntary work in emergency situations requires concrete actions. The volunteers'

attention is thus focussed on the outside world therefore losing or being more vulnerable to losing connection with the body and body sensations.

Awareness raising interventions, as an organically embedded response to the story of the volunteer, will help to reconnect to the body (sensations). As we know, the body holds information that is not really accessed through words. It is the job of the companion-therapist to bring this information into awareness. To support the volunteer not only to tell his story, but to support the embodiment of his story. As it were, “offering our flesh” to embody their experience so as to support the integration of the experiences bodily and to bring ground to these experiences.

Although, with online work, we experience limitations in perceiving with all the senses, (the visual and auditory are most strongly present) we will also have to appeal to other senses to allow the grounding and necessary embodiment of experience to take place so that the Gestalt formation process can be completed.

5.3. Focussing on the circle of influence

Volunteers are exposed to an enormous appeal to their sense of social responsibility. In overestimating their influence to change the situation, they can fall into helplessness, powerlessness and reactive actions. Here it is important to create a balance between their sense of concern and their circle of influence (their actual capacity of change of the local conditions).

Supporting the volunteer in creating awareness about the imbalance between the circle of concern and influence will help to channel his/her energy and actions into a smaller circle. It is about moving the focus from the circle of concern (commitment and social responsibility) to where the influence extends to change things (reference: Stephen R.Covey, The 7 habits of Concern and Influence).

It is supporting the process from reactive to proactive action in which the impact of volunteers' actions can become visible and tangible. It protects the volunteer against frustrations, excessive stress and finally burnout.

5.4. Validation of voluntary work and volunteers' experiences

Validation of volunteers' work and their experiences is important to sustain their motivation. Offering online support free of charge by a professional organization such as EAGT is in itself a validating intervention. It is a gesture of recognition from the wider society that underlines the importance of volunteering in the field of human rights.

Validating volunteers' feelings, thoughts, sensations and behavior as understandable during online sessions makes the volunteer feel cared for. Through validation we acknowledge and accept how the volunteer feels without judgement or rejection. It strengthens the online relationship and keeps the volunteer connected to the outside world.

Knowing that someone is witnessing his/her situation contributes to the volunteer's sense of *'I am not alone'*. It's an experience of *'I matter'*.

It is also important to pay attention to the personal development that volunteers go through during their deployment. They develop a new scope of the world, acquire a new attitude about their place in the world and acquire new competences and skills. Noticing this definitely strengthens self-confidence.

5.5. Psycho-education and normalization

Psycho-education can be a powerful intervention in response to a volunteer's concerns about his/her mental, emotional and behavioral responses to events that have a profound impact on him/her. Prolonged tension or witnessing traumatic events may evoke reactions that are unknown to the volunteer. The function of psycho-information here is to make it clear that the volunteer's reactions are normal under unusual circumstances. By providing information, containment is offered to the not understood or overwhelming experiences.

For example, the explanation of burnout symptoms can help the volunteer to give meaning to his/her reactions and offer tools for self-care, to relax and to respect and protect one's own boundaries.

Also some basic knowledge about trauma and its effects and appearances can offer a sense of what is happening on different levels.

5.6. Bringing in a relational and field perspective

We mentioned the big appeal to volunteers before. This can also cause a great sense of responsibility, a sort of *'Atlas complex'*, where they can experience the world as resting on their shoulders. To get out of this all too personal take, it can be helpful to take a different angle. It can be liberating for volunteers to see that whatever they are experiencing, it is not only theirs; in other words, field themes, such as helplessness, impotence, numbness, and depression are at play.

One way is to investigate how these themes are at play in the therapeutic relationship. Seeing parallel processes can reduce feelings of guilt. *'I'm not doing a great job. Instead of offering hope, I feel myself becoming more depressed.'* can turn into *'No wonder all these feelings of depression are so palpable; it's what we have in common and it helps me to relate to the lack of perspective that we all experience in this situation.'*

Also, the issue of secondary traumatising can be looked upon from this perspective. It's not the volunteer that is falling short or not displaying enough resilience, but he or she is representing what is happening in the situation.

