

Refugee Survivors of Violent Trauma

Few of us can fully comprehend the burdens of being a refugee or asylum-seeker, especially one traumatized by war and oppression. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fathom the trials they have faced and obstacles they have overcome just to survive, let alone reach our country safely. Once here, they face a whole new struggle: learning the language and customs of a foreign land.

In reaching out to refugees, perhaps the most important step you can take is to treat them as you would want to be treated in their situation. Those who aid refugees, asylum-seekers and other immigrants offer additional advice:

- **Be kind, patient and sensitive:** Remember that many of them may be suffering from the mental and physical scars of traumatic experiences.
- **Respect their cultural and religious differences:** Cultural competency is vital to understanding their needs and how to address them.
- **Avoid stereotyping:** While there are many similarities among people from the same culture, what is true about some or most from a particular region or country may not be true of all from that region or country.
- **Value their contributions:** Refugees should not be defined by their needs but by the contributions they do and will make to their new communities.
- **Honest is best:** Always communicate honestly, even when doing so is difficult.
- **Understand their difficulties:** While thankful for the opportunity at a new life, they also may feel a profound sense of loss for the life they left behind.
- **Identify helpers:** Encourage them to seek out community resources that can help as they adapt to their new home.

According to health care providers, the process of adjusting to a new culture has four distinct stages: euphoria, negativity, gradual adjustment and, finally, biculturalism. The amount of time spent in each stage varies considerably from person to person, and many never fully integrate. Others, especially children, may move quickly to adopt a new culture, resulting in conflict with their parents or grandparents, who may adjust more slowly.

Life After Trauma

Complicating cultural integration may be the additional barrier of physical and psychological scars left by past torture or other violence. Generally, refugees fleeing persecution hold official refugee status from the local government, but many immigrants without refugee status also faced religious, ethnic or political persecution, as well as other hostile conditions, in their homelands. The result can be an added burden of psychosocial distress, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health problems.

Understanding the nature and impact of trauma can be key to helping them. Many survivors find themselves in unfamiliar and distressing psychological territory. It is common for them to endure intense feelings of isolation, insecurity and fear. Without help, they may turn to alcohol or other substances in an attempt to get relief, which can spark new problems and derail the healing process.

Since each individual's experience is unique, there is no one-size-fits-all remedy. However, the following tips may help you better communicate with those who have been victimized:

- **Listen:** Talking about the experience can help them acknowledge and validate what has happened to them, reducing stress and feelings of isolation.
- **Research:** If the victim wants more information or has other questions, you can help find answers and resources.
- **Reassure:** Survivors often question whether an incident was their fault or what they could have done to prevent it. Support groups can be a great source of reassurance for many survivors.
- **Empower:** Following trauma, victims can feel as though much what happens in life is beyond their control. Aiding them in maintaining routines can be helpful.
- **Be patient:** Every healing process is unique. Try to understand that it will take time, and do what you can to be supportive.

Resources

- **The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**, www.unhcr.org. This UN agency leads and coordinates international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide.
- **World Relief**, www.worldrelief.org. This non-profit provides refugee resettlement, disaster response and other aid at home and abroad.
- **The American Refugee Committee**, www.arcrelief.com. A non-profit that works with refugee communities in 11 countries around the world.
- **U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants**, www.refugees.org. An advocacy group for refugees and immigrants, it works worldwide.
- **World Food Program**, www.wfp.org. This UN agency is accepting donations to support refugees from the fighting in Ukraine.
- **International Committee of the Red Cross**, www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/europe-central-asia/ukraine. The Red Cross has set up a donation site to aid those in need as a result of the fighting.

What is asylum and who is eligible?

Asylum is the protection granted by a nation to someone who has left their home country for fear of being persecuted or harmed. Those who flee their countries seeking asylum do so because of violence, war and the danger that surrounds them. They are often referred to as refugees or asylum-seekers depending on the status of their asylum claim.

A refugee is someone who has left their home country because of the possibility of human rights violations and persecution. They are unable to receive protection from their own country so they seek safety elsewhere under international agreements to offer protection.

An asylum-seeker, similar to a refugee, has also left their home country because of the possibility of human rights violations and persecution. However, they have not yet been legally recognized as a refugee and are waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim.

If you need to seek asylum, contact the UN Refugee Agency in the country you are in regarding your asylum application.

It is important to understand the stages when requesting asylum. When applying for international protection, you will be informed of:

- The procedure
- Your obligations and rights during the procedure
- Time frame to complete the process
- Items needed to substantiate the asylum application (such as documents verifying your identity and nationality)
- Consequences if you withdraw the application

Countries admitting refugees will generally provide protection along with temporary accommodations, food and basic medical assistance. To locate the UN Refugee Agency in your country of interest, you may visit <https://help.unhcr.org/>.

Resources for Ukrainian Refugees

- <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-emergency-resources-refugees>

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