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.

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

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?

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.
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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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?
References & Additional Resources


ADDITIONAL EVENTS AND RESOURCES

- Public Workshops
- On-site Training
- Live and Pre-recorded Webinars
- Blog Articles
- Free Monthly Webinar

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