



# GPS

GROUP  
PEER  
SUPPORT

## GPS for Refugee Support Pilot Program Impact Report



# GPS for Refugee Support

## PILOT PROGRAM IMPACT REPORT

**Executive Summary 1**

**Background 2**

**Pilot Program Implementation 3**

**Pilot Program Results 4**

**Conclusion 5**

“Before the group, I felt like I was the only one who was having hard feelings around being a refugee, feeling like it’s just me having those feelings but when I heard from friends that they have the same things going on, I felt like I’m not alone.”

— GPS for Refugee Support program participant

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Refugees experience high levels of emotional distress during the process of resettlement. This can lead to high rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>1</sup> Mental health resources that can mitigate these conditions are extremely difficult to secure during and after the relocation process.

For this pilot program, GPS partnered with the 30 Birds Foundation to bring GPS for Refugee Support to newly arrived Afghan refugee teenage girls and young adult women living in Saskatoon, Canada. Twenty of the 200 Afghan girls participated in four online GPS groups over four weeks. All of the participants said that they would recommend GPS to their peers.

#### Other key findings:

- 85% of the participants want to learn how to lead GPS groups for others.
- 79% of the participants felt that GPS’s approach to issues relevant to them as an Afghan immigrant was either good or excellent.
- 93% of participants rated the expertise of the GPS facilitators as good or excellent.

Social support is a crucial ingredient for both physical and emotional well-being. The GPS for Refugee Support program provided a roadmap to emotional stability for the teens and young adults women who participated. By sharing their struggles with others experiencing similar challenges, they broke through intense isolation and increased their ability to integrate their trauma in a cohesive self narrative of resilience, self efficacy, and hope for the future.

<sup>1</sup> Henkelmann JR, de Best S, Deckers C, Jensen K, Shahab M, Elzinga B, et al. Anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in refugees resettling in high-income countries: systematic review and meta-analysis. *BJPsych Open* 2020; 6: e68. [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

## BACKGROUND

The GPS model of trauma-informed, group-based mental wellness support has been successfully utilized with diverse refugee, evacuee, and immigrant populations, including Afghan, Chinese, Hispanic, Mayan, Muslim, Roma, Somalian, and Ukrainian. The GPS curriculum for these communities addresses the barriers to accessing behavioral health care, which range from lack of familiarity with the U.S. healthcare system to stigma about mental health to fears that personal information will not be kept confidential. The curriculum is offered in the languages of the communities being served and is adapted to meet their unique circumstances, including trauma and current challenges. It is also adapted to accommodate each community's culture, including religion and values with a specific focus on community members' lived experience.

In 2021, after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, it eliminated the rights of women and girls. A group of attorneys, human rights activists, journalists, and Afghan expats created the 30 Birds Foundation to evacuate students, faculty and staff from the Marefat School in Kabul, which champions education for girls. The foundation successfully evacuated 450 Afghanistan residents, mostly Marefat students and their families, from Afghanistan and supported efforts to relocate them. Approximately 200 school girls from Kabul landed in Canada. Today, the 30 Birds Foundation provides long-term and comprehensive wrap-around support for these girls including mental health services, mentorship, and scholarships for higher education.

These evacuees were part of a massive exodus of approximately 200,000 people who fled the country in the days following the Taliban's control of the country. Nearly 2,000 came to Massachusetts, and in 2022 GPS partnered with the New England-based Ascentria Care Alliance to support Afghan refugees. That work included adapting the GPS curriculum for refugees to create GPS Sofreh-eh-del/De Shezo Dester Khwan ("Coming together of the heart" in Pashto and Dari). GPS also trained more than 15 Ascentria leaders in the GPS model to deepen the reach of GPS support further into the Afghan refugee community.

In 2023, based on GPS's successful work with Massachusetts-based Afghan refugees, the 30 Birds Foundation invited GPS to design and implement a pilot program offering group-based mental health support for up to 15 Afghan teenage girls and young women. They were informed of the opportunity to participate by the leadership at 30 Birds Foundation and applied to participate. Those interested completed a sign-up survey and were selected by the 30 Birds leadership. Four two-hour GPS sessions were held in August and September of 2023. In this pilot phase of the program, the focus was on understanding how the GPS model would be experienced by the 30 Birds participants. This included building trust between the GPS facilitators, running the groups, engaging in conversation about the basic tenets of the model and exploring social and cultural understandings of emotions and mental health.