6. Organizational culture and volunteers' mental health

We observe a wide range of voluntary organizations that vary from small spontaneous initiatives to highly professionalized organizations. What they have in common is that they are inspired by and passionate about human values. Voluntary organizations usually arise as

an emotional response to human injustice and needs. They are generally action oriented to make a change for people in need. Organizations differ greatly in the degree to which they are professionalized. Voluntary organizations have a life cycle, in which development tasks arise at the various stages that require an appropriate response, not least with a view to the mental health of volunteers.

6.1. Voluntary organizations and their life cycle

The beginning of a voluntary organization, like all social movements, is characterized by an emotional response to a specific situation. People are angry about injustice and take action as soon as they perceive ethical standards being undermined. Like minded people meet spontaneously in a concrete activity with a concrete aim and common values. The group is self-organized and self-supporting in an anarchistic style.

After a while the first evaluating questions arise. Are we achieving our aims? Are we as volunteers well trained? Do we need to recruit and select new volunteers? Where do we get money from? How do we account for our work to donors? With these questions, a first phase of professionalization presents itself. The questions serve to improve the content of work, or to speak to the primary process. In this phase, the spontaneous process is already somewhat more structured. The need to set up secondary processes (recruiting and selecting volunteers, fundraising, obtaining a legal status etc.) to support the primary process are emerging on the horizon. This also gives the outside world/environment (authorities, donors) influence in the organization. In this phase, we see a board and often the first paid staff entering the organization.

Inevitably, a third phase in the development process presents itself. Primary and secondary processes must be attuned to each other to design a dynamic and organic whole. The need for management emerges to steer all internal and external processes. The organization develops values, a mission and vision, designs an organizational structure with tasks, responsibilities and competences and gradually develops its own organizational culture. The way in which the organization develops, determines to a large extent the well being and mental health of volunteers.

6.2. Organizational key factors to volunteers' mental health

Below we describe a number of key factors of a voluntary organization that contribute to the volunteers' mental health and thus to the success of the organization and its projects. We encourage volunteer organizations to have at least a policy on these aspects.

6.2.1. Unity of understanding and coherence of values, mission and vision

The motivation and values of volunteers is mainly based on emotion and ethics. Volunteers' motives can change over the course of their life. Initially, the volunteer may be motivated to fight against injustice. Later on e.g. the volunteer wants to give back something to society. The volunteer wants to recognize his/her motivation and values in the mission, in the vision and the values of the organization. This gives an important feeling of 'being at home' and really connected with the organization and other volunteers and staff.

If they see lack of coherence between the mission, the work of the coordinators and the actions that they are supposed to undertake, this creates an extra burden of distress and pain whenever these are not met. Also, if the organisation (or any of their members) engages in unethical activities, those have more impact on volunteers. As the volunteers act merely based on their values and ethics, they require coherence in what they do, hear, and therefore say.

6.2.2. Managing of expectations of the organization and volunteers

The organization simply needs volunteers to do the job. The alignment of expectations is the basis for results. It is important for organizations to think about what they are asking of their volunteers, what expectations they have created and whether these expectations can be met. They need to express what they want and examine whether this matches what the volunteer is looking for. What makes the volunteer happy and can the organisation respond to that? There needs to be ongoing, continuous discussion about this, because the longer someone is with an organization, expectations can change.

If the organization doesn't invest in getting volunteers to stay with their organization, all the recruiting effort will be wasted. Managing expectations contributes to binding passionate volunteers to an organization.

6.2.3. Management style and the scope of influence of volunteers

Hierarchical and horizontal organisations and management styles do have a significant influence on the type of experiences that volunteers have. Volunteers generally don't feel at home in a bureaucratic organization that is focused on control. More than in other organizations, equality and exchange are important principles that contribute to the success of the organization and the well-being of volunteers. Both in the structure of the organization and in the organizational behaviour of board and staff, these principles must be deeply rooted to keep volunteers motivated and engaged. Volunteers must have the experience that they have a significant influence on the executive practice of the organisation; management and secondary processes are facilitating their daily work.

6.2.4. Feedback and the reward for volunteers

It is important that volunteer organizations make a feedback loop part of their culture. If volunteers do not receive a minimum of positive feedback, they can easily lose interest and leave or have a negative influence on the team.

