

Report



Oslo –

Norway

28th-30th October 2005

Ideology and Future Perspectives

Our goal with EEXM is to create an open forum for exchange of new ideas, self-help experiences and future emphasis.

Norwegian Self-Help Forum
Norwegian Directorate of Health and Social Services



Content



Greece

How do we Communicate Self Help in Greece?

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A. Brief Description — Theoretical Background

Self Help Promoting Program is being implemented under the supervision of the Social and Clinical Psychology Section of the School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessalonica. In particular, Dr. Ph. Zafiridis, psychiatrist-Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology, is the scientific supervisor of the Program while Dr. K. Bairaktaris, psychologist-Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology, is the Scientific Supervisor of the psychosocial interventions which are being implemented.

The program is funded by the Greek Organization against Drugs (OKANA).

The Program was initiated in February 2001 and is located in Thessalonica, the biggest city in Northern Greece with approx. 1 million inhabitants. Its basic aims are:

- Promotion of Self Help approach with regard to substance abuse and other psychosocial problems,
- Sensitization and training of health professionals regarding Self Help and its applications,
- Research into the applications of Self Help in confronting psychosocial problems.

Self Help Promoting Program is grounded on the gained experience and theoretical underpinnings defended by members of the Social and Clinical Psychology Section of the School of Psychology, regarding the confrontation of contemporary psychosocial problems (Dikaiou M., Zafiridis, Ph., Kordoutis, P., Bairaktaris, K., Boni, E. & Papadopoulou, D., 1999). Indicatively, both Scientific Supervisors of the Program are pioneers in their relevant fields of expertise; Dr. Zafiridis was the founder of Therapeutic Communities for substance abusers in Greece while Dr.

Bairaktaris was the person behind the de-institutionalization movement for psychiatric patients in Greece. Their work has been considered both pioneering and fundamental and follows the same philosophy which underlies the Self Help Promoting Program.

This philosophy, resting on the axes of Critical Psychology and other critical movements and efforts (Scheper-Hughes, & Lovell, 1987, Fromm, 1956, Yablonsky, 1967, Albee, 1998, Sarason, 1981, Fox, 1991, Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997), states that the dramatic increase of psychological and psychosocial problems (W.H.O., 2001) together with the observed inadequacy in the professional models developed for their confrontation, is associated with structural aspects of our economic / political system, with its internal contradictions, ideological trends and persistent choices. Problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, the increase of serious forms of mental illness, adolescent transgression and suicidal tendency, juvenile delinquency, alienation, violence, old age alcoholism and so on, nowadays evident at unprecedented levels, are only but the symptoms of a system in crisis (Prilleltensky, 1989, Zafiridis, 2000). The prevalent developmental model is based on and further promotes a series of attitudes / notions, ranging from competition by all means, the centrality of wealth as the core societal value, to high work and living intensity in general. As a result, this *modus vivendi* brings about passiveness, loneliness, and depersonalization while excluding those who cannot cope with these inhuman demands (Bairaktaris, 2004). This model also constitutes a breach in basic human needs fulfillment such as the need for companionship, solidarity, honest and sincere relationships, and collectivity. The steep increase of individual psychopathology and by extension of psychosocial problems is mainly attributed to the failure to cover such needs (Zafiridis, 1987, 1988).

Self Help proves to be a reliable alternative solution, since its basic building block is the activation of citizens in coping with their problems within a framework of collectivity and solidarity (Katz, 1981, Riessman, 1997, Matzat, 2001-2). Focusing on the centrality of self-activation and the assumption of personal responsibility, Self Help dissipates the currently observed passiveness when dealing with health matters. Apart from the above-mentioned contribution, the effectiveness of Self Help groups is also determined by the significance of

people "meeting" each other and forming communities of persons as opposed to impersonal "cases" which simply fit inflexible diagnostic categories. All these factors favour the growth of humanistic values and promote the fulfillment of basic needs which are prerequisites for mental and physical health maintenance and self-actualization.

This new approach, by placing the directly involved persons in the centre of action, redefines entirely the role of the health professional. Within this framework, health professionals are to reconsider traditional models of prevention, therapy and rehabilitation, which keep patients passive and, in reality, perpetuate the vicious circle of health problems themselves. By intentionally interlinking health care and social growth, professionals' new role is delimited to the encouragement and facilitation of activated citizens based on the agreement that only through the active and responsible involvement of those concerned, may health problems be confronted. The discharge and subsequent liberation of health professionals entail the acceptance of a new model of coping with health problems. This model overcomes the existing impasse, by placing citizens and local communities in the core of action, and health specialists in the periphery. The specialists are entrusted with the role of embracing the initiatives of citizens and local communities by providing know-how (Zafiridis, 2000).

B. Current status of Self-Help in Greece

Self Help in Greece is not particularly widespread and it definitely does not possess the expanded form of a movement. The whole debate is still at an initial stage. In contrast with other countries, no national policy and planning exists for the development of Self Help groups. With no intention to sound arrogant, the issue of Self Help was first raised by the Self Help

Promoting Program in 2001 when the first efforts to offer a support framework to such initiatives have been launched.