In this pilot phase of the program, the focus was on understanding how the GPS model would be experienced by the 30 Birds participants. This included building trust between the GPS facilitators, running the groups, engaging in conversation about the basic tenets of the model and exploring social and cultural understandings of emotions and mental health. Evaluation was conducted at multiple points throughout the pilot program.

Following each session, participants were sent a brief survey to gather information about their experience in the GPS groups. Following the last session, participants were sent a final survey asking them for more detailed feedback on the four group sessions. Finally, they were invited to attend a two-hour focus group to offer feedback and talk about next steps.

## PILOT PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The four groups were an opportunity for the young women of 30 Birds to become better acquainted with the GPS model, the GPS facilitators and each other. They were able to dive deeper into how they experienced their emotions and other experiences relevant to their mental health as Afghan refugees living in Canada.

Facilitators were trained and certified by GPS. Training included one-on-one coaching, apprenticing with an experienced facilitator during a minimum of four support groups, self evaluation, director evaluation, and a progress review. An overview of the participant population was conducted to ensure facilitators understood the unique challenges and stressors that refugees experience.

### Sessions

Session One: INTRODUCTION TO GPS GROUPS | Attendees: 9

Session One focused on setting the stage, developing connection and understanding the purpose of GPS groups, as well as beginning to discuss the participants' experiences and feelings. The group took place on August 16th, the day after the two year anniversary of the fall of Kabul to the Taliban. GPS had a guest facilitator, Tamana Attai, who is an Afghan immigrant herself and a graduate from the Marefat School in Kabul. Tamana shared her own profound feelings of grief and loss. This set the stage for deep sharing by the participants. It was a very powerful start to the series of GPS groups.

Session Two: EXPRESSING STRONG EMOTIONS | Attendees: 11

Building upon the experience in the first session where many girls shared deep feelings related to the memories of the fall of Kabul, Session Two focused on the GPS Guidelines highlighting that it is ok to have feelings in GPS groups and that the expression of strong emotions is a normal human response to stress, hurt and trauma. The GPS Guidelines are a key element in the psychosocial education that the model provides to participants. The discussion centered around normalizing and validating the feeling and expression of strong emotions, discussing specific emotions that the girls might feel including feelings that are sometimes not considered appropriate for girls/women to feel like anger or grief.

Session Three: IDENTIFYING AND NAMING EMOTIONS | Attendees: 11

Session Three began with a deep discussion about the nature of emotions. The concepts of fear and judgment when expressing emotions were raised alongside validation from the facilitators that feelings are a normal and acceptable part of being human. Participants were reassured that emotions that are sometimes seen as negative, like anger, are not "bad" in and of themselves. When we feel sad or cry, this is a normal expression of pain and hurt.

Facilitators shared that when we hold in our emotions, this can lead to further stress and can actually cause physical pain or illness. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was also discussed, and the emotional responses experienced were normalized. Participants were asked to talk about something they were struggling with, to name their emotions if they could, and also to identify where they might be feeling that emotion in their bodies.

Session Four: LESSONS LEARNED AND PERSONAL GROWTH | Attendees: 10

Session Four served as a recap and reflection session on everything that had been learned and discussed in the previous sessions. One feature of the GPS model is the discussion of "Realities" and "Principles". Realities, in the GPS approach, are those experiences in our lives that are challenging, painful and/or difficult. They may include common, community-wide experiences like leaving one's homeland or unique experiences like the loss of a loved one. Part of leading GPS groups is determining and sharing these realities and principles.

### Surveys

Following each session, participants were sent a brief survey to gather information about their experience in the GPS groups. Following the last session, participants were sent a final survey asking them for more detailed feedback on the four group sessions. Finally, they were invited to attend a two-hour focus group to offer feedback and talk about next steps.

## **PILOT PROGRAM RESULTS**

### ***Sessions eased feelings of isolation***

During the sessions, participants developed the following list of realities of their lives. The process of creating the list actively challenged the idea that the girls were alone with their struggles related to being a refugee.

- Life has been hard these last two years.
- Leaving home has been really heartbreaking. We have been forced to leave the security we once knew, our homes, our families and our country.
- We have lost loved ones and worry about people left behind, especially our sisters and other women in our lives.
- We have grieved a lot and had to adjust to everything changing.
- We have not been able to fully feel or express our feelings.
- We have kept so much inside, hidden, even to ourselves.
- We have focused so much on building our future that we have not fully dealt with the past.
- We want to express our feelings but don't know how to do that.
- We want to trust others but don't know how to.
- Learning how to express ourselves, if we were never encouraged to do that growing up, is very hard
- We want to be leaders but don't think we are able or ready to.