A feedback loop contains at least a process of giving and receiving feedback, processing of information, communicating what happens with the feedback information and visibly improving.

If properly implemented on all levels of the organization and internalized by staff and volunteers, it is an effective and inexpensive way to learn from each other and to improve work. It contributes to personal development as a volunteer, the quality of team cooperation and the exchange between executive volunteers and staff.

Whether from coordination, from their colleagues or most of all, from the beneficiaries, the remuneration of many of the activists or volunteers is to see that their actions have a positive impact.

6.2.5. The process of volunteering and volunteers' policy

A good volunteer policy is comparable to human resource policy in a professional organization. It covers all stages of volunteering as shown in the W-curve picture 1. Usually it is reduced to the process of briefing, support in the field and debriefing.

Briefing

Most volunteer organisations do briefings to prepare their staff before going into the field. They differ considerably in terms of duration and content.

PBI organises a 10 day briefing that also serves as a human resources selection process. The briefing contains group dynamics, history of the country, team work, real-life emergency situations and protocols. The briefing helps create a sense of community among the participants and build trust among all participants as well as between PBI staff and the volunteers. Briefings can help to raise awareness, can emphasize certain key points to be born in mind during the whole placement, and promote agreement re: protocols.

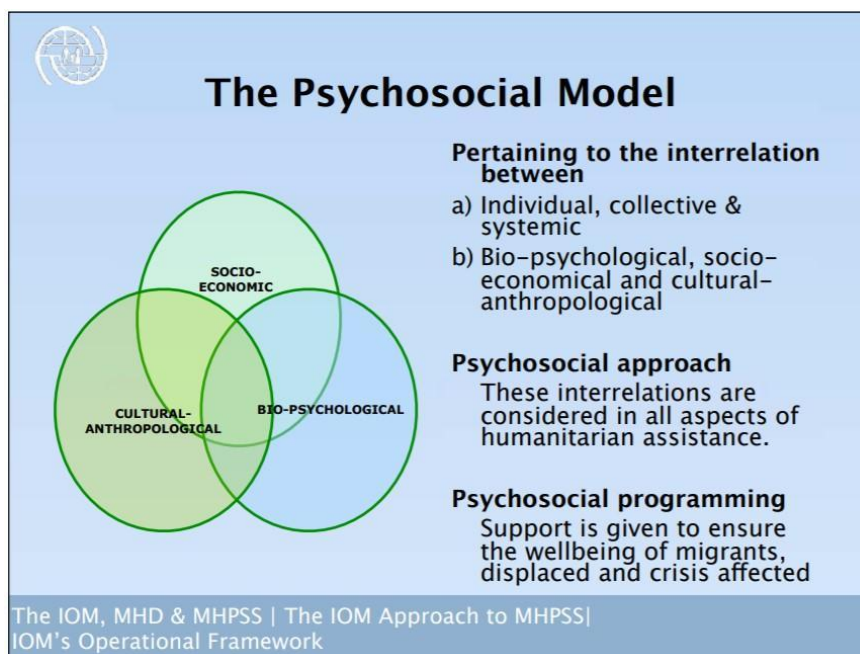
But briefings are not a magic tool. In the conditions of emergency that PBI works, the management of emotions becomes particularly important, to survive the experience for more than 3 or 6 months. In our experience, as far as emotional wellbeing is concerned, a good training is the one that has a proper follow up and is connected to other activities of self care, coping mechanisms, and emotional and community support. In this, field coherence and authenticity in their communication is a key ethical, managerial competency for coordinators. If so, expectations can be modulated and excess frustration with volunteers anticipated. Be clear about the available resources to make sure that people fully understand and agree. Hearing responses like *'Yes yes, I understand, I agree'* is not enough. We need to read between the lines and be aware of profound needs. The briefing is important but without proper follow up it can be a drop in the ocean.

On support in the field

Most organizations (especially those aimed at reception and guidance of refugees) have little or no policy on support in the field. As said before, the support in the field is an important condition so that the information and learning experiences from the briefing are not lost. All aspects of volunteering come together during the fieldwork as shown in the Psychosocial Model in picture 2.

PBI and its partners aim at following a psychosocial approach, an approach that should include the whole organisation along with its partners and all the goals. It is community co-creation with elements of collective action, community building, political focus and philosophical coherence as well as in “aid” programs and organisational structures.

