

# The role of a trauma-sensitive football group in the recovery of survivors of torture

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## Key points of interest

- Football is a potentially useful tool for enabling torture survivors to build relationships, manage their emotions and reconnect with their physical body.
- A partnership approach between football specialists and therapeutic specialists offers a promising way forward.

## Abstract

*Introduction:* Whilst there is some preliminary evidence for the benefits of sports-related interventions for survivors of torture, how sport and exercise can contribute to the rehabilitation of torture survivors needs to be better understood. Specifically, this paper aims to: 1) explore the ways in which a football group contributed to the wellbeing of participants and; 2) suggest characteristics of the football group which could potentially contribute to its effectiveness. *Methods:* An exploratory mixed methods study was

undertaken with participants and trainers of a joint programme delivered by Arsenal Football Club and Freedom from Torture in London. Individual discussions, group discussions and participatory ranking activities were used which led to the development of an initial programme model. This model was, subsequently, further developed through a variety of data collection methods. *Results:* Six potential outcomes of involvement in the football group were identified: relationships, a sense of belonging, hope for the future, emotion management, enjoyment, and improved physical health. In addition, the process highlighted factors contributing to the effectiveness of the football group: a sense of safety, therapeutic aims, similar participants, a partnership approach, staff characteristics, other opportunities, and consistency in terms of approach, session content and staff. *Conclusions:* This exploratory study outlines the potential benefits of the football programme that would require further validation through a case-control study and participant follow-up. A model is put forward as well as a number of recommendations that serve as a starting point for similar programmes and guides academic research in the area.

*Keywords:* Torture survivors, sports therapy, football, programme model, refugees

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## Introduction

The challenges of life after torture can be amplified by flight from an unsafe environment and living in a new and, sometimes, hostile host country. As a result, torture survivors often suffer from multiple, overlapping, and protracted stressors. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression are frequently reported (Williams & van der Merwe, 2013) and feelings of trust in the world around them can be eroded as a result, which inhibits the development and maintenance of relationships (Boyles, 2017). The consequences of torture often include: complaints relating to the nervous system; signs of hyperarousal (e.g., breathlessness); and chronic muscle contraction that inflicts pain (Kira, 2002; Rothschild, 2000; Van der Kolk, 2014). The physical and psychological effects of torture are tightly intertwined. Therefore, effective torture rehabilitation interventions need to address multiple areas of survivors' lives and be responsive to the inter-connected nature of the challenges faced.

A phased approach for working with survivors of torture has attracted considerable support, based on Judith Herman's (1992) stages of recovery: 'safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection'. The three phases overlap, and an individual may move between all three multiple times during their recovery. This view emphasises the need for both one-to-one therapeutic work and reconnection with the body and with other people (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). Activities that do not directly depend on expressing thoughts and feelings—such as sport, art, music, and movement—provide important dimensions to therapy (Dutton, 2017). Van der Kolk (2014) emphasises the importance of interventions

that help survivors to live fully in the present, which complement approaches that more directly focus on addressing distressing thoughts and memories.

Rosenbaum et al. (2015) concluded that traditional treatment for trauma may benefit from the inclusion of physical activity interventions as adjunctive treatments. Ley and colleagues (Ley, Krammer, Lippert, & Rato Barrio, 2017; Ley, Rato Barrio & Koch, 2018) studied the effects of a sports and exercise therapy programme with war and torture survivors and found that "the experience of pleasure, the distraction and respite from illness-related thoughts and worries, the being in the present 'here and now', the experience of mastery and achievements, as well as activation and motivation for physical activity seemed therapeutically meaningful in this population" (Ley et al., 2017, p. 92).

Dutton (2017) describes a football group with asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, many of whom were survivors of torture. He describes how football addresses the whole person—the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Players reconnect with their bodies through the physical elements of the game. In addition, football requires different types of mental activity, such as identifying strategies for passing the ball or organising the team, and stimulates a range of emotions, such as joy and frustration: "The spirit can be lifted by collective endeavour towards a common goal—a shared experience that can be spiritual in a simple way" (p. 277).

