

Interview with Malia D.

A Survivor Tells of Her Healing

Malia D. is a 39-year old woman from East Africa. She has a Masters Degree in public health and had worked in the area of reproductive health and family planning. In 2000, she was detained by government security officers and accused of membership in an outlawed political organization. She says a relative may have been a member of this organization, but that she herself was not. Nevertheless, she was detained for 27 days, interrogated and tortured extensively. Torture included electric shocks to the soles of her feet, beatings, sexual threats and assault, having icy water thrown on her and being left in wet clothes in a very cold room, and repeated threats of death. She was released after being forced to sign a false confession and a promise to refrain from political activity. Upon release, she was hospitalized for 2 weeks, during which time she was afraid to tell what had really happened to her for fear that the doctors were setting a trap designed to catch her reporting government torture. The torturers told her she'd be killed if she talked.

Malia stayed in the country for several months before getting the opportunity to leave on a visitor's visa for the United States. Once here she applied for asylum, but was denied in her initial interview. She couldn't tell her story. She was referred to the torture survivors program [here called Survivors] by an attorney to help prepare her case for immigration court.

Malia's words are in italics.

It was a blessing in disguise that I filed the asylum application by myself and didn't get it, because if the officer had given me asylum I'd still be a very sick person. But I didn't get asylum and so the lawyer sent me to Survivors.

I didn't realize I was sick. I didn't know I can be cured. I didn't realize the damage done to me.

I had no hope. I didn't think I could ever recover. I thought I'd always be that way. I was breaking down. It affected my thoughts. I no longer thought things positively. The trauma was so great. This torture covered all parts. For quite a long time, it had been part of me. There was nothing else I saw in this world except what happened to me there.

I realized I couldn't concentrate. When I would read, I'd wonder, "Can I ever read and remember?" I held a Masters Degree from a major university. I forgot that.

Malia had been afraid to talk in her first interview with the asylum officer. Treatment started with that.

When I went to the asylum office, I didn't know what to say or not to say. I was still scared. [At the asylum office] the people there are still the government. I'm running away

from the government. My country is a friendly country with the United States. I didn't trust [that the information would be kept confidential].

At Survivors, I was received. You asked me about things I didn't think about. You asked me "Has anybody disappeared?" You're not asking me "What happened to you?" You asked questions for everybody. "Did anyone disappear?" "Did they put a gun to your head?" I liked the personal touch. I started to like Survivors. I started feeling free. I started opening up.

Before, you trust nobody. The only place you can trust is Survivors. That's where you trust. That's where you feel peace, comfortable. This is somewhere you don't have to be watchful. Trust is the first move of healing.

I started feeling, "OK, my mother and father passed away. Now these are my new parents." I started opening up. I've got someone to open up to. My own mother never knew I was tortured. I used to have a very sharp pain in my heart. I used to sit and it would pierce me. I'd come to Survivors just to be here.

Malia began counseling with a psychotherapist working with Survivors, who provided individual and group therapy as well as documenting her trauma for the asylum court.

With my therapist, whatever you talk is confidential. I had come to believe that even my testimony in court would be confidential. I started telling her about many things. Gradually, details of what happened to me came out. Then I felt safe. So when I was talking in court it was not the first time. Slowly I overcame the fear that I had had, "If I say [what happened to me] I'll be killed." It sticks there in your mind, the threats. It's there. "They can get you anywhere." But my therapist and the medication and Survivors helped me to become myself. If I had been to court before going through the healing process, I would not have been able to talk.

At the second meeting of the group with my therapist, people started talking politics. That made me build confidence in this place. Because we were safe to talk politics. You start meeting people. Before, you feel like you're alone. You're the only one who is picked on. Here you meet others from different countries – different places – even people with worse stories, stories of what they've been through, even things to be grateful for. Before, you're in America, but "So what? I'm here, but where to go, who to trust?" America is expensive. \$2.00 for the bus. And people don't talk to each other.

A survivor needs more than a therapist.

A counselor is somebody serious. Sometimes you get fed up with that and sometimes you don't want seriousness. The counselor has a special role, to tell about bad experiences. But there is more than just your case. There's your body. Sometimes you just want a picnic outside.

I got very close to the Survivors' case manager. She'd provide me with hygiene items to care for myself and with tokens so I could travel. Survivors made me comfortable. I could ask for the things I needed. You become free, the way you tell your mother things, personal things you don't want anyone to know. I started feeling that way. I started laughing. My case manager would talk with me and I'd start laughing. I went home to my room, and I'd think about what she said, and I'd laugh and laugh in my room. I wondered if people would think I'm crazy. With her, I'd remember any little thing she'd say.

Sometimes I would just come to Survivors to sit in the reception area. I wasn't coming for anybody in particular. There are places you come, like you go to the beach or the ocean, just to be there. Here I'd come and get peace. I'd feel peace. Here people are jolly. They're happy to see you. Sometimes I'd just come and sit, then I'd go to the fridge and get water.

