

TACKLING GRIEF IN THE FACE OF TERROR... Aart of Life and Murtala Mohammed Foundations to the rescue

Nigerians of various stripes: religious, regional and sundry persuasions; especially from the north turned up in large numbers for the 3 day long, ground breaking grief and trauma counseling training.

The training was organized, as part of a unique collaborative initiative, by the Aart of Life and Murtala Mohammed Foundations who were responding proactively to the most critical socio-political issue of contemporary Nigeria.

The response from the north was not surprising given the spate of bombings and terror attacks which have occurred mostly across the region, but what made the sessions more insightful were the personal experiences of participants who had been affected by or have witnessed these traumatic and tragic occurrences.

The training which was attended by representatives from the UN, the Federal Fire service, National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA), Red Cross, Mental Health Foundation, Live well initiative and many other intervention and relief organizations was focused on would be counselors, first responders to crises and other people who may find themselves in the proximity of grief and trauma in the necessary course of their work, and may thus need to counsel others.

Counselling a traumatized or grieving person, the facilitators pointed out, is too unique to be left to those not trained in its intricacies.

In his opening remarks, Dr Femi Olugbile, Permanent secretary, Lagos State Health Ministry, commended the effort of the Muritala Muhammed Foundation and the Aart of life Foundation and advised that "we must begin to see grief not just as an individual experience, but also as a collateral loss which necessitates a generalized attention," while noting that "more grief counseling trainings should be encouraged."

Chief Taiwo Taiwo, Founder of the Aart of Life Foundation who gave a very enlightening presentation which chronicled how the sudden loss of her only daughter led her to set up the Aart of Life foundation which is promoting grief counseling in Nigeria in concert with partners like The Murtala Mohammed Foundation, MTN and Emzor amongst others.

Other resource persons at this one-of-a-kind session included some of the best clinical psychologists and psychiatrists from Lagos State University teaching hospital. The list included Dr. Rotimi Coker, Dr. Zachariah, Dr. Adewuya, Mr. Okonkwo and Dr. Adebayo.

The high point of the three day exercise which featured role playing sessions was the town hall meeting which brought the participants face to face with survivors of grief and traumatic situations who have coped with or are at different coping stages with their loss and /or pain thus moving them from the realm of case studies to practical engagement.

The audience sat through true life tales from Sunny, a Red Cross official who witnessed a bomb detonation gone awry. Another participant, this time a NEMA staff, told

of how he once encountered a near plane crash during what was supposed to be a training simulation. Both had delayed and recurrent trauma symptoms including phobia and hallucinations.

To assist such people involved in disaster response and management, Dr Adewuya, Head of the Department of Psychiatry, Lagos State University urged that all such organizations from the Red Cross, to NEMA, the FRSC and even the fire service need to have a unit with at least one Aart of Life trained grief counselor, who would counsel them when necessary and recommend suitable therapy for trauma experienced on the job.

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