Therefore, there is some evidence for the benefits of sports-related interventions for survivors of torture, but more research is needed on how sport and exercise should be organised to provide the most effective support to this population and to avoid inadvertently causing harm (Ley et al., 2018). This

paper shares the descriptive insights from data that was originally collected to develop a programme or 'logic' model of a football initiative between Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community in London, UK. Specifically, this paper aims to: 1) explore the ways in which a football group contributed to the wellbeing of participants; and 2) identify the features of the football group which contributes to its effectiveness. The paper provides an overview of the initiative, details the data collection methodology, describes key results, discusses the factors informing the results, and concludes with recommendations for practitioners.

### **Overview of the football group**

Arsenal in the Community and Freedom from Torture have, together, been running a football group for Freedom from Torture clients since 2012.<sup>1</sup> Freedom from Torture is a UK charity that provides medical consultation, forensic documentation of torture, psychological therapies and support, as well as practical assistance, to survivors of torture and organised violence, most of whom are seeking asylum and refuge in the UK. In many cases, clients suffer from the physical and emotional consequences of torture, as well as the emotional, social and practical consequences of leaving their homes, families and livelihoods, in addition to dealing with the asylum system in the UK with minimal social and economic resources. Arsenal in the Community is a part of Arsenal Football Club, which delivers programmes across

four main themes (sport, social inclusion, education, and health) and always prioritises social outcomes ahead of sporting achievements.

The group meets once a week at 'the Hub', which is the Arsenal in the Community centre next to the Emirates stadium. Between 15 and 25 players attend each session and there is considerable variation in terms of age (the 60 clients referred to the group to date range from 18 to 57 years, with an average of 34.5 years), physical fitness, and football skills. Bleep test scores from September 2017 (17 players participated) ranged between 1.4 and 10.9 and one-third of the players rated themselves as 'a little fit', 'quite fit' and 'very fit' respectively. Again, approximately one third rated their football skills as 'OK', 'quite good' and 'very good' respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Freedom from Torture clinicians make referrals to the group based on an assessment of the client's ability to cope, medical risk, and interest in joining. Despite the group being open to both men and women, no women have yet joined. The group is a therapeutic activity that emphasises psychosocial wellbeing rather than physical fitness or football skills and the sessions focus on providing a safe environment that promotes enjoyment and wellbeing. Each football session begins with warm-up activities that encourage teamwork and communication, followed by a series of short matches. Sometimes players act as referees. The session ends with a 'cool down', which helps to calm any emotions that may have been particularly heightened during the session.

<sup>1</sup> The Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community football group is referred to throughout as 'the group' or the 'football group'.

<sup>2</sup> See online appendix here: <https://doi.org/10.7146/torture.v29i1.106613>

Until clients obtain their 'right to remain' or refugee status, their involvement with the football group is limited to attending the session. However, once a client obtains their right to remain, the Arsenal in the Community staff seek opportunities to link the client to other aspects of their programme, particularly their Employability project. This teaches work-related skills and can lead to various forms of employment afterwards, such as in the catering and retail sectors.

From the outset of the partnership, there was a conscious aim to combine the Freedom from Torture psychotherapy and the Arsenal in the Community social models to create a strong psychosocial framework for the football project. Staff work together very closely. For example, the Freedom from Torture clinician attached to the group attends each session and, given that emotions are often triggered during the football sessions, helps the coaches to reflect on the factors that may underlie them and advises on how to manage them appropriately.

### Methodology

The study reported here was conducted in 2017-2018 over a 12-month period, five years after the group was first established. Although no systematic data had been collected, as the group began and developed in a relatively informal way, the two organisations wanted to better understand and document how the football group may contribute to the recovery of survivors of torture.

Therefore, an exploratory mixed methods study was conducted to develop and validate a 'programme model' or 'logic model'. A programme model articulates *how* a programme is intended to work, and the precise nature of the issues which it seeks

to address.<sup>3</sup> Such models provide a useful working theory for structuring the gathering of data on these relationships (Rogers, 2008), and can be used as a basis for better organising, monitoring and evaluating a programme. The purpose of developing a programme model for the football group was, firstly, so that the perceived outcomes and mechanisms by which they were achieved could be clearly articulated, leading to an agreed focus and vision within the programme team. Secondly, the hypothesised outcomes and mechanisms could form the foundation of a future, more formal, evaluation.

The study had two distinct phases. The first phase focused on the initial development of the programme model and the second phase was concerned with the elaboration and validation of the model. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used.

