

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO WORK IN THE MENTAL HEALTH SECTOR?

Port of Call, Mental Health team
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As the mental health team of the Port of Call volunteers, we were curious to learn more about what it means to work in this field. We decided to approach a few professionals of IASIS dealing with mental health issues, and meet them in their work. What are their motivations, their challenges, their values? That is what Mary shared to us, as a psychologist working with mentally disabled people in the boarding house Agios Nikolaos. Also Ippokratis, a social worker coordinating the Intervention in the Community project, described his experience as truly fulfilling. First things first, let's explain their working context.

During the study visits we did while starting our volunteering work, we learned that in the boarding house of Agios Nikolaos, there are 15 beneficiaries with various mental health disabilities. They spend their time participating in activities with the goal of empowering and encouraging them, developing their skills, their self-image and self-esteem and the long-term goal of social or even professional integration to society. Mary is the psychologist of the team and she facilitates one to one sessions with the beneficiaries, as well as group sessions of occupational therapy, psychoeducation, and social skills and communication sessions. She welcomed us for our study visit and we felt admiring of her work and her empathy, which became even more obvious during our interview.



**Mary, psychologist in the boarding house
Agios Nikolaos, Iasis**

Ippokratis, social worker in Connect Your City, Iasis



In Connect You City center, we discovered that the Intervention in the Community is an initiative that started in order to face the needs that arose during the Covid-19 pandemic. This activity aims to assist and support vulnerable groups, such as the elderly or people who are unable to support themselves with psychosocial support, company, entertainment, personal care and hygiene, digital procedures, food and supplies deliveries and other personalized needs depending on the case. The end goal of the Intervention is, again, to reintegrate the beneficiaries back into society and help them be autonomous. What about Ippokratis? He is a very dynamic social worker we met on our first visit. He coordinates all the volunteers' and employees' visits to the beneficiaries and actions in the field, such as gathering food and supplies from the open market. He is also in charge of the communication with the state and other NGOs. By knowing him a little bit more, we discovered how passionate he is.

Why work in mental health?

The answers we got from both interviewees were eerily similar. They both had an intrinsic desire to help people from early on in their lives and as their lives went on, it was something that they would increasingly gravitate towards. Certainly, they took slightly different directions in life, one ending up as a respected psychologist and the other as a very active and hands-on social worker, but their underlying motivations remain inherently the same.

"I've always had an inclination to investigate and learn about human behaviour, discover myself and help others", as Mary said.

A common reward in these professions: the feeling of social usefulness through interpersonal relationships

For both of our interviewees, it is extremely rewarding to help someone and to see a positive change in a person thanks to their work. The feeling they get from it is strong, and it was easy to believe by watching them talking about it. Indeed, Mary told us that "it's amazing to see people facing difficulties and you helping them step by step to discover themselves and reinforce something in themselves, without interfering with their special and delicate way in which they tend to develop, but being with them, supporting them in

this path of growth, is an elating feeling”. And, in our visit we had the chance to experience what she was talking about; they enjoyed our company and we had a great rewarding time with them. It does not necessarily need to be a huge difference for them to get this reward, as Ippokratis explained: “It is the feeling that you get when you see even a small change in a person. Because sometimes a small change is a very big step for someone. And I believe that is the biggest reward”. So the reward of working as a social worker or a psychologist goes way beyond the professional area, as it is also on a personal level: “it gives a positive outlook to the way that you exist and stand in this world, your role here” (Mary).

"It gives a positive outlook to the way that you exist and stand in this world, your role here."

Mary and Ippokratis' approach.

As it may be apparent for some, there are multiple approaches one can have when trying to help people, as people are individuals and there really is no one way to solve every problem. Ippokratis wants to do all that he can to make the beneficiaries of the Intervention as autonomous as possible so that they can “stand their

ground, stand on their own, get into the labour market or try to fix some issues of their life and to move on. To motivate the person and educate them in ways that they will be able to learn more and get more from life, in order to move on and no longer need help”.

At the same time however, Ippokratis was dismayed to mention how hard this end goal of autonomy is. From his perspective, the limits imposed by the lack of infrastructure, social services and support from the state are detrimental to achieving autonomy. In his opinion, the state and all the different NGOs who can offer services have to collaborate and finally be able to support individuals in a holistic way.

Mary is an expert in Carl Rogers' person-centered approach. It's an approach which gives great value to the individual, has great faith in the person and it believes in the natural tendency of people to become actualized. The role of the therapist, according to this approach, is much less interventional, but rather respectful and faithful to the person's natural aptitude to evolve and flourish. It is based on empathy, the quality of the relationship that is built between therapist and beneficiary and the authenticity of the therapist, whose role is to be a companion and stand by the beneficiary in the journey of their life with unconditional acceptance.

For Mary, these are qualities that agree with her personality and characterize her work. In her years working in mental health, she has realized “that people

need very few things to open their heart. They need this quality relationship to unravel themselves, they need to be believed in so that they can bring out their stronger self”.

In the final analysis, Ippokratis and Mary are following different directions in their quest to help people. However, their unshaken belief in the ability of the human spirit to grow, flourish and persevere is strikingly similar. Armed with that faith, they do everything in their power, despite the immense hurdles and difficulties, to nurture it and empower it and finally, to foster the process of self-actualization.

Feeling inspired? Think about volunteering!

Anybody willing to help can support one of those two facilities through volunteering. There is a diversity of activities you can contribute to, so you can probably find something that suits your interests while fulfilling some of the needs.

In the Intervention in the Community project, “the main activity is to help people by visiting their houses and by providing some services, such as food, clothes, or having a small talk for a while, or helping them with digital issues or maybe with transportation” (Ippokratis). This kind of mission is really rewarding, “because you have the chance to directly get from your relationship with the persons”, as the coordinator explained. There is also a need for volunteers to do groceries delivering and to go to street markets and gather food for people in need, which we can say from our experience has a very nice and dynamic atmosphere!

In the boarding house Agios Nikolaos, the volunteers “help the beneficiaries spend their time in a creative and productive way. There are simple activities, like going for a walk with a beneficiary or playing a game with them, and there are more complex actions like forming an education and therapy team, which depends on the skills of the volunteer” (Mary).

Volunteers are very much valued there, “because they come here with fresh ideas, special skills, interests and motivation, which is invaluable to our work. We are an open and extroverted foundation and we try to welcome as much of the outside world as we possibly can”, as the psychologist explained.

If you are interested in helping Mary or Ippokratis, you can contact Iasis by email (volunteers@iasismed.eu), or by visiting the Facebook page Iasis Amke Athens. And for the Intervention in the Community project, you can go to the specific Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/paremvasistinkoinotita>.

For Mary’s interview click [here](#).

For Ippokratis’ interview click [here](#).