

Mental health of refugees



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Introduction

Disasters and wars are happening constantly. One sure result is that some people have to leave their homes and countries and become refugees. While many refugees suffer physically from injury or hunger, far more suffer psychological harm. It is estimated that there are 18 million refugees in the world today, and twice that number of persons are displaced within their own countries. In the past, concern has often focused on the deaths, physical diseases and traumas that resulted from wars and disasters but nowadays there is also growing concern about the psychosocial and mental health consequences. Such consequences are not always short-lived; some can last a lifetime and some may even have an influence on the children of those affected. Yet in the midst of these negative experiences there may also be positive signs. Refugees should not be seen as helpless people who totally depend on help they are given. Refugees are often people with strong determination to survive, which is why they became refugees. People who provide help to refugees or other displaced persons should look for the capacity to survive and cope and try to help build up this positive element. In this way refugees and other displaced persons will be encouraged to use their own abilities to help themselves.

What can be learned from this manual?

This manual is intended to help those who work with refugees or other displaced persons to:

- recognize people with high levels of stress and teach them how to cope with their stress;
- understand what “functional complaints” are and recognize and help people with such complaints;
- help refugee women who have been raped;
- understand the mental health and development needs of refugee children;
- understand traditional medicine and work with traditional healers;
- recognize common mental disorders;
- deal with alcohol and other drug problems;
- help victims of torture and other violence.

Who is this manual for?

This manual is written primarily for relief workers, community workers, primary health care workers, primary school teachers and others who provide support to refugees and other displaced persons who have fled war or disaster. These personnel may be working for international organizations such as UNHCR, WHO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies or other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in this field. The whole of the manual will be relevant to many workers while others, according to their responsibilities, will find parts of it useful. It is written in simple language and the reader does not need special training in psychology or mental health. Health professionals may also find it useful, particularly as an aid for training and supervising others. The term "refugees", as used in this manual, should be understood as including all displaced persons.

Adaptation of the text

The manual provides broad guidelines, which should be adapted as necessary to the local culture. It may also be useful to translate the manual into the local language, even if the persons using it know English as a second language. The process of translation will help to put the principles set out in the manual into a form that is relevant to those who will use it, thus helping them to be more effective.

The need for tolerance and acceptance

Relief workers may or may not be of the same religion, culture or social class as the refugees themselves. If they are not, they should be encouraged to be tolerant of other religions, customs and beliefs. In difficult times, people need the support provided by their religions and customs, and relief workers should be aware of this. Refugees have left the security of their homes and they need to feel accepted in their new surroundings.

The mental health of the helpers

Finally, those who work with refugees and other displaced persons need to take care of their own mental health and put the principles in this manual into practice for themselves. A helper who is mentally exhausted cannot help anyone. Refugee workers need leisure time and the opportunity for healthy enjoyment of their life away from their work. The first unit of this manual aims to help workers prepare themselves for their role and help others as effectively as possible.

UNIT 1

Useful helping skills

Learning objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

1. Understand yourself better.
 2. Organize a treatment plan.
 3. Create a safe helping environment.
 4. Build a helping relationship based on trust.
 5. Listen effectively and skilfully probe for information.
 6. Provide appropriate comfort and support.
 7. Encourage self-sufficiency.
 8. Assess the needs of the person you are trying to help.
 9. Develop a plan of action for the person you are trying to help.
-

To provide support and treatment to refugees with emotional difficulties a helper must learn some basic helping skills. This unit teaches the basic skills necessary to communicate effectively.

Becoming an effective helper

To be an effective helper you must first understand yourself better.

Why have you chosen to be a helper?

Ask yourself these questions:

- Why do I want to help others?
- What do I get from helping others?
- How might my personal needs or interests interfere with my ability to help others?
- What strengths do I have that will be useful in helping others?

People who choose to help others are providing a valuable service. Helping can be rewarding but it can also be difficult and stressful for the helper.

People have different reasons for choosing certain types of work. It is important to know yourself well and to understand your reasons for wanting to help. No one helps solely in order to do good for someone else. Often people choose to help others because it makes them feel worth while. Sometimes people have suffered themselves and want to be kind to others to repay kindness that was shown to them.

Some helpers may themselves have needed help in the past and remember what it was like to have no one to assist them. Others may at times have problems of their own and believe that, if they help others, they will also be helped to cope themselves. You must understand your reasons for wanting to help so you can be sure that they do not prevent you from helping others.

It is very important for helpers to have their own lives under control. It can be difficult to sense another person's feelings if your own problems fill your mind.

Who am I?

Explore your personality. Be clear about your values and beliefs.

The following is a list of personal attributes and goals. Try to understand which are most important to you. Number them in order from 1 to 18, with number 1 as the most important and number 18 as the least important. There is no single correct order. Each person has his or her own priorities.

| | | |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| health | friendship | world peace |
| basic life needs | inner strength | spirituality |
| self-respect | excitement | mature love |
| success | family security | wisdom |
| natural beauty | material wealth | adventure |
| minimal stress | satisfying sex | education |

Ask friends or family members to number the items on the list according to what they feel is most important. Compare your lists.

Then ask a young person or elderly person to number the list. Compare the lists again. What did you find?

It is quite normal that people's values should differ. Each person is unique and each has a special way of experiencing the world.

For most refugees basic life needs and family security would be at the top of the list. It is difficult to concentrate on other values until these needs are met.

