

Salama



INNER
SAFETY
PROJECT
السلامة الداخلية

Salama

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Review

The contents of this publication were reviewed by mental health professionals representing diverse cultural perspectives and areas of expertise, to ensure technical accuracy and safe application by trained laypersons. Their insights shaped the language, tone, and content of the text and activities in this manual. This work was enriched through the generous review of Noura Amkieh (Lebanon), Wendy d’Andrea, PhD (USA), and Justine Hardy (United Kingdom).

Design and Document Production

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About the authors

This book was written by Mohammad Alrajabi and Michael Niconchuk, the founders of Inner Safety Project.

. Their knowledge has been gained through lived experience , intensive multidisciplinary study , and consultation with scholars from multiple fields . Together they bring complementary and varied expertise : Alrajabi has a masters degree in international relations and diplomatic law, and Niconchuk in social cognition. Niconchuk has published widely on trauma, social neurobiology , and healing-centered peacebuilding , and Alrajabi has managed complex virtual and in-person delivery of trauma-focused psychoeducation programs . Both have worked in community mental health and psychosocial support programs since 2015. Their work spans the intersections of neurobiology inner life mental health , and forced displacement , aiming to be useful and responsive to others who have experienced war, armed conflict, or forced displacement.

Drawing on their combined knowledge and extensive lived experience, this work reflects both scientific rigor and long-standing commitment to communities affected by war and displacement—both powerful sources of knowledge. Reviewed by specialists across multiple disciplines, this book is intended to open new lines of inquiry and practical curiosity for addressing the profound psychological and emotional suffering of people living through war and disaster.

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Disclaimer and Waiver

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Signature:

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UNIT 1: Introduction and opening

Welcome. Thank you for taking the time and energy to interact with the Salama program. As you can imagine from the program's name, it is our hope that you feel safe and cared for throughout this process.

To feel safe does not mean you will be free from discomfort. Some of what you learn and experience in this program may be uncomfortable, but overall, we hope to build resources and practices towards safety in an unsafe world. It is our goal here to offer some insight on mental health in the most dire circumstances that you can use in conjunction with the many other practices and tools you already have to maintain mental and emotional health.

Welcome

Mental health is an essential component of our overall well-being, yet it is often overlooked or stigmatized in many societies. Just as we prioritize physical health, taking care of our mental and emotional state is crucial to living a healthy and fulfilling life. Encouragement of self-knowledge, self-care, and mental health can be found in religious texts, philosophical literature, and modern scientific evidence. And each of these fields have made important contributions throughout history to our understanding of mental health.

Imagine your mental health as a garden: a garden requires nourishment, attention, and care to thrive. Just as flowers need sunlight and water, and the gardener (you) needs to know how to care for each of the plants. The gardener must learn the soil and the secrets of the land, too. In the same way, our mental and emotional health consists of many interconnected issues. Health is carefully achieved and maintained through insight and knowledge about the self, through supportive relationships, self-care practices, spiritual practices, and professional guidance when needed.



Acknowledging mental health struggles is not a sign of weakness but rather a testament to our humanity. While some mental health challenges seem to emerge from nothing and nowhere, others are obviously caused by experiences we, our families, and our communities endure. Sometimes, there are clear external causes for individuals' and communities' mental health challenges. For example:

- It is not surprising that ten years of displacement and poverty would increase the risk of depression
- A violent occupation or invasion may cause severe mental and material distress
- Constant fear of separation from loved ones may not be a symptom of an illness to be treated, but could be a perfectly logical and temporary response to new violence or conflict

It is understandable and natural that tremendous adversities would contribute to stress, sadness, anxiety, anger, depression, and hopelessness and it is important to acknowledge that it requires both courage and determination to understand, consider, and address mental and emotional health in the midst of constant adversity.