During surveys and a focus group held after the sessions were complete, participants shared the ways in which the process of creating a list of realities and talking about their experiences helped them feel less alone with their struggles related to being a refugee:

- “Before the group, I felt like I was the only one who was having hard feelings around being a refugee, feeling like it's just me having those feelings but when I heard from friends that they have the same things going on, I felt like I'm not alone.”
- “The groups were a really good opportunity to express whatever I was holding inside of myself and my feelings. It's very common to keep everything inside, but GPS groups gave us a space to express those feelings and it was really good for me. I learned that it's not something we have to be afraid of or worried about.”
- “GPS is effective because we have the chance to have difficult conversations, because we just need someone to hear us and not judge us. Now, we can feel that other people understand us. We can relate to each other and I feel that everyone participating are my real friends.”

### ***Sessions facilitated a new framework for strengths-based inner dialogue***

Participants created the following list of principles based on their beliefs about what is true about people no matter what pain they may have experienced. The principles are strength-based messages meant to inspire participants and remind them of their inherent worth and resilience.

- No matter how much women have been put down, we are strong women.
- No matter how we have struggled, we have survived. Women are survivors.
- We are smarter than we think and stronger than we believe.
- Although these last few years have been the hardest in our lives, we have also grown so much.
- Sometimes it's the hardest experiences in our lives that make us stronger and wiser.
- No matter what we have gone through and how much we struggle, we deserve respect and love.
- We are not perfect and that's ok.
- Some days are hard and that's ok.
- We can make progress, slip back and get up again and that's ok.
- Even though we struggle, we can be leaders for other women and girls.

### ***Sessions helped participants feel more comfortable advocating for themselves***

During a focus group held after the sessions were complete, participants spoke at length about how saying ‘no’ is not an accepted cultural behavior of girls and women in Afghanistan. They also shared that the sessions helped them understand that behavioral expectations of girls and women can vary according to cultural context and that it is okay to challenge certain cultural expectations if they are no longer serving them.

The primary skill that participants spoke about gaining as a result of the sessions was the ability to say “No.” Representative quotes from the focus group include the following:

- “The best thing I learned from the GPS group was to say NO!”
- “I will remember how to take care of myself and use all of the rights which I have as a human being, including the right to say no. I am aware that I am important, I am valuable, and I deserve to live the way I want to.”
- “I will remember to be real, to respect myself, and I will remember to say no.”
- “One thing I will never forget about GPS is that we would tell ourselves that we are important, that we are valuable and that we deserve to live a good life.”

Participants also spoke about gaining a greater understanding of the ways in which culture shapes behavior. Representative quotes from the surveys and focus groups include the following:

- “I learned that culture affects our beliefs about ourselves and shapes our behavior.”
- “I learned that every culture has something to tell us about women, and as an Afghan girl there was an effect on me from my culture.”

### ***Sessions helped participants better understand themselves***

During the focus group, participants talked about the need to care for their mental health, and the importance of both understanding and being able to express feelings. Representative quotes from the surveys and focus groups include the following:

- “When we are not in a good place mentally, we can not act properly. It’s all like a chain. It’s important to take care of our mental health and our feelings, because it affects everything physically, spiritually, and psychologically.”
- “I learned how to calm myself, by closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, thinking about myself and not anything else. (The GPS group) helped everyone to feel calm and relaxed.”
- “I learned how to put myself in the shoes of other people while listening rather than interrupting or doing anything else while others are talking.”

## **CONCLUSION**

Social support is a crucial ingredient for both physical and emotional well-being. The GPS Sofreh-eh-del/De Shezo Dester Khwan Program provided a roadmap to emotional stability for the Afghan girls who participated. By sharing their struggles with others experiencing similar challenges, they broke through intense isolation and increased their ability to integrate their trauma in a cohesive self narrative of resilience, self efficacy, and hope for the future.

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## **About GPS**

GPS Group Peer Support (GPS) is a mental wellness intervention that mitigates the long-term effects of stress, strain, and trauma. Incorporating elements of mindfulness-based stress reduction, cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational interviewing, peer-to-peer support, psychosocial education, and other evidence-based modalities, GPS is designed for the rapid implementation of essential mental health support during times of stress, crisis, and change. GPS Group Peer Support can be delivered by mental health clinicians or trained, non-clinical staff, faculty or students with relevant lived experience.

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