



Freedom from Torture



TACKLING TRAUMA

How football is aiding recovery from torture

NOVEMBER 2018



Freedom from Torture

“Football has many powers, among them the ability to break down barriers and bring people together from all backgrounds, languages, cultures and experiences.”

Foreword from Freedom from Torture

We are hugely proud of our partnership with Arsenal in the Community. At Freedom from Torture, we work with survivors of torture from countries across the globe to help them find their voices and rebuild their lives in the safety of the UK. Having gone through one of the worst human experiences imaginable, they find themselves here alone and isolated, knowing little about our culture and with a long road to recovery ahead of them.

Football has many powers, among them the ability to break down barriers and bring people together from all backgrounds, languages, cultures and experiences. As such, it can be a huge source of comfort for someone far from home. Community building and group work is increasingly recognised as key to rehabilitation of survivors of torture. So the opportunity to take part in a football group, focused on therapeutic benefits but bringing survivors together through a familiar sport and under the auspices of Arsenal, a club well known and recognised worldwide, has been invaluable to those who have taken part.

As this report shows, the group is a product of a valued partnership with our Islington neighbours and a coming together of shared values. We are proud that the crucial role of the staff has been recognised, and especially proud of the players who continue to engage in the group, support each other, play the ‘Arsenal way’ and demonstrate such enormous capacity to overcome and transform adversity.

Sonya Sceats

Chief Executive, Freedom from Torture

Foreword from Arsenal

Arsenal Football Club and Freedom from Torture hold deeply aligned values and a profound belief that a sense of belonging to a community is a vital starting point for a process through which people who have faced unimaginable challenges can begin to recover a sense of self and start believing in a positive future.

We are passionate about using sport and especially football coaching to create that sense of community and belonging. This provides a foundation for participants to start a healing journey which can lead to rediscovering confidence in their bodies, connectedness with themselves and others, a valued place in the world and a renewed sense of enjoyment and fun.

This report evidences that our joint Football Group project opened the door to a deep level of transformation in the lives of the participants and we are humbled and proud in equal measure to present this evidence. I would like to emphasise however that the courage of stepping through the door and travelling down a positive, transformative path is all down to the individuals who participated in our Football Group and who became, and remain, a bright light of inspiration in all our lives.

Our relationship with Freedom from Torture has been inspirational. Together we have developed a pioneering and effective partnership that has consistently held the wellbeing of our participants as a primary focus. It has also provided evidence and inspiration to increase Arsenal’s ambitions to develop equally impactful projects across the globe.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the success of this Football Group project for their profound belief and commitment that it would transform lives and I would like to thank the participants for their immense courage and trust in us.

Svenja Geissmar

Chair, The Arsenal Foundation



Freedom from Torture

“Our relationship with Freedom from Torture has been inspirational. Together we have developed a pioneering and effective partnership that has consistently held the wellbeing of our participants as a primary focus.”



Freedom from Torture

“People come from different communities, we speak different languages but when we play we have one language, the language of football.”

Every week, a group gathers to take part in a football therapy session just next to Emirates Stadium, at The Arsenal Hub, home of Arsenal in the Community. This group of men are from a broad scope of nationalities, range in age from 18-55 and have diverse football ability. What they do have in common is a traumatic past; they are all survivors of torture, and moved to the United Kingdom to seek safety, rebuild their lives, and recover from unimaginable cruelty.

Torture targets the whole person, so all aspects of life are affected - physical, social, emotional and economic. Freedom from Torture - a UK charity whose London centre is close to Emirates Stadium - supports survivors of torture from across the world, most of whom are seeking asylum and refuge in the UK. In many cases, clients are suffering not only from the devastating consequences of torture, but also the impact of leaving their homes, families, and livelihoods behind, while dealing with the UK asylum system with minimal social or economic resources.

Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community have together been running a football group, developed and delivered specifically for torture survivors, since 2012. The aim is to provide a safe environment in which Freedom from Torture clients can enjoy themselves through football while strengthening their overall wellbeing.