#### *Phase One: Initial Development of the Programme Model*

The below methods were used to gather the information necessary for the development of the initial programme model, which aimed to understand the perceived effects of the programme and the means by which these effects are achieved.

#### *Discussions with staff involved with the project:*

One group discussion took place between two coaches, the clinician attached to the group, the Arsenal in the Community manager, and the Freedom from Torture London & South East Clinical Services

<sup>3</sup> A programme model 'details the components, mechanisms, relationships and sequences of causes and effects which are presumed to lead to desired outcomes' (Coalter & Taylor, 2010).

Manager. Four of these five people have been involved with the group from its inception. The objective of the discussion was to document perceptions of how participants in the football group change over time (potential ‘outcomes’) and the factors that contribute to these changes. Multiple informal conversations with individual staff members were also held to further explore emerging themes.

*Participant ranking exercises:* Two ‘participant ranking exercises’ (PREs) (Ager, Bancroft, Berger, & Stark, 2018) were conducted with clients involved in the football group (one group of seven and one group of eight), to understand the perceived benefits of participating in the football group. Players were asked the following question: “*Tell me some of the most important ways the football group helps the people who come to it. You can think about yourself, and about other people*”. For each ‘benefit’ identified, the player was asked to explain it briefly and then select an object to represent that issue and explain why.<sup>4</sup> This yielded additional insight. For example, ‘opportunities’ was represented by a tape measure and the player explained that each mark along the tape measure indicated one more step in life, and all the steps yet to come. The process continued until a maximum of 10 issues had been identified, which were then ordered from ‘more important’ to ‘less important’ by the participants. Participants were asked to explain their placements. Further discussion and readjustment of the placement of

objects was encouraged until the line of objects represented the consensual view of participants regarding the appropriate relative prioritisation of ‘benefits’.

Throughout the session, the facilitator took notes, such as verbatim comments, justifications given for proposed positioning of the various benefits, and disagreements.

*Individual interviews with players:* Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with four players. Three were currently involved with the group (self-selected), and one former player was requested to participate. Interviews included questions to elucidate: their feelings when they were first referred to the group and attended; changes that they noticed as they continued attending; similarities and differences with other groups that they were involved with; their relationships with the two organisations involved; and their perceptions of staff. Written informed consent was given before the interview and each interview was tape recorded and transcribed in full. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes.

*Observation of football sessions:* The lead researcher attended and observed five football sessions during the course of the study and took field notes.

*Analysis and development of initial programme model:* Thematic analysis was conducted on the data from the individual interviews, the discussions with staff, and the PREs using Dedoose data analysis software. The themes were not pre-determined but emerged from the data. The themes were categorised into perceived outcomes and factors that contributed to the outcomes, and the relationships between them were explored. A visual representation of the programme

<sup>4</sup> The facilitator had brought a wide variety of objects to choose from, including a padlock with key, a small model drum, a tape measure, a pen, a small toy lion, a small football, a cup, a ring, and a battery.

model was then developed to illustrate the relationships. This was shared with staff and revised based on feedback. Next, additional information was sought to more systematically explore the key themes identified.

*Phase Two: Elaboration and Validation of the Initial Programme Model*

The following methods were used to collect additional information on the 'outcomes' and 'contributing factors'.

*Player questionnaires:* A questionnaire was developed to obtain more systematic information on: perceptions of the organisations involved in the football group; the coaches and the football sessions themselves; self-rating of fitness and football skills; and relationships and social networks. 27 players completed this questionnaire.

*Player behaviour checklist:* A checklist was developed to obtain more systematic information regarding: the number of players participating in the football sessions; any instances of aggressive behaviour or refusing to abide by referee decisions or instructions; whether and how the coach addressed an emotional issue or interpersonal problems; and whether players helped each other during the session. One coach completed the checklist after five sessions in August and September 2017. A 7-item questionnaire was also developed to assess players' participation and interactions with others. The clinician who attended each session completed this for 26 players.

*Physical health interviews:* Individual interviews were conducted with five players to explore the impact of the football group on their physical wellbeing. They were all from the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC) and aged between 22 and 52 and had been involved with the football group between one and five years. They were selected for interview by Freedom from Torture staff because they had specific physical problems when first referred to the group. The issues explored during the interview included: how the players felt when they were referred to the football group; any physical health changes when playing football; how they felt about their bodies when they were playing and how this has changed over time; and their current physical wellbeing. The interviewer took notes during the interviews, and subsequently conducted a thematic analysis of the information obtained. The analysis was conducted manually, and themes emerged from the data rather than being determined in advance.

