The Comfort Dog Project

Molly Jenkins & Philip Tedeschi
Transforming Trauma: Resilience and Healing Through Our Connections With Animals

- Tedeschi & Jenkins (Eds.), 2019
- First book to focus on the impact of human-animal relationships for people who have experienced trauma
- Safety through human-animal connection
- Focuses on the cross-cultural reach of trauma-informed AAIIs
- Chapter 14: Interviews with four international HAI programs in Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Romania, and Uganda

“Safe” by Elicia Edijanto, 2014
The Comfort Dog Project

- A program of The Big Fix Uganda, located in the Gulu District of northern Uganda

- Pairs war trauma survivors with street dogs in need of good homes as a complement to therapy

- Each participant vows to be a lifelong guardian for their dog

- **Six program phases:**
  - Community sensitization and participant recruitment
  - Client assessments
  - Counseling and the development of dog-guardian bonds
  - Dog-guardian bonding activities (e.g., training, grooming)
  - Final assessments and community integration
  - Service as mentors, program ambassadors, and humane educators
Impacts of Perpetual Threat

- Felt safety is hard to come by for many people in Uganda.
- Chronic stress, such as the trauma of ongoing war, can lead to persistent dysregulation and an inability to self-soothe.
- When an individual has an unconscious “Neuroception of Safety,” higher brain structures are activated, making down regulation possible.
- Animal companions often provide us with a sense of security, an increased capacity for self-regulation, and an impetus for re-engagement with the social world.

Photo from current day Ukraine
Theme 1: Driving factors for choosing HAI as a point of intervention

- Community psychologist and war trauma survivor Francis Okello Oloya received physical and emotional support from dogs during his youth.

- Many Acholi people in northern Uganda had strong existing bonds with dogs.

- Improving animal welfare through accessible veterinary care, humane education, and caring human-animal bonds was a key program objective.
Theme 2: Prominent cultural views of mental health and trauma

- **Idioms of Distress:** Trauma response is often mediated by numerous historical, cultural, and discursive practices, including conceptions of self and understandings of destiny or fate.

- People in Uganda often don’t seek counseling due to cultural stigma and a scarcity of mental health resources.

- Trauma is viewed as a shameful sign of weakness or relatively insignificant.

- Lack of awareness that trauma symptoms (e.g., nightmares) stem from experiences in war.
Theme 3: Cultural stereotypes and views of animals

- Perception of dogs or certain types of dogs (i.e., strays) as unclean, diseased, and thus, menacing or undesirable.

- Fear of dogs stems from their traditional role as the family protector, as well as their participation in wartime operations.

- These experiences have historically made Western-based conceptions of dogs as family members, best friends, or participants in therapy feel strange to people in Uganda.
Theme 4: Challenges of running an HAI program in Uganda

- Cultural stereotypes about animals and mental health have presented program challenges, as well as safety risks to guardians and their dogs.
  - Early in the program, many guardians were ridiculed for walking with their dogs or even wearing a program T-shirt.
  - Numerous community stressors associated with poverty compound challenges (i.e., food insecurity, disease).
Theme 5: Animal welfare considerations

- Free spay/neuter, vaccines, deworming, and other treatment for life through The Big Fix
- Participant screening and selection (human and dog)
- Home consultations with the guardian and their family
- Guardian Commitment, signed in the presence of the village’s Local Council Leader
- Animal care and training classes, plus bonding activities
- Supportive follow-up from a humane officer and paid mentor
Theme 6: Outcomes at the individual and community level – One Welfare

- Enriched canine welfare through healthcare, grooming, and human companionship
- Feelings of support, purpose, safety, and belonging for individual guardians coping with significant trauma
- Shifts in community perceptions of dogs and the value of human-canine bonds
- Guardian re-engagement with the community through program ambassador activities
“After grooming and bathing, we found that not only did people want to touch their dogs, but they didn’t want to put their dogs on the ground again when they were clean. There were people who actually would carry their dogs home. They were so delighted that their dogs were clean, and they began touching and petting their dogs and interacting more with them. So, we really felt like that was helping us to accomplish one of our main goals, which was to promote good human-animal bond.”

- Sarah Schmidt, President of The Big Fix Uganda
Theme 7: Advice for practitioners

- On the ground, work should be led by a local person or people who are intimately familiar with the community culture.

- Collaboration with local organizations and institutions to ensure HAI programs are culturally inclusive and responsible.

- As those outside the community, how do we best support the program without taking over or imposing our values and biases?
**Iroba Nono**  
(You aggress me for nothing)

**Bitum**  
(Nothing is permanent)

**Petaga**  
(I am not shaken by whatever you do)

**Watmon**  
(Relatives cannot forgive)

**Agonya II**  
(Take Comfort)

**Gifty**  
(A gift from God)
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https://thebigfixuganda.org/donate-or-help.html
Thank You!
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The Comfort Dog Project – BBC News

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCgOu0p7x0c