

Trauma: Understanding its Impact and Providing Support ¹⁷

As a sponsorship volunteer, you may have the privilege of spending significant time with the sponsored newcomers and learning about their life story. During your time together, you may find evidence of trauma that has been experienced. This section is designed to give a basic overview of some of the causes of trauma, some indicators that an individual has suffered a traumatic experience, and ways in which that trauma might be re-experienced day-to-day.

NOTE: The purpose of this section is to provide basic information only and it is not intended to replace the advice and expertise of a professional. If you believe that professional mental health support is needed, please *do not hesitate to reach out to the appropriate support services in your community.*

A traumatic event leaves a permanent or lasting memory on the individual who is experiencing it. People who suffer from a traumatic event may continually relive the experience and perhaps try to avoid reminders of it (as reminders can sometimes provoke significant emotional responses). What one individual finds traumatic, another may not, and how that trauma manifests itself is equally as unique and individualized as the person who experienced it.

There are many outward signs that may indicate an individual is experiencing distress from a traumatic event. Some of the most common indicators of trauma are:

- alienation
- isolation
- shame
- self-hate
- externalized racism
- internalized racism
- fear and anger towards authority figures
- low self-esteem

¹⁷ Adapted from “Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence and Islamophobia: A Guide for Educators.” *Islamic Social Services and National Council of Canadian Muslims*. www.issacanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ED-GUIDE-ENGLISH-BOOK-WEB-SEPT-15-2016.pdf

- destructive behaviours (substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, criminality, suicidal ideation)
- aggressive behaviours

Understanding the Impact of Trauma

Internally, trauma may be experienced in some of the following ways:

GRIEF

For some refugees, grief is felt and expressed in complicated ways and may not be easily recognized or addressed. Refugees may be grieving the family (parents, children, or friends) they left behind in their home country and the loss of their daily routine. This grief is more than being homesick and may be too painful to talk about with others. The security of being welcomed by a sponsoring community may provide them an opportunity to express their grief. As a sponsor, you may have the opportunity to create healthy spaces for the newcomer to acknowledge their feelings and to express their grief.

MISTRUST

Refugees who have experienced the devastating impacts of war and persecution may struggle to trust others. They may come to Canada from a context in which it was important for them to be able to identify and avoid ‘enemies’ for the sake of security. This may act as a barrier that prevents them from letting their guard down. To build trust, give refugees time to feel secure and open up (do not expect this to happen automatically).

OBSESSIONS

Extended exposure to precarious living situations may mean that refugees arrive in Canada in “survival mode.” You may observe behaviours that reflect this, such as giving gifts that may not be theirs to give or hoarding items. As a sponsor, we encourage you to help refugees develop a sense of security rooted in the belief that life in Canada will present them with the opportunity to begin life anew.

FLASHBACKS

Mundane actions, sounds, smells, or events can trigger reactions due to past

traumatic experiences. A loud bang from fireworks may sound like a bomb exploding or a gun firing. A fence around a schoolyard may be a reminder of a refugee camp or an internment camp enclosure. If the refugee you are sponsoring is triggered by something reminiscent of a traumatic experience in their past, try to provide a safe space to talk and examine what is triggering the negative action. Having adults, youth, and children write stories about their country of origin, their family, and their life before Canada may be a helpful way of processing their experiences and feelings.

STRESS AND ANXIETY

Refugees may experience high levels of anxiety brought on by trauma, as well as adjusting to a new home and the challenges that entails. Anxious children may be fidgety and have trouble focusing. They may also experience anxiety or panic attacks brought on by triggers or feelings of inadequacy of not being on par with peers due to language and cultural barriers. Understanding, patience, and positive encouragement and offers of help can ease anxiety of afflicted individuals. You and your church group can play a healing role and be a comfort by offering a hand of friendship and companionship as they navigate their way through new school, community, social, and work environments.

Providing Support

The following are tips for helping victims of trauma to healing and wellness.

ACKNOWLEDGE that refugees may be experiencing trauma and feelings of marginalization, isolation, and fear for their future.

RECOGNIZE your own judgments and biases, how they may contribute to how you understand geopolitical issues, and the subtle impacts these may have on your interactions with the refugees.

RESPOND in a timely manner to the needs of refugees when/if they are confronted by discrimination, negative world events, or news media treatment of evolving events that affect them.

RESPECT diversity within school, place of work, and the community.

FACILITATE conversations and interactions between people from diverse

backgrounds, cultures, value systems, and faiths.

PROVIDE SPACE for newcomers to speak about their faith and cultural identity as well as their feelings on world events that impact them.

INVITE speakers who can help you understand the challenges that refugees will face and how racism impacts them, your city, and our county.

INFORM yourself and others about the backgrounds of the refugees. Have a database of information on historical events that have impacted their communities (but do not make assumptions about how these events may have impacted them specifically).

ORGANIZE anti-racism events, human rights days, or cultural celebrations in your church to raise awareness, empathy, and understanding.

REACH OUT and be proactive in seeking out community partners and professionals so that when an issue arises you can rely on the support and experience of others as needed.

PREPARE AND EDUCATE all volunteers working with refugees so you are prepared to respond to their needs and decrease the potential for conflict or crisis.