Arsenal in the Community is a part of Arsenal Football Club, and delivers programmes across four main themes: sport, social inclusion, education and health. It prioritises social outcomes ahead of sporting achievements and works towards its mission to create ‘a sense of belonging’.

“We have different problems. We come together, enjoy the football and we forget everything. Whether we’ve had bad news, whatever, we forget while we’re in the session. It’s like medicine.”

The weekly football sessions are delivered jointly by staff from Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community, bringing together the expertise of each partner, and consist of warm-up activities (focusing on teamwork and communication) followed by short games and ending with a cool-down. The 15-25 players see the sessions as an enjoyable opportunity to play football, while benefiting from the therapeutic elements that are integrated into the sessions.

If a Freedom from Torture client is interested in joining the football group, and it is medically safe for them to do so, they will be referred by their therapists and clinicians at Freedom from Torture – who will continue to support them as long as is needed. Though both men and women can theoretically join - women have not yet done so in practice.

Players in the football group are occasionally invited to special events and matches at Emirates Stadium. They also have access to opportunities through Arsenal in the Community to develop new skills, such as an Employability Programme, once they gain permission to stay in the UK.

Here we explore how this unique football group assists players to recover from torture and complex trauma, and revealed a range of benefits to their wellbeing.



HOW DOES THE FOOTBALL GROUP BENEFIT PLAYERS?



The football group is supporting players' recovery from torture in a meaningful way. This impact report found that the football group boosts players' social, mental and physical wellbeing. Below are some of the key findings from the questionnaires, interviews and group discussions conducted with players and staff.

Social wellbeing

For many torture survivors, their feeling of trust in the world is broken, making it extremely difficult for them to develop or maintain relationships with others. Therefore a crucial part of the recovery process is being able to trust and connect to others, feeling part of a group in which one is understood, accepted, and valued, and having a reliable source of social support.

The nature of the football session makes it necessary for players to interact with others such that they gradually build relationships and trust. Many players referred to others in the football group as their closest friends, and expressed a sense of belonging and connection to something bigger than themselves. These strong bonds were fostered by all of the players having similar histories and challenges, the relatively low turnover, and the positive and welcoming attitudes of the staff involved.

Building Relationships

↑ When we come to this country we have no friends, no family, so we built that new family here. We come from different parts of the world, but once we're [in the UK] we're seen as asylum seekers and refugees, so we have that in common. So we support each other, emotionally, with advice. We exchange contacts, we talk to each other. So the people [in the football group] become your family.

↑ We are rejected in our own countries, but we came and found a new family that valued us, and gave us something that we never thought of. Once you are alone in your little tiny room here, as an asylum seeker, you have no-one around you, so Arsenal says 'come, we are here', you interact with so many people. You go to the match, you have 50,000 people around you. You know very well you cannot do it yourself, so somebody did that for you, somebody considered you as a human. It gives you that sense of belonging to a group.

Feeling connected and valued

↑ That connection [with Arsenal] is for ever, especially because I was given opportunities by Arsenal which have led onto other changes in my life.

↑ When I arrived in 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.

↑ This football we are doing, it gave me new life. When I left home to come here, I was struggling too much with my asylum seeker matters. I found out people don't like me, maybe my life doesn't make any sense at all. And then I lost my happiness. So honestly, when I start to come and play football here, they gave me the value I lost before.

↑ Quote from Player





Emotional/psychological wellbeing

The psychological and emotional impact caused by torture is devastating. Survivors report increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, plus feelings of anger, guilt and shame .

Players in the football group develop greater emotional wellbeing over time. This includes developing greater confidence and hope in the future, and being able to better manage their emotions.

Increased hope for the future

↑ 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.

↑ I was given opportunities by Arsenal which have led onto other changes in my life.

Better management of emotions

↑ I used to be very angry. When I came to the football group, [the Arsenal in the Community coaches] advised me, and I listened to them because we are friends, family. Now I understand that if someone tackles me it might just be a mistake, but before I used to think it was deliberate. I was a madman. Now I try to avoid conflict.