In this context, the online psychotherapy support given by EAGT therapists is (and should be) but a small action in the framework of a logical and coherent approach including a series of actions and bodies that care for the human dimension.



picture 2.

On debriefing

This is one of the weakest points of all humanitarian or human rights projects. There seems not to be enough time taken to learn from the experience of the departing staff. In general organizations there is a lack of experience with a feedback system during the whole process of volunteering. Without a good feedback process (see paragraph 5.2.4.) it is not clear whether the debriefings have any impact. This may show the difficulty to allocate time to learn from mistakes and good practices. Additionally, those who leave can have feelings of abandoning the cause; they have given up or are finally saying that they are burnt out from the environment or organisation incoherences. This creates a disappointing and frustrating unfinished 'goodbye' for the volunteer.

In many international cooperation organisations, there is a lot of rotation of staff and volunteers. This is a permanent problem, so far unsolved, for many organisations. Rotation means a constant change and loss of history of the organization. This creates a lot of distress for volunteers as they cannot rely on older staff and their created coping mechanisms. Furthermore, many leave and this creates an extra burden or excess of responsibility for volunteers who stay on for newcomers. Finally, the recipients of the help also become skeptical about building links with volunteers and translators if they rotate so much. They do not wish to re-experience abandonment.

So a possible proposal could be to allocate an element of standardised debriefing that can incorporate learning. The organization should see the departing volunteer as a source of knowledge and experience that leaves, and as a possible enthusiastic ambassador for future volunteers.

7. Further reading from Gestalt literature on online therapy and international activism; reading tips for Gestalt therapists.

7.1. Who takes Care of the Human Rights Defenders?

(By Guus Klaren and Ivana Vidakovic in 'Yes we care! Social, political and cultural relationship as therapy's ground, 2015)

It was a first booklet written by the founders of the cooperation between the EAGT and PBI where they incorporated some information coming from Peace Brigades International, describing some issues and establishing some protocols in order to better understand the difficult task of providing accompaniment to Peace Brigades International activists. The activists are placed in particularly complicated settings in countries with a high number of human rights violations.

In their W-Curve the authors explain the typical experience that volunteers undergo in their assignments with PBI. For those therapists who have not elaborated the process of doing international volunteering, this curve is of particular help. It situates the therapist with some reference points which can help contextualize and not underplay certain peaks of the experience of the volunteers during their stay abroad.

PBI, after years in existence, have developed security protocols and culture-specific organizational practices. They organize training for all volunteers before going into the field. PBI also incorporates elements of the psychosocial approach.

7.2. Supporting Human Dignity in a Collapsing Field

Gestalt approach in the social and political contexts (Joanna Kato, Guus Klaren, Nurith Levi, editors, 2019)

The book includes an interesting selection of articles with valuable experiences and reflections from Gestalt therapists dealing with the refugee crisis but also the philosophical background of Gestalt therapy.

7.3. Networks and Processes of Belonging: Between Roots and Intentionalities

(By Maria Mione, Elisabetta Conte, Gianni Francesetti and Michela Gecele in ***Panic Attacks and Postmodernity, Gestalt Therapy Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*** (Gianni Francesetti, editor 2007))

A useful description of a similar environment where international volunteers can find themselves is the one described in Francesetti's *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity*. Firstly, the book gives a broad account of social and political factors and its influence on wellbeing and mental health. Secondly, it describes the current postmodern collapsing field with constant changes and constant redefinition affecting individuals but also organisations. Last but not least, in the chapter entitled from "oikos to polis" we see an interesting metaphor of what the life of an international volunteer can be (e.g.) leaving their home to another country, field or social environment. It provides vivid examples on the importance of the scaffolding and healthy emotional life received during the period of childhood. Episodes of high anxiety and panic attacks can emerge in the vertigo that foreign trips and new environments provide. The excitement of the trips and new experiences can well hide (or trigger) other unsolved issues and pending Gestalts. Finally, as one of the "key" therapeutic words, the author stresses the word "belonging". As a conclusion, with or without all symptoms of panic attacks, the book gives us valuable tips for what we can call the "syndrome of the traveller". It reminds us as therapists that we give importance to the experience of belonging. In the relational work, the questions and exercises of belonging are one amongst other approaches that can be experimented along with the client.