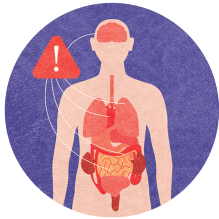
In recent years, there has been a shift in how mental health is viewed and treated. In some places and for some communities, conversations around mental health have become more open, reducing the stigma that once surrounded it. This change can encourage individuals to seek support without fear of judgment, fostering environments of understanding and empathy, though we admit that in some societies and communities the stigma persists, with mental health struggles sometimes seen as weakness, insufficient faith, or even demonic possession.

Mental and emotional distress exists on a spectrum, and not all distress means a person is "sick" or has a "disorder." Feelings such as sadness, hopelessness, worry, anger, overwhelm, or the strain of fractured relationships are often natural responses to life's circumstances. In some cases, factors like genetics, childhood experiences, or later life events may contribute to the development of a mental health condition or challenges worth addressing. However, the pursuit of mental health is not limited to treating illness or attending therapy—it is also about building coping skills, deepening emotional intelligence, strengthening relationships, and fostering consistent self-care.

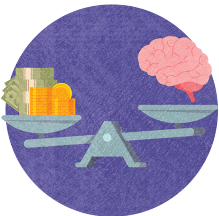
Caring for your mental and emotional health is not only about therapy, nor is it something only for those with a mental illness. Caring for your mental health involves practicing self-compassion, prioritizing physical health, building caring relationships, deepening spiritual and creative practice, prioritizing self-care, and seeking to create positive change amid life's challenges. Additionally, creating supportive communities where individuals feel safe to express their feelings and seek help is vital, as well as seeking professional clinical support when necessary and available. Whether through therapy, support groups, or simply providing compassionate help, we can all play a role in caring for each other's mental well-being. In short, mental health is an integral part of overall health and includes different aspects of our lives.

The importance of mental health

The importance of mental health is underscored by a wide range of concrete evidence from various fields, including healthcare, economics, social sciences and public policy. Here are some key pieces of evidence highlighting the importance of mental health:



1. **Impact on physical health:** Many studies have shown that mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, can have significant negative effects on physical health. These conditions are associated with an increased risk of various health problems, including cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and poor immune function.



2. **Economic costs:** Mental health disorders impose significant economic costs on individuals, families, communities and society as a whole. These costs include health care expenses, lost productivity due to absenteeism, reduced earning potential, and increased social welfare spending.



3. **Social and interpersonal relationships:** Poor mental health can impair social functioning and strain interpersonal relationships. Individuals with mental health problems may have difficulties maintaining friendships, romantic relationships, and family bonds. This can lead to social isolation, loneliness and feelings of alienation.



4. **Educational attainment:** Mental health problems can interfere with cognitive functioning, concentration, and academic performance. Children and adolescents with untreated mental health disorders may struggle in school, leading to lower educational attainment.



5. **Public health crisis:** Mental health challenges represent a major public health crisis worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), depression is the leading cause of disability globally, and mental and emotional distress continue to rise in many parts of the world.



This and other unmentioned evidence highlights the need to raise awareness, increase investment, and take concrete action to promote mental health, combat stigma, and guarantee equitable access to quality mental health services for everyone.

1.3

Introduction to Salama

The Salama program is part of a broader initiative of the same name. The Inner Safety Project, which was started by persons who have known the feeling of war, of constant scarcity, poverty, and fear of many different negative outcomes. Simply, the Inner Safety Project initiative is all about safety, about the search for a feeling of safety within the self even in the most unsafe circumstances. Salama is about preserving mental health, choice, and self-awareness in adversity.

1.4

The Salama program vision

The Salama curriculum is designed to offer new insights and hope for adults who have experienced chronic adversity, specifically violent conflict and forced displacement. *It combines storytelling, psychoeducation (sharing knowledge and information about mental health topics), and practical learning activities to advance individuals' understanding of the psychosocial effects of conflict and displacement in individuals, families, and across generations, and encourage the consideration of emotional, psychological, spiritual and relational resources that can improve a sense of inner safety. **It is not psychotherapy and it is not a trauma healing program, but rather a psychoeducational activity encouraging reflection and hope.***

1.4.1

What does "Inner Safety" mean?

