In June of 2018, the idea was born to bring an OCD training program to the Recovery House in Karachi, Pakistan. The inspiration was not only to address the scarcity of mental health services there but also to handle a lack of funding and an overall scarcity of knowledge about mental illness. The objective was to manage some of these contributing factors to the lack of treatment options by creating a program to train clinicians in Karachi. Shaheen Ahmed, co-founder and president of the Recovery House, built the connection between the rehabilitation institute in Karachi and the International OCD Foundation. Being from Pakistan herself, Ms. Ahmed is well aware of the obstacles faced by patients suffering from mental health disorders like OCD. When the staff in Karachi asked for help treating patients with OCD, Ms. Ahmed used her connections in the US to get in contact with Dr. Monnica Williams. As a member of the IOCDF Scientific and Clinical Advisory Board and member of the Diversity Advisory Council, Dr. Williams worked with Ms. Ahmed to come up with a plan to train several Karachi therapists in order to treat the Recovery House patients.

At the 2018 Annual OCD Conference, Dr. Williams described the need to help untreated patients in Pakistan to the Diversity Advisory Council. Also at the meeting was Dr. Elizabeth McIngvale, an IOCDF board member and founder of the Peace of Mind Foundation. The Peace of Mind Foundation’s main goal is to increase access of care to effective, evidence-based interventions. This aligned with what Shaheen Ahmed hoped to accomplish as well as with Dr. McIngvale’s knowledge of the many places isolated from OCD treatment around the globe. Following these discussions, the foundation provided the grant to make a training program possible. Dr. Williams was enthusiastic about the partnership and the grant: “It was incredibly exciting and very generous of them. I want to make sure people know what great work the Peace of Mind Foundation is doing in addressing these very real barriers to treatment.”

Three clinicians from the Recovery House were chosen to participate in this training conducted by Dr. Williams and Dr. James DiLoreto, both therapists who treat OCD at the New England OCD Institute. Dr. Williams, who led the effort, is board-certified in behavioral and cognitive therapies and is part of faculty at the University of Connecticut where she conducts cross-cultural OCD research. The online program to train the Karachi clinicians was comprised of two parts. The first part consisted of 12 one-hour training sessions and included a wide range of information on OCD. One session every week was spent going over information about OCD and treatment options like exposure and response prevention; and in the following session that week, Dr. DiLoreto and Dr. Williams consulted on cases the clinicians had in their program. The second part of the training includes weekly group supervision of the participants over the course of six months.

In order to take part in this opportunity, the trainees had to meet certain requirements as well as bring their own OCD patient cases to work through during training. Although the didactic portion is completed, weekly supervision is ongoing for the next few months. At the end of the program, clinicians will receive a certificate of completion from the IOCDF. Completion
is contingent upon participating in all the sessions and successfully treating two patients with OCD.

This OCD training program is a huge step toward determining how well-researched treatments apply to different populations, cultures, and ethnoracial groups, as well as figuring out the best way to treat a wider range of people suffering from OCD. Despite the great amount of research on OCD symptoms and treatment, there is a lack of specific information for many ethnic groups. Dr. DiLoreto spoke to this after working with the clinicians, noting that “There’s not a lot of OCD therapists, knowledge of how to treat OCD, or access to that type of treatment...so [the online training] was something that was really needed.” OCD, along with many other mental disorders, has different presentations and effective treatments specific to the patient’s cultural background. Shaheen Ahmed acknowledged this lack of information for diverse groups and was excited about the training: “When you apply practices in a different environment, culture, support system, etc., the outcomes are different.”

With the conclusion of part one of the training, positive results are already coming to fruition. Dr. DiLoreto said that the clinicians being trained “gained an understanding about what OCD is and were able to begin to pick up certain behaviors that were OCD related in their clients.” Two specific examples he cited that really stood out included one case of a person who would not leave their room but who is now attending regular groups in the treatment program. The other case was someone fearful of contamination concerns who refused to use the utensils provided to eat but has now started to use them. Dr. DiLoreto did point out that progress may be slow at first due to the fact that many people the clinicians are seeing are being treated for another psychotic or mood disorder to which OCD is secondary. However, both Dr. DiLoreto and Dr. Williams are optimistic for more successful results to come as the clinicians continue to become more skilled in managing symptoms in their own patients.

By training clinicians in Karachi, Dr. Williams is hopeful that those clinicians can go on to train others as well, making treatment more accessible to the Pakistani people. The IOCDF offers training in the United States thorough the Behavioral Therapy Training Institute (BTTI), but this is not usually a feasible option for people in some countries. Dr. McIngvale is especially hopeful that with the success of this online training in Pakistan, the opportunity to help others in underserved countries treat mental illness will become a real possibility: “If we can show that this is an effective training intervention, imagine the global impact that can have. We're not just talking about professionals in a mental health clinic that get training, we're talking about ways that we could train education systems, students, future professionals, future mental health professionals in an easily accessible format which is low cost, and I think that's where the key is.”

Regardless of the global implications, this training is definitely providing a much-needed intervention to Pakistani patients now and in the future.

Emma Turner graduated from the University of Connecticut in May 2019, majoring in Psychological Sciences and minoring in Biological Sciences. As an undergraduate, she worked in Dr. Monnica Williams’ Culture and Mental Health Disparities Lab. Emma will be starting work this summer as a clinical research assistant in Dallas, Texas doing research for treatment of PTSD.

Monnica Williams, PhD is a clinical psychologist specializing in cognitive behavioral therapies. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at the University of Connecticut, and Director of the Laboratory for Culture and Mental Health Disparities. She is also the Clinical Director of the Behavioral Wellness Clinic, LLC in Tolland, Connecticut, and she has founded clinics in Kentucky, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

Learn more about the Peace of Mind Foundation at peaceofmind.com

Starting June 1st, simply go to winstonflowers.com and click on “Charity in Bloom” to place your order. With this lovely Winston’s arrangement, you will be supporting the important work of the IOCDF while giving the gift of beautiful flowers.