7.4. Karpman Drama Triangle

Dialogical and existential theoretical rationale that develops three typical roles that can arise in situations of oppression but also help. These are: a) the victim, b) the perpetrator and c) the saviour. These roles are not necessarily fixed and they can be interchangeable and finally all three can be present in each person, be it conscious or unconscious. The basic idea is that these three roles are present in every individual. This proposal from Karpman (2014) may contribute with some tips to the therapists' understanding of certain attitudes of saving the world that typically appear with activists. In the therapy room, the phenomenological and dialogical work of Gestalt therapy can help bring awareness to these issues if the topic of the motivation to help is brought into the session.

As we well know in our profession as therapists and social workers, the idea of the saviour, of saving the world, of helping those in need is a very generous one but it is not always full of self awareness. We are not always aware of the experience of power and superiority that the helper can have while providing support, and vice versa. The victim may be attached to the secondary benefits of behaving as someone victimised by the world and oppression. In this case, even if it is true, our role is to accompany. If we only say "how bad is the oppressor

and how good you are”, we may end up replicating the whole cycle and overlook our potential contribution.

7.5. Experience using Polyvagal theory in online work with volunteers (by Gestalt therapist Deirdre Foley)

I focused specifically on body work and breathing techniques while explaining a little about how nervous systems can deregulate, especially given the fast pace of life which our species is not hardwired to cope with. I worked very much in the fore-contact phase of the gestalt counseling/therapy relationship to establish and build a sense of trust and safety. I leaned on Perls' early writings (Ego, Hunger and Aggression) to support volunteers in understanding bodily sensations, and how important oxygen is in bringing down the intensity of anxiety episodes - *'Anxiety equals excitement plus inadequate supply of oxygen'* (Perls, 1945). I referred to neuroscience and trauma research, using references and theories of both Stephen Porges (Polyvagal Theory) and Bessel Van Der Kolk (The Body Keeps the Score) as well as explaining the basic concept of field theory and how the field impacts all of us. The feedback I got was very positive and between sessions the volunteers explored some of this research themselves, so the discussion became more interactive rather than didactic. The shame and guilt they felt (in relation to getting support when so many refugees were in need) seemed to have 'softened' by the end of our time together. They had a better awareness of how modern man, themselves included, can carry, in varying degrees, unresolved developmental trauma and that this can naturally compound experiences in an acutely traumatised field like Samos. I was attentive when they made connections and referred to their personal experiences, but I was also very sensitive to rhythm and pace. Delving beyond the surface would have been risky. To sum up, being present and listening to their narratives, with some intermittent theoretical discussion on relevant gestalt theory and neuroscience research, appeared to be supportive of healthy contacting and enhanced (self) awareness.

7.6. Online Gestalt therapy: Some extra concepts and practice (Elena Petrova- IIGT).

The **experiment**. The most important part of the Gestalt method of work is the moment of action when integrity of mind, emotions, intentions, movements is achieved. The dialogue itself is partially restricted in terms of joint movement. Therefore, you may ask the client to get up, move around the room, change his body position, use objects and toys. The use of plasticine, actions with objects, including toys are good for this. I offered a client an experiment, to talk about a subject he knew while sitting comfortably, or standing at his feet and having support, or stretching out strictly like a lecturer (talking head). It turned out to be new for my interlocutor that we all know from everyday experience. As soon as you change the position of the body, when you are talking about something important, thoughts change. On the contrary, rigid thoughts prompt the body to be rigid. Conclusion: by changing the body's position with the new movements, the thoughts change, and energy is redistributed and a space for a new experience is created.

Also, we may notice that clients are more cautious in expressing aggression against the therapist when working online. In my experience, this can indicate either that the screen

format creates deflection and interferes with the manifestation of IT, or that my interlocutor observes the futility of the bodily expression of aggression, or an additional fact of my (therapist's) invulnerability and inaccessibility as an interlocutor in such a dialogue.