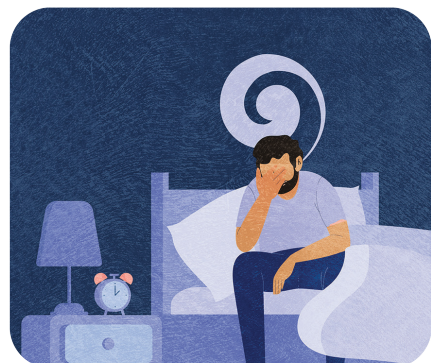
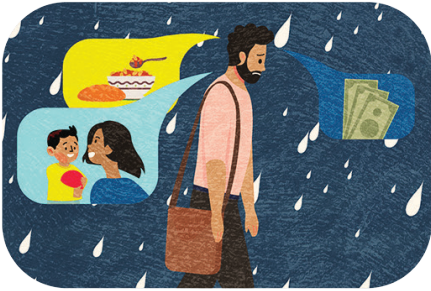
We define inner safety as a **subjective sense of security and efficacy**. Feeling safe is not a black and white concept. The ability to feel *safer than before* can result from access to and use of material, psychological, social and spiritual resources that allow you to navigate adversities while minimizing harm caused to the self and others.

The term "inner safety" does not imply happiness, freedom from hardship, or perfect health. Inner safety exists on a spectrum, and it is impossible to feel totally safe when there are so many external threats and dangers. Many factors that contribute to your feeling of internal safety are outside of your control.

Some of those factors may have been intentionally destroyed by others, and indeed, some people may benefit from preventing your attainment of safety. Surely, the ability to feel safe results from the interaction of external and internal factors, and the work of "healing" or "resilience" combines a personal responsibility to inner work as well as work, by communities and larger actors, to dismantle root causes of harm.

As much as there are factors outside of a person's control, it is possible to build awareness and tools that improve one's ability to regain control in moments of distress, support others in the community, and manage some of the adaptations that may have occurred due to long-term stress or trauma. So, while total inner safety may not be achievable, it can grow, even in adversity. Inner safety requires a combination of self-awareness, personal vigilance, community support, and systematic efforts to promote justice, equality, and respect for all individuals. It is an ongoing process that involves individual action and collective responsibility.





1.4.2 Bigger problems to deal with?

Is it logical or reasonable to talk about or address mental health when there are real, tangible, existential problems to deal with? When a person is just trying to stay alive?

Consider the example of a man living in poverty. Each day, he must find work to feed his children, never knowing how he will earn enough for that day's bread. At night, after repeating this exhausting routine, he lies down to sleep with his mind full of fear, anger, and worry—yet he voices none of it. Sometimes, without meaning to, he lashes out at his child or yells at his wife. In such circumstances, feelings of frustration and rage are understandable, even logical. Faced with daily survival and ongoing hardship, there is little motivation—or practical space—to focus on mental health. For many, it feels like a luxury. And if life remains painful, stressful, or dangerous, the question naturally arises: what is the point of prioritizing mental health at all?



Experiences such as war, displacement, and poverty consume a person's energy in the service of basic survival, leaving little capacity to notice, let alone address, the impacts of stress and trauma on thoughts, emotions, behavior, relationships, and community life. These conditions can fuel depression, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, shame, and intense physiological stress. Over time, the very feelings and symptoms of poor mental health can narrow a person's ability to imagine or work toward a different future, reinforcing cycles of shame, despair, and disconnection.

Many people confuse mental health with happiness or economic prosperity. It is common to hear phrases like *"If I had money or a job or a different passport I would feel safe."* Maybe, but it is complicated.

Many people who have material wealth and stability also experience depression, anxiety, and unwanted effects of stress and trauma. Many persons who fled war zones and were resettled in other countries, for example, have improved material circumstances as compared to before. That said, increased wealth, a powerful passport, or stable work does not eliminate the effects of trauma, even if it does create forms of stability, predictability, and power.