*Revision and validation of the programme model:* This additional information was inputted into the programme model on an ongoing basis over a six month period, and was supported by regular review sessions with staff. Once the programme model appeared to accurately reflect the data, it was shared again with a group of players and their input was used to validate the model.

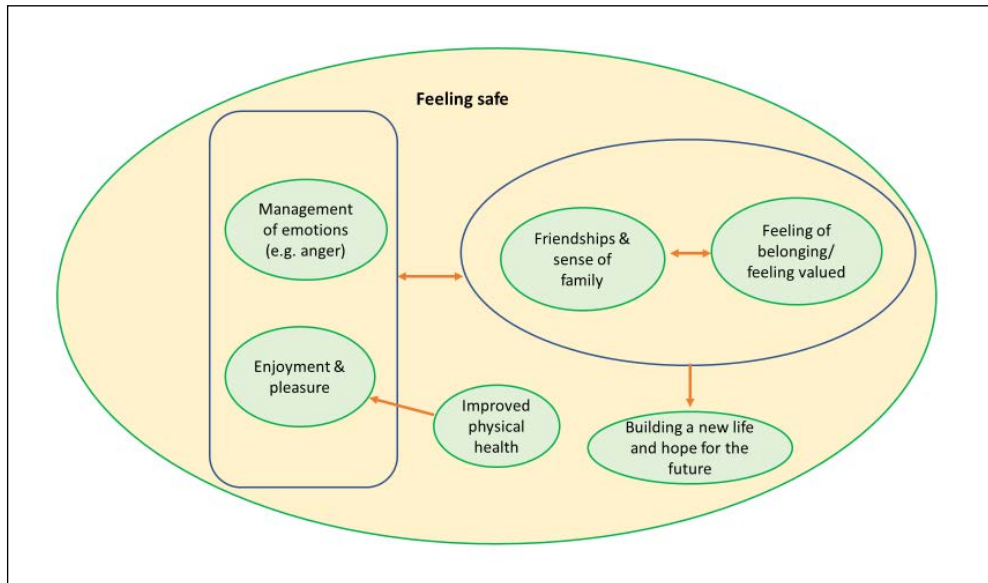
## Results

The final programme model is shown in Figure 1. Six potential outcomes of involvement in the football group were identified, some of which are inter-related as progress towards one is connected with progress towards another.

## Outcomes

Six outcomes were identified.

1. *Friendships and sense of family:* The ability to establish new relationships is

**Figure 1:** Football group programme model

a key element of recovery: “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others ... Recovery can take place only in the context of relationship; it cannot occur in isolation” (Herman, 1992, p. 133). Survivors of torture struggle to trust others and build relationships. Therefore, short and time-limited sports programmes may not enable them to create the type of new connections necessary for recovery (Ley et al., 2018). The open-ended nature of the football group enables clients to progress at their own pace in terms of connecting with others.

Players are not required to talk about their problems but some communication is needed in order to play as a team, and relationships amongst players and between players and staff generally strengthen over time. Players spoke powerfully about the importance of the relationships that developed, often referring to others in the

football group as their closest friends or ‘like family’:

*“In the beginning, individuals want to demonstrate their own skills, and they would all sit separately in the waiting room. Over time, their confidence within the group grows—passing, working together, using each other’s names, awareness of other people—they start to remove the defensive armour.”*

(Staff member)

Given that all group members are Freedom from Torture clients, they face similar challenges. This contributes to the feeling of safety within the group. Additionally, there is a relatively low turnover of staff and players, which allows for relationships to build over time: *“People come from different communities, we speak different languages but when we play we have one language, the language of football”* (Player).

