



*A Proposal to Support:*

## **From Surviving to Thriving: Clinical Science with a Human Rights Mission**

### **Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Israel's African Refugee Community**

*Our Mission.* We aspire to promote the mental health of African survivors of genocide, human trafficking, torture and conflict residing in Israel and throughout the world. The proposed research initiative will allow us to discover and begin to deliver innovative and effective treatments to heal the psychological wounds among some of the most vulnerable citizens of our world. We believe that this work is of great importance and potential impact and we are seeking a partner to help us advance this urgent project. **The University of Haifa is seeking \$1.5 million over five years to support this applied research initiative. We are currently the only academic institution in Israel to undertake such an initiative.**

*Initial Steps.* Over the last two years, we have partnered with leaders of the African refugee community in Israel and leading non-governmental organizations who work with forcibly displaced populations from Africa nationally and internationally. Our team set



up a make-shift field laboratory to study and begin to help this highly traumatized population living near the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station. In this lab we carried out a ground-breaking study on the mental health, risk and resilience, and possible treatment approaches among 120 severely traumatized Sudanese refugees. This initial

work has helped document both the importance and potential impact of the proposed long-term research initiative.

*Forcibly Displaced People (FDP): Locally-Globally.* Approximately 45.2 million people have been forcibly displaced world-wide due to civil war, violent conflict, ethnic cleansing, and hunger affects, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The stress and trauma experienced by these survivors is often unimaginable. Violence, torture and sexual assault are disproportionately experienced by FDPs before and during displacement, and post-displacement experiences are often characterized by arduous and life-threatening migration and stressors related to resettlement or residential status. There are now approximately 60,000 forcibly displaced men, women and children from African countries including Sudan, Eritrea, as well as smaller numbers from Republic of Congo, Liberia, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast residing in Israel. Despite the very elevated rates of trauma and stress-related mental health problems, only a small proportion of these survivors receive any mental health treatment, let alone treatment that has any proven scientific basis. This national and global public mental health crisis stems in part from the very limited systematic development and study of mental health prevention and intervention in this population. **The lack of knowledge concerning effective mental health interventions places the clinical science of refugee mental health decades behind the global need for such science.** The proposed applied research initiative – *From Surviving to Thriving* – will directly address this gap in knowledge.

## Project Description

The proposed five-year applied research initiative aims to achieve the following major objectives:

- I. To develop innovative and effective interventions to foster resilience and promote mental health in African refugees in Israel and internationally.
- II. To begin to implement and study the effects of these science-based interventions nationally and internationally.
- III. To gain insights about human resilience in the face of unimaginable suffering—knowledge that is of fundamental importance to science and society at large.
- IV. To inspire an international network of clinical researchers to improve the mental health of understudied, forcibly displaced populations world-wide.

*Background.* Mass displacement due to civil war, violent conflict, ethnic cleansing and hunger affects large numbers of people worldwide. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are more than 51 million Forcibly Displaced Persons (FDPs) around the world. The stress and trauma experienced by these survivors is unimaginable. Violence, torture, and sexual assault are disproportionately experienced by FDPs before and during displacement, and post-displacement experiences are often characterized by arduous and life-threatening migration and stressors related to resettlement or residential status. Although rates of trauma and stress-related mental health problems are significantly elevated among FDPs, only a small proportion receive mental health treatment, let alone treatment that has any proven scientific basis.

**The global public mental health crisis stems not only from a lack of resources, but from limited systematic development and study of mental health prevention and intervention for FDPs.**

*The Forcibly Displaced African Community in Israel.* The enormous and urgent global



disaster of forcibly displaced populations for many tens of millions of men, women and children has long-reached Israel – and we must act. There are now nearly 60,000

forcibly displaced persons from the African countries residing in Israel. Many of the African FDPs residing in Israel left their homes to escape various forms of persecution. These include severe human rights violations, murder of family members and other war-related trauma. A large proportion of the African FDP population has also been subjected to hardships and life-threatening experiences while traveling from their home country – crossing from Sudan and Eritrea through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula on their way to Israel – surviving kidnapping and torture motivated by ransom. FDPs who survive this journey are exposed to more hardships when they arrive in Israel. After crossing the border, they are often sent to detention for long periods and when they are released they face the Israeli reality including limited rights for asylum seekers. Thus, chronic insecurity concerning residential status and limited, if any, work permits lead to chronic insecurity and ongoing major life stress. These experiences and present conditions function as psychological stressors, and make the Sudanese FDPs in Israel at high-risk for various forms of mental health problems and suffering, such as posttraumatic stress, depression, and related poor mental health outcomes.