Pain, stress, and trauma over long periods of time can cause adaptations that money and stability cannot change on their own. For those who have moved from times of material insecurity to material safety, they may experience a lingering feeling of *"I am no longer the me of before."*



It is important to recognize that most programs aimed at improving mental health for people affected by war, disasters, displacement, discrimination, or poverty rarely address the structural conditions that cause mental harm. Approaches such as relaxation exercises or stress management place the burden of effort on individuals who are already struggling. While these tools can be valuable, those working to "improve mental health" must give equal attention to addressing the root causes of harm. Efforts that promote justice, equity, and freedom are not separate from mental health care—they can play a powerful role in fostering overall well-being.

So then, what is the goal of mental health activities like Salama? The goal is to increase your understanding of the psychological and emotional consequences of adverse experiences, and encourage you to confront negative effects of such experiences in ways that align with your values and goals. To do so requires awareness of the ways in which we have adapted and changed as a result of adversities, how these adaptations may affect our bodies, behaviors, relationships, and communities, and develop a repertoire of practices to build safety and control. And for many people, the support of mental health professionals will be critical. The Salama program is not a formal or clinical mental health program, and its facilitators are not mental health professionals, with few exceptions. **It is a learning program, and not therapy of any kind.**



Content warning

Some of the topics and situations featured in the Salama activities may be distressing, particularly for those who have lived through experiences of forced displacement, war, and violence.

The stories used in the Salama program are fictional, but will be familiar to the audience and may activate memories of painful experiences for readers. For example, Salama's short stories depict violence. Some scenes include bloodshed, violent death, and thoughts of self-harm and violence. In addition to the graphic description of violence, some parts of the text detail intense negative emotional experiences. Consequently, some parts of the text may be disturbing.

So why include such content, if there is no intention or desire to cause distress? All the above-mentioned graphic details are included to faithfully convey how conflicts, wars, displacement and childhood adversities before war and displacement affect the mind, body and behavior of people who endure such experiences. Readers are brought closer to "real" experiences for the sake of honest portrayal through which the authors seek to explain the complex and mysterious psychological and behavioral phenomenon which often occur in silence and privately. Many people feel alone in their experiences, wondering if they were the only ones who endured certain situations, emotions, or thoughts over the course of their hardships. Our intention is to describe real events that people have endured and faithfully describe the possible emotional, psychological, and social aftermath that may occur in an attempt to destigmatize and demystify common reactions to situations experienced by millions of people.

Additionally, the content in this program does not qualify a person to be a mental health practitioner, therapist, a psychiatrist or a counselor. This program does not replace nor challenge professional mental health services. It does not try to analyze personality, diagnose mental illness, or comprehensively address mental health topics. **The content is not therapeutic in its intent, but rather is intended for educational purposes which could encourage change or further explorations.**

Safety resources

As you go through the activities here, and in daily life, it is important to be aware of and make use of resources that strengthen your sense of stability and safety in the world. **Safety resources** can include physical objects, people, places, rituals, relaxation exercises, or imaginary scenes or memories that strengthen your feeling of safety and calm in the moment.

Self-resources

Even in the midst of tremendous suffering, rage, or sadness, almost everyone has some ability to calm themselves through different practices. For some, it may be prayer or reading scripture. For others, it may be thinking of or speaking with a particular person, and for others it may be holding a toy that was gifted by a loved one. Often we associate the idea of soothing with babies and children, but adults too have ways of soothing or making themselves feel safe. It is a good idea to recall some of the safety resources you have as you begin this program. And it is okay if you do not have or cannot think of any safety resources for now. Each person can build a repertoire of safety resources.

ACTIVITY.

Quick calming resources

This activity gives participants a chance to explore safety resources or calming tactics which they can make use of quickly if the content of the Salama program upsets or distresses them.

1. Distribute sticky notes to participants, and ensure they have pens. Explain that "safety resources" are those things which, when thought of or practiced, restore a sense of calm or make the person feel safe.
2. Each person can write as few or as many resources as they want, but only one per sticky note. If a person has no safety resources, they can think of things that may be safety resources for others, and write those.
3. Facilitators can ask participants to place their notes in the relevant categories, as per the chart below.
4. Review the chart together.