When Malia went to immigration court, she was able to testify, and she was granted asylum in the United States. She rushed to Survivors to share her joy.

When I got asylum, it was a great step. I was trying to put the torture as a part of life, just like any event. When I got asylum, even before I got asylum, I was feeling better. I had hope.

Treatment for Malia has had many components, in-house and through contracting providers.

Then I started concentrating on my health. Asylum was not the only thing. It was important. But I got focused on health. I wanted to be the person I was before.

I came to accept my symptoms. I understood it was part of the process. I stopped forcing things. When I was forcing I got more sick. When you talk, you understand what happened, and why it's still there. Why should it be with me still, even though it's years ago it happened, you think you're becoming crazy.

When I got the counselor, when I talked to her and my psychiatrist when I explained this, I learned – why I feared the color red, and feared sitting in the back of the bus. When I started talking I realized that what had happened was trying to come out. It helped me to know this.

The pain in my head has gone away. First it reduced. It used to be every 2-3 days. I also used to feel a pain like a needle piercing through my heart – a very, very sharp pain that you cannot explain. My therapist told me “Put your feet on the ground. Feel grounded. Feel yourself. ‘This is me.’” The small things we used to do here - like breathing exercises– made such a difference.

I used to have nightmares. I came to understand that what happened to me stayed in my mind. I was sleeping physically, but my brain was not. After I took the medication, the

dreams became less violent. The nightmares had been long and vigorous. I feel I'm sleeping better now. My brain is calming down. I have no nightmares now.

Malia's feet had been severely damaged by electric shock.

Another important thing was my feet. My feet were very cold, calloused, numb. I didn't know it could be corrected. I wore Dr. Scholl's shoes. I couldn't sleep. I had to put hot water bottles on my feet. Then I went to acupuncture. They found out that the blood is not circulating properly. And the treatments cured this. Acupuncture helped my hand and my feet. I remember when I got those white shoes from the case manager. I never believed I'd wear some like that again.

The acupuncture lady also taught me ways to sit – yoga positions. Stretch to open up the flow of energy and blood. I have to wake up my body.

In Survivors' creative writing group, when I was drawing, and listening to music, that's the first time I cried. I started to feel the heaviness passing away. I had become so hard. I wanted to cry but I couldn't. Now I started crying again.

Getting glasses was important, because my lenses had changed. My headaches got better after I got new glasses. Before light bothered me a lot. Now it's not so bad. I'm heading to be like what I was before the torture.

A visit to a community medical clinic for her physical exam led to a remarkable volunteer opportunity.

The visit to the medical clinic was good. I got an evaluation. Then I got involved at with the clinic. I talked with my doctor. And I told him about my background in demographics and health. He suggested I join the HIV program as a volunteer. I was introduced to the director of that program. The city wanted statistics for a diabetes project. I helped with that. I helped and advised with phase 2 of the diabetes project. They wanted baseline statistics for the United States, the state, the city, and the local clinic. I worked as a volunteer because my work authorization was still pending. The director said to me, "You came at the right time. It was a gift from God." I have a social security card, and receive cash assistance now as an asylee. The work at the clinic has been helpful. I can work, I can remember, I can look at statistics. My mind is working. I'm the woman I used to be.

Nine months after coming to Survivors, Malia put her experience in perspective.

It's a very bad feeling to lose yourself. Nothing matters anymore.

I didn't realize how physically I'd been abused. You know you're damaged, but there is more than you actually thought. How would you know that all this pain is part of something that happened three years ago?

[Through treatment] I came to understand in reality what had happened. That played a big role in my healing. It gave me something – understanding and hope. The more I understand the better I feel. The more I heal.

I'd like to have a video of how I was and how I am now. Before, you just wake up tired. Your body hurts, is numb, in pain, even when you haven't done anything. You feel aches, sick, and you don't know why. Nothing happened to you that night, but long before. You hear people cracking a joke but you don't laugh. What is there to laugh about? Your heart has changed completely.

If I was not at Survivors, if I didn't get help, I'd be like that until I go to the grave.

I'm glad I could recover so fast.

Being healthy, you can organize yourself. Being able to manage your body, being able to take care of yourself. Now I'm working and I feel fine.

Based on how I feel, I'd say I'm recovered 90%. Small things are left – allergies, and sometimes I have trouble concentrating and remembering. I'm going to sign up for acupuncture again. It's gentle. I'll take care of my diet too.

My psychiatrist advises me to take medications for up to one year. In May, I'll start reducing gradually. I feel alive. And I still get many of my needs met at Survivors.

After healing, you feel confident and secure. You just talk. This is a chance for me to be heard. If I can talk, I can even help others. Many have died, but Allah gave me an opportunity to talk. I am grateful to Allah who gave me a second chance. I am very grateful to all those I've mentioned and others too many to name who helped me through this healing process.