2. *Feeling of belonging:* The feeling of belonging is about a connection to

something bigger than themselves. Although players feel a sense of belonging with both Freedom from Torture and Arsenal, there is some ambivalence about their belonging to Freedom from Torture because this relates to a painful aspect of their identity. Their connection with Arsenal, on the other hand, is a source of pride and a positive part of their self-identity. As one staff member put it, *“the players would not want to wear Freedom from Torture t-shirts, but are proud to wear Arsenal shirts”*. This finding reflects Boyles’ (2017) claim that torture survivors’ therapists can become representative of the new country. For some members of the football group, Arsenal is seen as a symbol of the UK, therefore, being accepted and valued by Arsenal has a broader significance:

*“When I arrived in the UK it wasn’t easy to socialise, I didn’t know anyone, even I didn’t want to talk. But I feel like I belong to the UK because I belong to Arsenal. Arsenal is part of the history of the country, if I belong to Arsenal I belong to the country.”* (Player)

The close proximity to the Emirates Stadium and the other opportunities available through Arsenal in the Community strengthens the feeling of belonging to the club: *“When I’m walking the street I feel like a big man because I’m a member of Arsenal”* (Player).

**3. Building a new life and hope for the future:** Through their involvement with the football group, players have access to other projects offered by Arsenal in the Community which helps them to develop new skills and could potentially lead to employment, college courses or other positive changes. For some, the opportunities they were given alongside the football group helped them to develop personally in positive ways. For example, *“When I was on the coaching course, I learned*

*more about managing my emotions”* (Player). Another player stated:

*“When I came to the UK my brain was full of old memories, thinking only of the place I came from. It takes time to start collecting new memories—now I dream about my time here, instead of at home. Coming to the football group gave me a starting point, a way to start collecting new memories.”* (Player)

**4. Management of emotions:** A number of players and staff members noted that players learned to manage their emotions better over time. When players first join, some regularly over-react to the actions of others during matches, but this diminishes with time: *“One player, every session he would take a foul, he would totally kick off, ‘right, I’m leaving’.* Now his behaviour has changed completely and he puts that down to the group—he says this is his family.” (Staff member).

Players generally perceived that the behaviour of Arsenal in the Community and Freedom from Torture staff and the way in which they model calm behaviour was important to learn how to manage their own emotions. Their friendships with other players and sense of solidarity and compassion when others behaved aggressively was also important: *“We’ve been through the same things, so we know how to manage each other. I know I need to manage my anger because other people are going through the same kind of problems as me.”* (Player); *“The staff are great, I’ve never seen them angry. Even if you’re an angry person, being around them teaches me to be calm. I love the way they control the atmosphere—they know we have problems. They are patient.”* (Player).

The coaches work closely with the clinician to establish strategies to manage heightened emotions during the football



sessions through regular conversations regarding issues arising within the group.

*5. Enjoyment and pleasure:* One of the consequences of torture, and of displacement to a country which may lead to hostile interactions, can be a loss of interest in activities which were previously enjoyed. According to van der Kolk (2014), people who are traumatised are unable to experience pleasure in day-to-day activities. Re-engaging with an activity and enjoying it is thus an achievement in itself, which can also have a considerable impact on recovery. A clear theme running through players' descriptions of their involvement with the football group, and of observations of the football group sessions, was enjoyment and a temporary release from painful thoughts:

*"The time you're playing football you don't think about the difficulties in your life. The only thing is, your main concern at that time is to enjoy your game, is to score goals or something like that, that's the only thing you're focused on that day. Probably you might want to think, 'oh my God, my papers', but you see the ball is coming, and you forget about that for at least one or two hours, which is enough for the whole day."* (Player).

25 players rated how much they enjoyed the football sessions by choosing one of the following options: 'not at all'; 'a little'; 'quite a lot'; 'very much'. 22 stated they enjoyed the sessions 'very much', and three enjoyed them 'quite a lot'. Whilst engaging in an enjoyable activity for a few hours a week may seem like a small part of an overwhelmingly difficult existence, this can be an important element in recovery (van der Kolk, 2014). Of particular note is the way in which the staff have been able to create an enjoyable environment for a group of players with considerable diversity in terms of physical fitness and football skills.

*6. Improved physical health and connection with the body:* Torture survivors often report that their bodies are broken and permanently damaged, and may perceive themselves as physically weak, so avoid exercise (Boyles, 2017). This can exacerbate feelings of poor physical wellbeing and lead to physical deterioration. Playing football enables survivors of torture to "reconnect with their bodies in a physical way that was familiar from the past and grounded them in the present" (Dutton, 2017, p. 278). Van der Kolk (2014) concluded that survivors of traumatic experiences need not only to talk about their feelings and experiences, but also to have physical experiences to regain a sense of control.