PEOPLE

Who makes me feel safe?

PLACES

Where do I feel safe? (or have felt safe in the past). Think of the details.

OBJECTS

Are there any objects that calm me?

RITUALS

What rituals or exercises do I perform when I feel afraid?

1.6.2

Resources from facilitators

The most important safety resources for you are those you can access at any time, by yourself. In the course of Salama activities, facilitators will offer some resources that can help restore a sense of control or calm, when needed. These include:

- Facilitators trained in recognizing and responding to distress
- Clear communication about session content, agenda, and changes
- Water and snacks during group activities
- Open space to walk around near the activities
- Attempts to create comfortable temperatures and activity spaces
- Examples of soothing exercises participants can use on their own

Opening story

24 hours

8

7

6





24 hours

My name is Munir, and I lived a reasonably good life, neither luxurious nor poor. When I was twenty-four years old, my life was going well despite the normal challenges everyone faces. Like other young people, I struggled to secure a livelihood and build a better future.

I was married, but God did not grant me children. I worked as a sales representative for a canned meat company, and I excelled in my profession thanks to my eloquence and the affection of all my colleagues and the business owners I dealt with.

I did not participate in any conflict in my country, as I always tried to stay away from sources that could harm my security.

It wasn't because I lacked an opinion; rather, I had endless opinions and beliefs, but something was more important to me: my survival and the survival of my family. I am simply an ordinary person; my political and social opinions will not change anything.

Moreover, I was responsible for supporting three families who were waiting for their daily bread. As the conflict intensified in my country, job opportunities were out of reach, and safe working environments were almost non-existent.

For this reason, from the first moment the conflict escalated in my country, I made a vow to myself not to participate in any aspect of the conflict. I worked and distributed my goods, avoiding all the problems that might make me part of this war. When I stopped at certain checkpoints, I thanked God for passing through safely, aware of the dangerous situation I could fall into without fault or warning. But I didn't have many options in other fields of work, so my life goals were clear: to work to support my family.

Yes, I may not be desired or loved by many people because my position was neutral. I did not support any side, and surely this would not save me from problems either.

I was extremely careful not to talk about my political opinions with anyone. Even when the topic of the crisis and conflict was brought up in front of me, I would simply pray: "Oh God, relieve us from what we are in."

Often, I would look in the mirror and ask, "Who are you with? Which side are you on?!" The answer was the same every time: I am with stopping the bloodshed, and what is happening now in my country and homeland pains my heart and breaks me. The scenes I witnessed were not beautiful; rather, my memories and dreams were shattering before me. Many of the places that used to revive my soul with their memories were destroyed, and I became part of the past because of the conflict that intensified and escalated in the recent period.

With the shattering of my memories, my dreams also collapsed. How can you build dreams in a torn homeland where you are no longer guaranteed your life for tomorrow? How can you draw dreams in a place that lacks safety, in a place where memories fade, and smoke rises from our burned future?

At that point, you can only try to get through your day safely. Here I am planning as I do every day: what will I buy? What will we eat? And where will I sell my goods? And how can I reach customers?

In a profession like mine, and in these circumstances, I had to be an expert in geography and maps to find alternative routes to overcome dangers and hardships and reach my destination without being harmed, and all of that just so I could return with a morsel that would feed the mouths waiting for me. The matter was not just about me; I carried a great responsibility. A whole extended family was waiting for my return.

With the dawn of a new day, I went to work as usual. I loaded the car with the required goods, entrusted myself to God, and then set off on my journey to find new ways to reach my customers. I headed east of the city, crossed a checkpoint of one of the warring parties, and everything was fine. I reached my destination and unloaded the goods, then looked at some shops in the vicinity to try to sell what was left, but to no avail. That place was dangerous, lacked stability, and was subjected to shelling from time to time, and there were ongoing conflicts and attempts to control it. Therefore, the merchants were hesitant to buy goods and food except in very small quantities; they did not know if they would remain in the same place or leave.

At four in the afternoon, I set off on my way back, fearing that darkness would fall while I was outside, as the situation worsens with nightfall.

