Recognising and Responding to Trauma Amongst Refugee Populations: Psychosocial Perspectives

Guglielmo Schininà

Head - Mental Health, Psychosocial Response and Intercultural Communication Section

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

gschinina@iom.int
I. What is Trauma?

II. A Psychosocial Perspective

III. Responses and Recommendations
Trauma and Misconception
Trauma

- It means **wound**.
- It is not an event.
- It is not the default consequence of any event.
- Exposure to traumatic events is not a measure of psychological trauma.
- “Not the direct and causal effect of the event itself but the coupling of the event with a subsequent and retrospective **Meaning-Attribution Process.**”
  
  *(Papadopoulos, R.K. 2006)*
Circular (Psychosocial) Epistemology of Trauma

Moreover...

- In refugee contexts psychological trauma is usually defined by the syndrome of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

- *Syndrome*: medical definition tied to social and cultural environment.

- *PTSD*: series of long-term emotional occurrences related with a specific external event. It is the only psychological disorder that has an external event among the indicators.
Limitations of the Individual-Based Model of PTSD

- Most events qualifying for PTSD are not ‘beyond the range of usual human experience’.
- No event is such that exposure typically leads to PTSD. (Kessler et al, 1999)
- PTSD occurs less in well integrated communities than in fragmented ones.
- **Lack of social support is a major risk factor.** (NICE, 2005)
In 2014/15:

- **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - 5 (DSM-5)**
  - PTSD is not an anxiety disorder any more.
  - Symptomatology is kept, but intensity and duration scales are included.

- **International Classification of Diseases (ICD)**
  - Non-specific symptoms are excluded. Complex PTSD is considered (?).
A Psychosocial Perspective
Migration brings threats to identity during all phases of the migration process.

1. Who I am to myself
2. The interiorized social factors
3. How others perceive me

Do not focus on the past, as trauma may have appeared through the migration cycle.
Migration Brings Threats to the Identity Concept

Possible results may include:

- Disorientation
- Confusion
- Sense of instability
- Sense of loss
- Lack of trust
- Sense of inferiority
- Isolation
- Looking to the past, the future, but not the present
Threats to Identity in the Case of Syria

- Deterioration of social relationships
- Forms of violence (verbal, physical, sexual)
- Family separation
- Loss of hope
- Fear and anxiety
- Uncertainty and confusion about the future
# The Framework of Outcomes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUFFERING</th>
<th>RESILIENCE</th>
<th>ACTIVATED DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<td>Individual</td>
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<td>Family</td>
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<td>Groups</td>
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<td>Society</td>
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Assessment for Asylum Seekers: [www.evasp.eu](http://www.evasp.eu)
Resilience Factors in the Case of Syria

- Resilience factors differ between communities, gender and age groups.
- For example, wives who were missing their husbands, identified their resilience and coping mechanisms in:
  - continuing to care for their children and becoming more courageous
  - taking more responsibilities and new roles
  - building supportive relations with other women and the community
  - searching for jobs, showing flexibility and changing future plans due to the crisis (Salmeh, S., 2014)
Responses
When to Refer Clients to Specialized Services

- When they are suicidal and/or self-harming
- When they are violent against others
- When they are unable to function
- When they ask for it

Indicator for inability to function:
- a) being unable to state simple facts of life (name, town of birth, age, name of children)
- b) being unable to attend to basic daily routines in own pace.

BE AWARE:
- Inability and un-willingness are different concepts.
- Threats to commit suicide are always to be taken seriously and immediately referred.
The Identity Concept and Perceptions

- Consider your role in perceiving their identity.
  - How do you approach them?
  - Does your perception of them affect their own self-perception?
Apparent distress may be caused by issues at all levels of the Pyramid.
Recommendations

• Do not stigmatize.
• In the case that a client needs specialized care, refer them immediately to the appropriate services.
• Train yourself on Psychological First Aid and supportive communication skills.
• Familiarize yourself with feelings and reactions that may be normal for migrants to experience in their current circumstances.
• Know that emotional problems did not necessarily develop from one event that occurred in the client’s life, but they could have developed throughout the cycle of migration.
• Do not focus on the negative only, instead look at resilience factors and strengths.
Psychological First Aid (PFA)
Self-Help Booklet for Men

• A self-help booklet for men on how to react to the normal emotional consequences of crisis situations.
• Developed through the organization of focus groups with men who have been affected by the Syrian crisis.
• Men in this context are rarely given attention and special guidance.
• To help them understand precisely that their emotions, stresses, anxieties, anger and insecurities are normal, considering their life circumstances.
• Messages
  ▫ Communicate with others around you.
  ▫ Participate in recreational activities.
  ▫ It is not stress itself that leads to disorders, it is the way one copes with it.
Psychosocial Support to Crisis-Affected Displaced and Migrant Youth and Their Families in Syria and Neighbouring Countries

- Focuses on capacity building for NGOs that are providing psychosocial support, and targeted direct interventions and capacity building in Syria and Lebanon to IDPs affected by the crisis. The project has been funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

- In Syria activities include:
  - Training in PFA for front line workers
  - Training in supportive and non-violent communication for frontline humanitarian workers
  - Training Conflict mediation and community-based mediation for community leaders/activists
  - Training in MHPSS considerations in the daily management of shelters for the displaced for shelter managers
  - Masters Program in Psychosocial Support and Dialogue (two editions) for Syrian professionals working in Syria and Lebanese professionals working with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

- Supported a Recreational and Counseling Center for Families in Baalbeck, Lebanon
  - Aims to raise awareness and provide a safe space to refugees and the host communities.
  - Activities at the Center have targeted women, the elderly, youth and children with recreational activities, artistic mediation activities, educational sessions, support groups, discussion groups.

- A psychosocial mobile team supporting displaced populations in South Lebanon
- A self-help booklet for men
References

• IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (English):

• Psychological First Aid:

• Introduction to Basic Counseling and Communication Skills:
Video: Letter from a Refugee

• “Letter from a Refugee” follows the emotional journey of a group of young Syrian women who had to flee the war in Syria, the stress of separation from family and friends, the difficulties of adapting to their new environment and, ultimately, the discovery of their own inner strengths.

• The video was shot at DARI, a Recreational and Counselling Center for Families in Baalbeck in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, and is the result of a creative self-help workshop – part of an Italian government-funded IOM project: “Psychosocial Support to Crisis-Affected Youth and their Families in Syria and Neighboring Countries.”

• This video was launched on 12 August, 2014 to celebrate International Youth Day and this year’s focus on mental health.

To view “Letter from a Refugee” please go to: http://youtu.be/ApUhm_KLV-g