Most players in the football group experienced some physical health problems when they were first referred, and those interviewed said that they had experienced an improvement in their physical wellbeing through the football group (e.g., increased energy, feeling fitter and stronger). Two players suffered from more serious physical problems, and both said these had improved over the time that they were with the group. For example, a player who had suffered a stroke perceived that his gait and balance improved through his participation in the football sessions. Players also discussed the positive consequences of the group on physical symptoms of stress, such as headaches. One player stated, "*I love playing football, exercise is good for my body. I sleep better*". Some communicated that they had been able to develop a more positive connection with their bodies, even outside the group, and developed a belief that their bodies could recover and become stronger. They described how they consciously make healthier decisions, such as to walk instead of taking the bus. For example, one client said, "*now I make a plan to run in the park*

*every Saturday...I have to find a way to maintain fitness”.*

### **Factors contributing to the achievement of outcomes**

Through the data gathered during the development of the programme model, a number of factors were identified that contributed to the effectiveness of the football group in terms of strengthening the psychosocial wellbeing of participants.

*1. Sense of safety:* Players feeling safe during the football sessions was a cross-cutting theme that was perceived as crucial to achieving all the outcomes: “*When I walk inside I feel relaxed, safe. I’m a different person. When I’m outside I don’t feel safe.*” (Player); “*Safety is most important—when you’re not safe, you can’t do anything, you can’t learn, you always feel stressed.*” (Player). Developing a sense of safety is crucial for trauma-sensitive sports projects to achieve positive effects amongst torture survivors (Ley et al., 2017). The consistency of the approach used in the football sessions, session content, and staff were identified as important elements in achieving this. In addition, the low turnover of players enables them to get to know each other, which fosters a cohesive culture and develops feelings of safety. Players perceived that the caring nature of the staff enhances this.

*2. Nature and structure of the football sessions:* Coaching staff must strike the right balance between the perceived demands of the activities and the skills of the participants. If the demands are perceived as too high, the individual may become frustrated and anxious and so withdraw from the activity. Conversely, if they are perceived as too low, the individual may become unstimulated and disengaged. Although the diverse

nature of the group makes achieving this balance challenging, this study indicates that participants’ positive experiences do not depend on their level of skill or fitness. The way that the coaches manage the activities contribute to this.

The staff work to ensure that the sessions are structured in a way that maintains a therapeutic approach. This involves managing the sessions so that they do not become overly competitive or focused around the particularly good players. Staff have adapted sessions to enable players who have special physical needs to participate alongside the others. They also regularly remind the players that the aim is to enjoy the time together rather than to win.

The physical nature of the activity means that players can manage how much they communicate with each other. Staff encourage connection and communication by, for example, ‘warm-up’ activities that involve calling other players’ names as they pass the ball. However, there is no requirement for players to talk about anything other than the activity that they are engaged with. Importantly, there are opportunities for conversation which allows clients to build confidence and relationships at their own pace.

Football also facilitates the development of strategies to manage emotions, as players have to learn to accept referees’ decisions which go against them and to tolerate mistakes made by their colleagues and by themselves. They learn these strategies partly through experience and engaging with the other players, but also through the direct support of staff who engage with players who struggle with negative emotions during a session.

*3. Participants with similar experiences:* The football group is open only to Freedom from

Torture clients, therefore there is tolerance within the group of behaviours that others might find difficult to understand (e.g., over-reaction to certain situations) and they often attempt to help those who are having difficulty managing their emotions.

*4. The partnership between Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community:* Clients continue to work with Freedom from Torture as they engage with the football group, which facilitates the rehabilitation process. As they reconnect with others and with their own bodies, they can explore issues which emerge through this process with the clinician present during football sessions, and with their therapist.

Although players exhibited some ambivalence regarding their association with Freedom from Torture, because this relates to a painful part of their identity, the acceptance that they experience from Arsenal in the Community appeared to have positive consequences. The fact that Arsenal is an internationally recognised organisation may contribute to this. Players' sense of belonging to Arsenal is, therefore, extremely significant, particularly for those who have felt rejected and marginalised by other UK institutions.

*5. Staff characteristics:* The qualities of the coaching staff and the Freedom from Torture therapist attached to the group appeared to be central to the effectiveness of the programme. The qualities and behaviour of the staff associated with the football group are essential elements in the creation of a safe environment, within which players can start to become more confident, develop relationships, learn to manage their emotions, and strengthen their psychosocial wellbeing.