I took the same road back, and when I reached the same checkpoint, the soldiers stopped me. They spoke to me rudely and arrested me, saying: You must fight with us. One of them said to me, "You are here in this country, so you have a responsibility to defend it." I wondered to myself, "Defend what? In what capacity? And for whose benefit?"

I resigned myself to the reality; I had no other choice. I feared for my family if I fled, and I feared for my siblings.

It was like a dream; I didn't fully comprehend what was happening. My biggest concern was to return the car and the goods to their owner so that he wouldn't accuse me of theft or demand financial compensation from my family. I arranged things with one of the soldiers at the checkpoint, called the car owner, and told him my address in the east of the city, asking him to come and take the car and the money because I would not be able to deliver them to him.

The car owner came and tried to get me out of the checkpoint where I was being held, but to no avail. Before the day ended, I called my family with the help of the same soldier, telling them in brief and concise

words that I would be fine. I don't know where this confidence that I would really be fine came from, but I had no choice but to try to reassure my mother, my wife, and my family. I told them that everything was going well, that I was fine, and that no one was assaulting or mistreating me. I advised them not to worry and to be well themselves.

At dawn, a bus came, and I was transferred to one of the points belonging to the same checkpoint.

Everything was not fine; I did not feel safe. I spent my night in the new place with great difficulty, and the next day they gave me the official uniform and asked me to wear it. I had no tasks at first, and I had nothing to do. When it was five in the evening, I sat under a nearby tree and cried bitterly like a child.

I burst into tears, and I don't know where all these tears came from or how I exploded into crying like that. I addressed myself, wondering how my life had turned upside down in 24 hours. This was not a day in my plans. And now I don't know what to do or where to go. What brought me here? What mistake did I make to end up in this situation? I had not participated in any suspicious or non-suspicious details from the beginning so as not to be here, in this place and in this uniform.

Why? This question lingered in my head for a long time. Words choked in my chest, and I couldn't express what I felt that day.

I no longer knew what to say, what to do? Or what had I done? What should I have done not to be here? As a normal person living in this country, I watch this conflict without wanting to take sides with any party. I am originally unconvinced by the idea of the conflict that broke out, and I don't know who is right and who is wrong. I don't know who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed. If I fight today on one side, will my brother be on the other side? Will my cousin be on the other side? And if so, will I face him? Will I kill him?

I had never seen a weapon up close in my entire life, let alone held one in my hand, so how could I participate today in armed conflicts?

24 hours were enough to change the course of my simple life and then destroy it mercilessly.

A young man in the prime of his life living the worst nightmare he could ever experience. In 24 hours, everything changed, even my humble bed was replaced by the open air. I sleep wearing my shoes, embracing a weapon that does not belong to me and to which I do not belong.

Those 24 hours I still think about to this day. I am now thirty-six years old, and those hours still haunt me daily. I think about them after 12 years have passed since that situation.

I write you this story, and today I am one of the survivors, and I don't know what I did for my life to change to this extent.

One thing kept me sane and alive, and one phrase I had repeated since I was a child: A'asa likheir. "Hopefully it is for the best."

Story analysis

ACTIVITY:

This activity offers a moment for participants to reflect on the story they just read, and explore with curiosity the sensations and emotions they experienced. Open the exercise by saying: "We want to pause and reflect on the story. It is likely that this story elicited emotions and even physical sensations for you."

PART 1

What are some of the physical sensations you felt during the story? Be specific.

What are some emotions or feelings that you experienced during the story? Be specific.

PART 2

In the hours described in the story, what are some of the negative experiences Munir endured?

As you read about Munir's life, what are some of the factors in Munir's life (e.g. strong family nearby) that may provide some ease in his hardship? In other words, what might be his safety resources?

PART 3

Write a short letter to Munir. The letter can be about whatever you want, but please imagine that you have an opportunity to share your thoughts, reflections, or any words you would like with Munir.

Facilitators may choose to offer a calming exercise for participants (e.g. breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or movement) after this exercise.



**INNER
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