A Canadian study found that teens understand the therapist better when they talk online as they feel less anxious. The analysis of online therapy practice allows us to conclude that even in the online environment, the therapist can implement the most important Gestalt principles in a dialogue. These forms enable the client to create a new experience and establish support for the client in terms of the process. So, the person begins to add something new to his experience and thereby creates the prerequisites for productive changes.

7.7. Extract from the Newsletter September 2020: Psychological support for greater serenity of the volunteers. PBI Switzerland.

Having benefited from a personalized psychological follow-up, Marion affirms that the process has been a great help to her, in addition to collective mental health workshops. She encourages future volunteers to take advantage of this service, offered by PBI in partnership relationship with the European Association for Gestalt Therapy (EAGT), *"It is about being in active listening and in a position of observer gauging and bringing tools. Concerning their safety only, as soon as they arrived on the field. It seemed essential to me to start the sessions. The psychologist allowed me to take a distant look at my experience and to manage this abrupt change more calmly"*. Today, Marion supports the communication work and PBI France events by means of a temporary contract. The former volunteer considers this transition opportune to continue differently.

'I was contacted for individual work by two young women who volunteered for a year in Peace Brigades International (PBI). Neither of them felt particularly distressed. It was just the awareness that, within the framework of a mission, certain events could deeply and durably reach the living one in oneself in a real testing of oneself'. In a preventive approach, to take care of who they are, it seemed good to them to take advantage of the opportunity offered by PBI and to ask to be in contact with a Gestalt therapist, who happened to be me. Even if it is still a question of the balances of the living, such a request positions the work of Gestalt therapy differently.

7.8. Extract from Verónica Gaudio's report on accompaniment of PBI volunteers. (free translation from Spanish)

"A young volunteer described to me the positive aspects of volunteering with PBI. He said "the group", "to leave the individualism", "to collaborate and take care of other people", "to grow in a job - more than in any other". He realized that he missed his six companions from whom he learned so much. Commenting on his lifelong friends who stayed in their country of origin, he says that they had job security and they kept their jobs. While during these pandemic times he is somehow anchored in someone else's house, forcing himself to make decisions. To leave or to stay? fearing making mistakes in his decisions. As if wanting quick answers. I felt empathy because I found myself in this very same situation many times until I

learned to live with what happens in the here now. Learning to see things from several different points of view. We breathed, we looked at each other, we listened to the sound that came from the house of his neighbor without having to decide now on any topics. No need to decide on whether or not getting married, having children or not having them, traveling more or not. I asked him to stay still for a moment. He told me that he was this speechless silence made him uncomfortable, but at the same time a sudden feeling of peace was emerging and steadily overtaking him”.

7.9 Extract from Riane Malfait’s report on her accompaniment of Greek Islands volunteers.

(...) volunteers have a felt sense of the suffering of the situation and respond with a strong need to do something about it. In order to understand ourselves and thus develop healthy ways to respond to the ‘demanding’ situation. (...) Our sense of the situation is grounded and influenced by former experiences. Most of the time we have a lack of awareness of these dynamics, so we are kind of lost in the new situation. We don’t know how to stay in aware contact, how to limit our engagement, how to find peace with ‘not succeeding in what I hoped to realise’. My volunteer describes how the suffering in the world resonates in all her cells and evokes an irresistible drive to take the plane and offer help where needed. (...) link this ‘urgency’ in acting to her (unaware) despairs in the past and incorporated ways of being motorised by senses in a suffering field. By senses we remember. Every new situation that includes phenomena of the old ones, motorises the patterns of behaviour we developed. We integrate experience physically so we are structure bound in our relating to the world. Focusing on the sensory-motor aspect of behaviour is helping to understand the concept of ‘enduring relational themes’. As Jacobs says: «Attention to enduring relational themes and their implications for the dialogue between therapist and client provide context for presence and contacting». Awareness of those ‘natural’ incorporated dynamics develop more freedom on the contact boundary. Acting more deliberately increases the ability to make choices and thus to choose for more self protection and to accept the limitations of the field. A deepening of understanding the ID-functioning of the self is needed to develop, in an experimental and thus ego-functional way, the ability to respond differently to the same situation.