The importance of building trusting and supportive relationships with those

facilitating activities has been found to be an essential component of effective programmes (e.g., Lykes & Crosby, 2014). In their discussion of an exercise programme conducted with men and women who had experienced war and torture, Ley et al. (2018) noted the importance of the continuous participation of a therapist with expertise in working with this population. As well as enabling staff involved with the group to respond effectively to any negative feelings that occur in the course of the football sessions, any difficult emotions triggered during the sports sessions can then be explored during therapy sessions. This demonstrates how participation in a sports programme can directly complement individual therapy and vice versa.

The characteristics of the staff involved with the football group, which were consistently mentioned by players, were that they are calm and patient in all situations, continually demonstrated positive behaviour, and exhibited care for players. As van der Kolk (2014) states, social support is not just being in the presence of others, the critical issue is "being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart" (p. 25).

*6. Connection to other opportunities:* The connection with other Arsenal in the Community projects is an important element in players' ability to move forward, develop new skills and confidence, and have hope for the future. Developing new skills are seen as key to building a new life.

*6. Consistency:* High levels of consistency—in terms of approach, session content and staff, and low turnover of players—contributes to the creation of a safe environment. Players know what (and who) to expect. Dutton (2017) notes that in the football group

he ran with refugees and asylum seekers, having sessions that followed the same format was important therapeutically, in that it brought predictability and containment so that trust could develop. Consistency allows relationships to be built slowly and be maintained over time.

### Conclusions

The football group developed organically and has never been formally funded. This study was the first attempt to document the nature and effects of the group.<sup>5</sup> Our results are solely based on the perceptions of participants, without any objective measure of outcomes. Although the final programme model was not developed in a standardised way, it reflects this particular football group with this particular group of clients. Thus, it cannot be claimed that participation in the football group leads to the identified outcomes for all those involved because of the limitations associated with methodologies used, the lack of an initial baseline data, and the participants' heterogeneous nature, and the small number of participants. Our exploratory study suggests some potential benefits from the programme that would require validation through a well-designed case-control study and participant follow-up. Nevertheless, and considering the lack of similar data, we put forward a model of understanding and some recommendations that serve as a starting point.

Taking the limitations of this assessment into account, the following recommendations

for those involved in establishing sports-related rehabilitation programmes (particularly football programmes) for survivors of torture are forwarded:

- Maintain as much consistency as possible, in terms of approach, session content and staff, and strive for a low turnover of players.
- Restrict group members to those with similar backgrounds and experiences to promote a sense of safety for new members. Those who are ready can be linked to other groups which would enable them to connect with a wider range of people.
- Ensure that the group sessions involve both staff with football coaching skills and staff with therapeutic skills. Coaches and therapeutic staff should maintain an awareness of key points likely to trigger negative emotions in players (e.g., a referee's decision or a mistake made by another player or themselves) and offer appropriate responses and support.
- Select coaching staff who have the skills and qualities to develop trusting relationships with players, yet maintain the necessary boundaries. Other essential characteristics are patience and an ability to manage emotions in a calm yet assertive way.
- Ensure the principle focus of the football group is on enjoyment and cooperation, rather than competition and winning. This may mean that some of the more skilled players need to be connected with a more competitive group in addition to the therapeutic football group.
- Adapt sessions to enable those with special physical needs to participate fully.
- Include simple communication exercises within sessions without putting pressure on players to talk to each other about issues other than the game.

<sup>5</sup> Arsenal in the Community is now in the process of developing a set of monitoring and evaluation tools which will enable them to gather information on an ongoing basis and conduct a systematic evaluation of the football group in the future.

- Enable players to continue with individual therapy alongside their involvement with the football group, so they can explore issues which emerge as they reconnect with others and their own bodies.
- There are considerable advantages to linking a football group to a prestigious club since this enables players to develop a sense of identity, which is connected to belonging to an institution which has positive connotations for them and for those they interact with.
- Connect those involved with the football group to other opportunities when they are ready and when possible.

### Conflict of interest

The first author has completed paid work for Freedom from Torture over the past ten years as a consultant and has conducted pro bono work during the same period. The first author was paid to undertake the assessment of the football group on which this paper is based.

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