## **Project Stages**

### **Stage I: Laboratory Research: Guiding the Development of Innovative and Effective Therapeutic Methods (*Years 1-2*)**

We first seek to optimize the effectiveness, reduce any risks, and conduct responsible science prior to implementing interventions in the community. Stage I research will lay down a strong scientific foundation to reach conclusions about the nature of mental health, risk and resilience, and potential innovative methods to effectively target prevalent mental health problems including anxiety and depression in this population. As noted above, we have initiated Stage I research over the past 2-years with great success and very promising findings regarding the nature of suffering experienced by African FDPs and novel therapeutic means to treat their psychological wounds. Stage I research is focused on meeting Objective I and beginning to pursue Stage II research.

## **Stage II. Beyond the Laboratory: Implementation of Novel Intervention Programs in the Community (*Years 3-5*)**

Building on research insights from Stage I, we will develop and deliver innovative and effective mental health interventions within the African refugee community in Israel. To do this real-world applied research directly in the community, we will collaborate with our Non Governmental Organization (NGO) partners nationally and internationally, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Israel, Physicians for Human Rights, Geshar Mental Health Clinic, the African Refugee Development Center, and Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel. Though our first responsibility is locally, we will work with our partners internationally to test these interventions among the larger forcibly displaced population of African refugees beyond our borders.

## **Stage III. Global Partners & Impact (*Years 4-5*)**

Stage III comprises a range of dissemination efforts to inspire clinical laboratories around the world to adapt their efforts to understand human suffering and develop prevention/intervention science for the unique needs of African FDPs world-wide. This Stage includes an international conference hosted by the University of Haifa, in which 10-15 leading clinical research groups from around the world will participate. In the first such Conference of its kind, our research team will disseminate the findings regarding possible prevention/intervention approaches targeting suffering among African FDPs residing in Israel. The goal of the conference is to encourage our colleagues to adapt and test these new therapeutic methods among FDPs in their national/local communities.

## Academic Leadership



**Prof. Amit Bernstein**, Department of Psychology, founded and heads The International Research Collaborative on Anxiety and Related Disorders, is the Director of the Clinical Psychological Science Graduate Training Programs in the Department of Psychology, and directs the International Perspectives on Psychological Science Honors Program at the University's International School. Professor Bernstein's work is focused on discovering psychological mechanisms underlying prevalent forms of human suffering, including anxiety and related disorders and thereby guide the development of novel intervention methods to foster resilience and mental health. Since joining the University in 2008, his laboratory's research has been supported by a range of institutions including the National Institutes of Health, European Union FP-7, Israel Science Foundation, Psychology Beyond Borders, and the Israeli Council for Higher Education.

## Request for Support

We invite you to partner with the University of Haifa to expand this important national and international applied research project preserving and promoting human rights in Israel and around the world.

**A generous gift of \$1.5 million** will provide resources necessary to embark upon this **five-year applied research initiative**.

- ❖ **An annual gift of \$100,000** will provide much needed funds for scholarship and fellowship support for doctoral and postdoctoral students.
  
- ❖ **An annual gift of \$500,000** will enable the University of Haifa team to set up a mobile laboratory in the field. The mobile laboratory will be equipped with an EEG/ERP system, psychophysiology system, eye-tracking system, psychophysics; and digital experience sampling.
  
- ❖ **A gift of \$1.5 million** will provide support for personnel, field and laboratory research expenses, and international cooperation of the five-year research project.

*Thank you for your kind consideration of this request.*

## About the University of Haifa

The University of Haifa is the largest comprehensive research university in Israel's northern region and academic home to a community of students that most accurately mirrors Israeli society. It enrolls the largest number of military and security personnel, who study alongside civilians from all walks of life - Haredi and secular Jews, new immigrants, Arabs, and Druze.

The University's mission is to cultivate academic excellence, create a shared Israeli experience, and promote democratic values in an environment of tolerance and multiculturalism. It is such an environment that contributes to outstanding research and a community of exceptional, creative, and productive alumni. We believe that fostering outstanding research while strengthening Israel's northern region and promoting an environment of multiculturalism is of strategic importance for the continued existence and prosperity of the State of Israel.

The University of Haifa stands atop Mount Carmel, where Haifa's southern boundary verges on the Carmel National Park. Over 18,000 students study here for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees. The University of Haifa is fully committed to academic excellence, which is expressed in its many and diverse interdisciplinary and international programs and collaborations with academic institutions around the world. The University of Haifa has gained an international reputation in many research areas, and is Israel's leading university in the humanities, social sciences and marine research.

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