References

1. Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling and Anna R. Rosling (2018). *Factfulness*. Publishing House Flexibell AB/Macmillan. New York
2. Guus Klaren, Ivana Vidakovic, (2015) Who takes care of the human rights defenders? in ‘Yes we care!’, *Social, political and cultural relationship as therapy’s ground, a Gestalt perspective*

3. Francesetti et al. (2009). *Panic Attacks and Postmodernity Gestalt Therapy: Between Clinical and Social Perspectives*. Psychotherapies. Gestalt Journal Press.
4. International Organisation for Migration (2018). Psychosocial implications in Vulnerable Migration, Migration Crisis, and Forced Migration. The IOM Perspective. MHPSS. International Organisation for Migration. Geneva.
5. Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 Habits of Concern and Influence*. Free Press 6. Perls (1945) *Ego Hunger and Aggression*. Knox Publishing Company. Durban.
7. Porges, S (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory:Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, self-regulation*. New York, NY: Norton.
8. Van der Kolk, B (2017). *The body keeps the score*. Penguin Random House UK. London.
9. Karpman, S. (2014). *A Game Free Life*. DRama Triangle Publications. St Francisco. USA

ANNEX 1

Previous Clarification

Below is the template letter that we adapt to each of the volunteers as a response to their request.

Regardless of the text of the letter we have observed the following statistics in the course of the last 10 years:

- Most of volunteers explicitly appreciate the work, but we hardly receive any feedback from them (Only 1% to 5% of all the social volunteers have responded to us giving feedback)
- 20 % of social activists that have received our letter or started the process, abandoned the therapy without informing the therapist or us.

Template letter to social activists/ volunteers in Greece/Refugee Crisis

In the name of our organisation, we thank you for your contribution and solidarity to this big human refugee crisis. We understand that You all are under some extreme conditions and we are all following up on this big issue too. Usually, as a platform we do not take urgent cases, but we seek to reply as quickly as we can.

Nevertheless, we are happy to confirm that one of our Senior coach/therapists is ready to provide accompaniment/support.

Just a brief note about our proposed terms of use and method.

Our Method

We ask to keep the coach/therapist informed of changes or unavailability, as well as try to follow the commitments that are mutually adopted in the beginning. In this way, the relationship is taken care of, which we consider to be already part of our accompaniment process (of Gestalt therapy) and the healing process too. Gestalt therapy is a humanistic orientation of accompaniment that can help us process emotional situations in our lives. Our therapists can give a professional accompaniment of personal processes, professional or even as an advisor. It can also be used for trauma situations to do therapy under certain other conditions.

Our organisation, the Human Rights and Social Responsibility Committee is channeling European highly experienced therapists who act as human companions and provide their presence to social activists like you. Our method works primarily with Gestalt therapy but in session complementary methods and coaching modalities can also be suggested depending on the situation. In our approach, it is considered desirable to be able to talk about emotions, physical sensations, and the relationship with the therapist. Similarly, although the emphasis of the Gestalt accompaniment process is in the here and now, any topic that the person considers appropriate can be addressed (directly or indirectly).

Our therapist/Coach

Please kindly contact directly asap to the Speaking specialist/coach :
<xxx@gmail.com>

You can agree with him or her on terms and channels of contact. Depending on the availability of the therapists, we propose some 4 sessions. (But it can be more or less according to each case).

We hope you take good advantage of this somehow unique possibility and keep the therapist informed in case you agree on sessions or miss a session. We believe that this care is very important for your accompanying process too.

We appreciate it if you can send us a note once you have finished the process with the reasons for using this service and its benefits.

You can contact me for any arising issue and we hope that all this whole process can be of support for your personal process too.

Eduardo Salvador

On-line Crisis Response Project Coordinator

Member of HR&SR Committee

CC -

Joanna Kato. Chair of Human Rights and Social Responsibility

The Therapist / Coach concerned

ANNEX 2

The template letter for PBI activists contains a similar text that in fact summarises the MoU signed between the EAGT and PBI. The proposed sessions are to the tune of 8 sessions.

The letter sent is usually in Spanish, as most of the users are Spanish speaking Europeans that write to me in Spanish. We have an extra group of 6 Spanish speaking Gestalt therapists that help us in Spanish when needed. We have also counted on EAGT therapists that have given so far accompaniment in German Dutch, French, Italian or English languages.