It is also important to note that there is not a consistent survey on existing Self Help groups in Greece. Only patchy information can be obtained from various sources which fail to reveal the whole picture mainly because Self Help groups are new in Greece and the definition and taxonomy of such groups is often confusing. When starting in 2001, we realized that this confusion is not attributed to conflicting views over specific aspects of the notion, but mostly to fundamental divergence from the substance and meaning of Self Help. One of the most persistent problems is the assignment of leading roles to experts while keeping the term "self help" at the forefront of such groups. At the beginning, our basic intention was to change this attitude through participation in conferences and seminars as well as through the training of the experts themselves.

The number of Self Help groups is not large, even though an increasing tendency is recently observed. Apart from clear Self Help groups, several other collective initiatives of self-organized citizens were formed regarding health issues. These initiatives mostly take the form of associations, unions and volunteer organizations. Some adopt Self Help and self-management practices in one or more of their axes of intervention. The exploration of and acquaintance with these groups is one of our activities as will be presented in the following. The above mentioned initiatives are extroverted efforts with special focus on the defense and assertion of rights.

In the following, we present the main types of Self Help groups:

- a. 12 step groups: These form the oldest and mostly widespread type. They date back to 1987. It is estimated that there are around 70 groups in the country which operate in 19 cities (Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Families Anonymous, AI-Anon, Overeaters Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics).

- b. Other Self Help groups: Self Help Group for Multiple Sclerosis, Self Help Group for Young Patients of Diabetes (under formation), Self Help Group of disabled persons called Disability Now, Parents' Association for Mental Health.
- c. Associations of People with Physical Illness or Disability and of their family members: These associations, in relation with the exact nature of the problem concerned, deal with the empowerment of their members, sharing of information on potential ways for the confrontation of the problem, education, general public sensitization, prejudice elimination, and the improvement of the quality of life.
- d. National Federations: These Federations promote issues of general concern and deal mainly with representation, advocacy, the defense of rights and the promotion of policies. One of the most active Federations is the National Federation of Disabled Persons, which was founded in 1989 and counts 39 member associations. Its administration is entrusted to disabled persons and to parents of disabled persons.
- e. Associations which are created around institutional bodies: These involve associations which function at the periphery of central structures or services and they essentially support their operation. Any change in the philosophy and operation of the central structures affects these peripheral associations. Examples are the "Family Associations of the Centre Therapy of Dependent Individuals", the "Parents of Addicted Persons participating in the Recovery Program of the Psychiatric Hospital in Attiki", and the "Friends Association of the Psychiatric Hospital of Thessalonica".

C. Presentation of Main Fields of Intervention

C.1 Open Program for the Psycho-social Support of Psycho-active Substance Users and Family Members of Users

As already mentioned above, the Program's basic goal is the promotion of Self Help in the confrontation of drug and alcohol abuse. In this framework, we have developed the Open Program for the Psycho-social Support of Psycho-active Substance Users and Family Members of Users.

From our perspective, this open Program offers an interesting example of an innovative psycho-social intervention along the lines of Self Help philosophy and its applications. Its function is twofold; on one hand, participation in 12 steps Self Help groups and, on the other, simultaneous support towards people in fields which are not met within the framework of the groups. Program's activities are planned in a participatory mode by staff members and group participants with the intention to meet the needs of the latter. This participatory mode is based on the concept of co-formulation which is entirely consistent with most modern health policies (Bairaktaris, 1994). In particular, Program's actions are not applications of theoretical models and plans from the expert's side, but a product of constant interaction among involved and interested people at any given time.

Below we present the main activities developed:

- a. Sensitization on the notion of Self Help and its application in the problem of addiction. This activity is realized through the active interconnection among people which are not aware of the Self Help groups but keen to participate and people which are already participants in such groups and in need of further support frameworks. The term active interconnection refers not only to the provision of information on the time and place of Self Help groups meetings but also the linkage of newcomers with older members and the opportunity to meet with other persons participating in Project's activities. This active interconnection is also promoted through the participation in the other activities which are based on the principles of self-management and mutual aid.

- b. Creation of a safe and "clean" from substances meeting place. The focus is on developing communal values such as solidarity, honest human relations, sincerity, mutual aid; all values which promote personal development.
- c. Medical and legal support, educational and professional development advice.
- d. Organization of computer and foreign language learning seminar
- e. Awareness-raising on cultural, social and ecological issues.
- f. Facilitation of Self Help groups' function (this activity concerns not only Self Help groups dealing with addiction problems but also with other problems).

C.2 Provision of know how on the creation of Self Help initiatives

With the fundamental intention to promote the notion and applications of Self Help in the confrontation of psycho-social problems, we have planned and implemented since February 2001 the provision of know how on the creation of Self Help groups. At a first level, this support is addressed to people which face health, mental or physical, problems. At a second level, we aim at the empowerment and training of newly-created group members in order to enable their future autonomous and independent function.