↑ 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.

↑ 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.

Increased confidence and happiness

↑ In the week after the football, my mood - not that it was better- but it was a

bit different. Because I've done a bit of exercise, I've relaxed my brain, and any body organ unless you exercise it, it becomes an issue. So the fact that I was running on Monday, the following day was more relaxing, so it was helping me to be more positive, so I said, "OK, if I can do football, why not go for English school?" You try to do more to come to yourself, because you wake up on Tuesday morning, you feel more energetic, you want to do something else on that day'.

↑ In the Hub and in the Freedom from Torture centre, when I walk inside I feel relaxed, safe. I'm a different person. When I'm outside I don't feel safe.

↑ You know, sometimes you can spend a week, you don't laugh. Or you spend a week, you don't have people that speak to you. But the hour you spend in there [at the football group], someone will talk to you, someone will make you laugh. It's a huge difference. That's very special'.

Physical wellbeing

Torture leaves significant physical scars and long-lasting effects on the body.

The players interviewed said that thanks to the football group their physical health improved. This included increased energy, improved sleep, and generally feel fitter and stronger – such as a reduction or elimination of physical problems and symptoms of stress (such as headaches).

One player said that the problems with his legs improved until he no longer needed to attend physiotherapy sessions, and a player who had had a stroke said that his gait and balance improved through his participation in the football sessions.

Another player has a physical disability and received individual support initially – but now his health has improved to the point where he is able to join in the sessions along with the others. He sees the football group as having a very positive impact on his physical and emotional wellbeing.

👉 I love playing football, exercise is good for my body. I sleep better.

👉 When I go on Monday I come back home, I'll be tired on that Monday, I will have my shower I'll be tired on that Monday night. But following week I feel more relaxed, I have more energy during the week. But if I miss on Monday, then the whole week I'm so tired.



Connection with the body

The football group helped players to reconnect with their bodies. Most said that initially they had felt that their bodies were not fit enough or strong enough to perform the way they wanted to, with one saying he was initially frustrated at his body being 'inadequate'. However this changed through participating in the football group, and all of the players interviewed developed a belief that their bodies can recover and become stronger.

One player said that playing makes him feel good physically, and that he now feels that he loves his body. There was a sense of being strong when they play, and of overcoming the physical impairments they had previously experienced. There was an overall positive perception of what their bodies are now capable of – giving them confidence to make healthy decisions even outside the football group.



WHY IS THE FOOTBALL GROUP EFFECTIVE?

1. Participants with similar experiences

The football group is open only to Freedom from Torture clients, and this is crucial to its success. They have faced/ are facing similar challenges, which means that players feel comfortable with fellow-players and feel understood. There is tolerance within the group of behaviours that others might find difficult to understand (e.g. over-reaction to certain situations). Players care about their fellow players, and try to help those who are having difficulty managing their emotions.

2. Therapeutic focus of the football sessions

The establishment of a safe environment is a crucial part of the programme, and the feelings of safety which are engendered amongst players enables them to achieve other outcomes. Staff leading the football group make considerable efforts to ensure that the sessions are structured in a way that maintains a therapeutic approach – more than focusing on football ability, physical fitness, or being competitive. This builds and maintains a group culture which prioritises respect and participation. That football is primarily a physical activity means that players can manage how much they communicate with each other, which supports the building of trust and friendships.

3. Partnership between Freedom from Torture and Arsenal in the Community

Each organisation brings their particular expertise to the partnership – and this is central to the success of the project. Neither would be able to facilitate the session alone.

4. Calm and compassionate staff

Staff involved with the group were consistently mentioned by players as being calm and patient in all situations, providing exceptional modelling of positive behaviour, and showing that they care about players and their problems

5. Connection to other opportunities

The connection with other Arsenal in the Community projects is perceived to be an important element in players' ability to move forward, develop new skills and confidence, and have hope for the future.

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 since players can attend sessions knowing what (and who) to expect.



Freedom from Torture

Registered charity: England 1000340, Scotland SC039632.