




REFUGEES AND TRAUMA
- TIPS FOR SUPPORTING

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Trauma and the Refugee Experience

Trauma occurs when there is a wounding to our sense of survival and overall well being; when we are greatly affected by experiences that shake our foundation.




Not only an individual experience – involves family, other relationships, community, culture - needs a psychosocial approach.

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Trauma and the Refugee Experience

Unique aspects of the refugee experience:

- ▶ Multiple layers of threat to wellbeing...
 - ▶ violence, war, death, injury, assault, loss, change, separation, uncertainty.
 - ▶ loss of choice and sense of urgency.
 - ▶ ongoing process – not just one event.



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May experience transformed view on life and new possible future with increased resilience → traumatic growth



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Trauma and the Refugee Experience


Threat to identity and sense of self which can occur at multiple points in migration experience:

- Prior experiences
- Violence and threat in home country
- Violence and threat during migration
- Experience of arrival in new country

What meaning can be made of these experiences?

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Normal impacts from the migration and refugee experience



Suffering:

- ▶ fear, stress, confusion, anxiety, disorientation, sense of loss, lack of trust, isolation, disconnection from loved ones and familiar setting.

Resilience:


- ▶ anticipation, euphoria of change and hope, learning new skills to cope.

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Core Psychosocial Needs

Safety

- a relative *sense* of being out of danger & threat has passed.
- an opportunity to calm, settle & rejuvenate.
- support to have basic needs met.



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Core Psychosocial Needs



Social connection

- access to a variety of kinds of support.
- to engage and build sense of self-competence.
- physical, emotional & spiritual engagement.
- opportunity to contribute to own & others' wellbeing.

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Core Psychosocial Needs

Coping

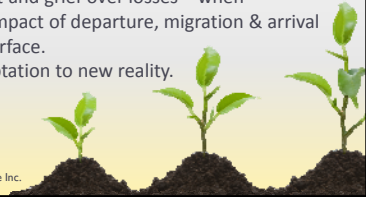
- a chance to explore problems & worries.
- receive information and tools to cope.
- support to use own natural coping.
- assistance with day to day living
 - *Examples:*
 - Language
 - Housing, clothing, groceries
 - Schools, medical attention, banking, drivers' license, transit, etc.
- Cultural differences & nuances – expectations.

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Core Psychosocial Needs

Time

- It takes time to fully *feel* increased safety and trust. Often there are different stages people may go through in first 10 – 12 months after arrival:
 - Euphoria of arrival & new freedom.
 - Disillusionment and grief over losses – when accumulated impact of departure, migration & arrival come to the surface.
 - Increased adaptation to new reality.



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Signs of Struggle

What you may see:

Physical Health challenges

- Stress related physical symptoms → abdominal complaints, headaches and back pain.
- Symptoms due to conditions during migration → lack of nutrition, lack of sleep.
- Children → struggle with sleeping, nightmares, bedwetting, body aches and pain, separation anxiety.

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Signs of Struggle

What you may see:

Psychological and Emotional challenges:

- Hyper-alertness, fear, depression/despair/ loss.
- Nightmares, flashbacks, shut down & dissociation.
- Shame, embarrassment, guilt.
- Concentration, memory difficulties, disorientation.



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Signs of Struggle

What you may see:

Psychological and Emotional challenges continued:

- Sense of inferiority, isolation.
- Children – regression behaviours (thumbsucking, bedwetting, clinging behaviours) aggressive or oppositional behaviour.
- Struggle to trust – especially “authorities”.
- Indirect attempts to communicate and get needs met – has not been safe in the past.



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Signs of Struggle

What you may see:

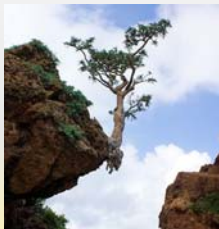
Grieving & Multiple Losses

- Direct loss of loved ones, community, home.
- Separation from other family, friends, occupation.
- Survival guilt and shame → got away & survived.
- Sense of up-rootedness → no longer embedded in own culture, past, traditions & routines.

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Signs of Resilience

Not every individual and family will respond the same way. Each also comes with their own strengths and resilience factors.



- **Pulling together** and caring for each other.
- **Courage** to learn new skills and new roles.
- **Flexibility** to explore new possible futures.
- **Transformed** sense of life and the broader world.

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**Key Capacities Helpers can Strengthen →
Protective Factors**

- ▶ 1. Enhance the sense of safety and ability to take in support.
 - be calm, respectful and compassionate.
 - teach and model skills for emotional regulation.
 - Examples: calm breathing, connect in the present, relax muscle tension, give & receive soothing gestures within family.
 - help individuals and families access resources to have basic needs met.

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**Key Capacities Helpers can Strengthen →
Protective Factors**

- ▶ 2. Enhance sense of self and family identity.
 - provide honest, accurate and understandable information about resources, rights and where to find additional support.
 - speak and behave in ways that take into account and affirm the person's culture, age, gender, customs and religion as much as you can.

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**Key Capacities Helpers can Strengthen →
Protective Factors**

- ▶ 3. Opportunity for social engagement
 - opportunities to be around settled, engaged people to form new relationships.
 - if desired, the opportunity to connect with own culture, traditions and language.
 - opportunities to be physically involved and active – experiencing joy and playfulness.
- ▶ 4. Access to resources for adequate mental and physical health care.

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Recognize when people may need more specialized support

- ▶ People with serious, medical or physical injuries that are impairing functioning.
- ▶ People who are so upset that they cannot care for themselves or their children.
- ▶ People who are at risk to hurt themselves or others.
- ▶ Physical and/or psychological symptoms that continue over a period of time.

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Pay attention to yourself too!



- ▶ Consider your view and approach toward supporting refugee individuals and families. For example, if you see them as victims who are helpless this will shape how you listen and respond.
- ▶ What are your own expectations of how a refugee individual or family will respond to your efforts to support?
- ▶ Continue to learn and be more informed about refugee and newcomer experiences, cultures, and the diversity of ways people will respond.

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Pay attention to yourself too!

Take care of yourself

- Don't work in isolation – stay connected to your supports. Recognize the impact of witnessing another's experience.
- Know your own limits – be honest about your time, training, energy and capacity to follow through.
- Attend to your own life too – continue to maintain health in all areas of life: physical, emotional, relational & spiritual.
- Rest and reflection: this work may change you.
- Are you ready?



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References & Additional Resources

- ▶ Bloemen, E., Vloeberghs, E. (2014) Supporting resettled refugees with psychosocial impairments.
See more at: <http://www.pharos.nl/nl/kenniscentrum/algemeen/webshop/product/264/give-us-some-time>
- ▶ Vargas, Claudia Maria (2007) War trauma in refugees – Red flags and principles, in *Visions Journal - Trauma and Victimization*, 3 (3). 12 – 13.
See more at: <http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions/trauma-and-victimization-vol3/war-trauma-in-refugees#sthash.M0WICxMF.pdf>
- ▶ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2007). IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings. Geneva: IASC
See more at: http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/guidelines_iasc_mental_health_psychosocial_june_2007.pdf

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- ▶ Public Workshops
- ▶ On-site Training
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