In this regard, the following actions have been implemented:

- a. Creation of a database with existing Self Help groups regarding various problems.
- b. Collection of bibliographical references concerning the creation of Self Help groups.
- c. Preparation of a manual on simple steps for the formation of Self Help groups which is distributed to interested persons. This manual forms the basis of any collaboration with interested persons.

C.3 Psycho-social Interventions based on self/mutual help principles. Community work and prevention.

The development of interventions which address psychosocial problems at the community level is also significant. The basic idea is to involve all possible stakeholders in both phases of planning and implementation. In this regard, a series of pilot interventions have been implemented in various schools of the city. Our intention was to enable communities in addressing a series of problems, ranging from psychoactive substance's use and abuse and teenage violence to racism, xenophobia and problems related to the coexistence of native and foreign students. It is important to note that the whole intervention was based on the active participation of all staff members involved with the educational process.

C.4 Diffusion of Self Help notion to the general public

The sensitization of the general public on the notion of Self Help is another main field of activity. As already mentioned, the notion of Self Help is not particularly widespread in Greece, which results in the existence of several difficulties in Self Help groups growth. Along these lines of thinking, a series of publicity actions have been developed which aim at the presentation of Self Help core values.

These involve:

- a. The operation of a Program web-site (www.selfhelp.gr) where information on Self Help initiatives and relevant issues is provided.
- b. Regular interventions in the media regarding the Program's activities and the notion of Self Help in general (articles, interviews, etc.)
- c. Participation in local events and associational meetings where the public debate on such issues is fostered.

C.5 Community Networking

This activity brings together people or groups of citizens/employees which adopt in practice the principles of self-management, self-organization, and active participation in social,

cultural and environmental issues. In order to ensure the diffusion of the Self Help notion, we first attempt to bring together people and groups which function along these lines. As demonstrated by the Program's experience, Community Networking contributes in a two-fold manner; by fostering the formation of Self Help groups and by facilitating the function of existing initiatives.

C.6 Networking with Self Help groups

There is not an updated database of Self Help groups and initiatives based on the principles of self-management in Greece. An effort to address this lack of information has been undertaken by the Program with the intention to trace all relevant initiatives in Northern Greece. Tracing down these initiatives implies getting in contact and actually meeting each separate group with the intention to present their work along specific axes/criteria such as participation framework, funding status, institutional form.

C.7 Training of health professionals

The basic intention is to train health professionals towards the adoption of new roles, namely the support of peripheral initiatives and the empowerment of citizens. The principles of Self Help are presented in the curriculum of training seminars, while staff members offer tutelage and share bibliographical references with health professionals which create self-managed groups within their working environment. Within this framework, formal educational modules for under- and post-graduate students of Psychology and for graduates of Social Sciences are offered at the University level. Another activity regarding the sensitization of health professionals is the effort to provide information of all health professionals working in hospitals, other health facilities, or privately about self help philosophy, its applications, self help groups that exist in Greece and about Self Help Promoting Program. Training and educational development is further enriched through the participation in conferences and seminars and through publication of articles in journals and newsletters

D. Current difficulties and future prospects

Given that the diffusion of Self Help notion in Greece is a new effort with a short history of four and a half years in parallel with the initiation of the Self Help Promoting Program, a number of deficiencies and difficulties exist. The most significant are the following:

- The lack of any state policy regarding the development of Self Help groups.
- The lack of knowledge on behalf of health professionals regarding Self Help and its applications.
- The lack of complete database of existing initiatives.
- Inadequate networking among Self Help groups and initiatives which operate along the same lines.

Having said that, the future challenges are presented in accordance with the following axes:

- Diffusion to a greater extent of the philosophy and practices of Self Help among health professionals. In this framework, the Faculty of Psychology, after the approval of the Greek Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity, is going to implement in the following two years a Project for the vocational training of professionals which are located in various public services (health, welfare and employment promotion) in Northern Greece. Self Help and its practices are at the core of the vocational training curriculum.
- Tracing down of existing Self Help groups and similar initiatives in Greece and the promotion of their networking.
- The upgrade of the existing Self Help Promoting Program to a Self Help Clearing House, given that existing institutional funding addresses only addiction problems

whereas we simultaneously promote Self Help initiatives to a lesser extent in a variety of problems.

- Advocacy at the central level in order to include in the health policy agenda the issue of Self Help. Having said that, there are concerns in our Self Help Promoting Program regarding the potential danger of having Self Help incorporated by the dominant welfare model. From our perspective, such an evolution invalidates Self Help as a movement of concerned and activated citizens.
- The utilization of the gained international experience. Given the brief history of Self Help in Greece, efforts for the promotion of Self Help can substantially benefit from the exchange and utilization of international experience through networking with similar initiatives abroad.

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