Personal characteristics of an effective helper

To be an effective helping person it is necessary to have the following personality characteristics:

| | | |
|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| genuine caring | calm manner | sense of humour |
| clear thinking | dependability | honesty |
| common sense | nonjudgemental attitude | self-confidence |
| self-awareness | positive attitude to life | respect for others |
| warmth | flexibility | openness. |

Helpers must fully respect the persons they are trying to help, regardless of values and beliefs. You must recognize the differences between you and the person you are helping, and you must respect these differences.

You are not the judge of the other person's life; rather, you should think of yourself as an invited guest. You have been asked to help, not to take over people's lives.

Helpers should try to empathize with the persons they wish to help. This means trying as best you can to imagine yourself in that person's position and trying to understand how that person sees the world. Ask yourself: How does this person feel about his or her life? How does this person view the world? What is best for this person to do?

Do not assume that you know the way another person feels because that is how you would feel. Each person has a unique life history and a particular set of values, needs, desires and beliefs.

Nine steps to develop a treatment plan

These basic steps will help you develop a treatment plan for those you try to help.

1. Arrange a safe, quiet and private helping environment.
2. Build a helping relationship based on trust.
3. Listen effectively.
4. Probe for information.
5. Provide comfort and support.
6. Encourage self-sufficiency.
7. Assess the problems.
8. Develop a plan of action with the person you want to help.
9. Provide follow-up.

1. Arrange a safe, quiet and private helping environment

Refugees often have to live in cramped quarters without privacy. They have no choice but to adjust to this.

They may not feel that to talk with you is in their best interest. They may be afraid that everyone else will hear about their problems. If they do speak openly, they may run the risk of being talked about by others or of making others resentful or hostile. Knowing that others are listening, they may limit what they say so the helper cannot be sure of the real problem. Being a refugee often takes away a person's self-respect. Whenever possible the helper must help refugees to regain their dignity.

You can usually find a quiet place somewhere to talk. Go for a walk, sit in an empty school or doctor's room, or even go to the washrooms at meal-time when no one is there. Ask the refugee to help you find a place to talk. This will help to build trust and appreciation of your efforts.

2. Build a helping relationship based on trust

You must earn a person's trust through your behaviour. Helpers are not automatically trusted just because they are called helpers. Initially people will speak about their problems only in a superficial way. Over time, as you build trust, they will talk to you more fully. Only then will you really be able to help them.

Approach people gently. Most refugees have good reason not to trust others. Remember to try to put yourself in their position and understand how they feel.

3. Listen effectively

People often begin to feel better simply because they are given the opportunity to talk and believe they are being listened to. Trying to suppress feelings and not speak about them can be the cause of emotional and even physical discomfort. Trying to ignore, avoid or deny emotional sadness or pain causes a great deal of stress. Problems of depression, constant worry, uncontrollable fear, aches and pains that have no physical cause, and many other symptoms can result from feelings being held in and not expressed.

The helper's most useful role may often be to encourage the expression of feelings; to do this you must be a good listener.

How to listen

- Sit facing the person.
- Make eye contact.

- Give your full attention.
- Do not let yourself be distracted.
- Nod your head or say something like “I see”, so the person knows you are listening.

Listening has many levels:

- We can listen to a person’s words.
- We can listen to the sound of a person’s voice.
- We can listen by observing how a person’s body moves as he or she speaks.
- We can listen to silence and note what the person does not say.
- We can listen to the meaning the words have for the person who is speaking.
- We can listen for a person’s feelings.

Never assume that you know how a person feels. Listen to what the person has to say.

Example

An elderly woman comes to a health clinic complaining about a headache. She wants medicine. If the helper listens only to her words, he will give her a pain-killer and send her home.

Helper’s thoughts: I see her hands are trembling. I wonder if this is because of the head pain or something else. I will ask her for more details.

Helper: Please tell me more about the pain. Where does it hurt? Are there times when it gets worse?

Woman: It hurts on the left side of my head. A sharp pain. It gets worse with loud voices.

Helper: When did it begin?

Woman: Last week.

Helper: Tell me about the first time you noticed it.

Woman: I have always been healthy. Other old people have developed medical problems in the camp. Not me. I am strong. I always helped my daughter and her four children. But last week I suddenly had this pain. I stayed in bed.

Helper: Tell me about your life in the last week. Has anything been different?

Woman: Yes. My son-in-law returned after three years in prison.

Helper’s thoughts: Her voice sounds sad and anxious. I did not hear the excitement or pleasure you might think she would feel.

Helper: What is it like to have him back?

Woman: Oh — it's nice.

Helper's thoughts: Again, no real positive feeling. It may only be a coincidence but her headache seems to have begun when her son-in-law returned. This is my guess. I need to ask more about her feelings.

Helper: How will your life change now that he is back?

Woman: My daughter will have to change her ways. We've done everything for the children on our own. We managed to eat and live without his help. He knows nothing about living in the camp. He doesn't know the children. The little one cries when he comes close to her. Everyone in the camp knows he was in a political prison.

Helper's thoughts: Now I know why she has a headache. The pain-killer would not cure this headache. Her son-in-law's return has a meaning I could never have guessed.

4. Probe for information

You need to have a great deal of information to be able to understand a person's real problems. You get this information by asking questions and probing for details.

Information-seeking skills

Probing

Ask questions calmly and slowly. Don't insist. Avoid sounding like an interrogator.

Be thoughtful about what you ask. Think about how the person may feel in answering you.

Let people talk at their own pace.

Questioning

Questions that are closed and require only a yes or no answer (such as "Are you afraid?") provide little information. An open statement that probes for information is more useful — for instance, "Please tell me about what is frightening you."

Leading

Lead the conversation to get information, but continue to follow the person's train of thought. If the person is talking about lack of food, don't immediately ask about the children's schooling. If you want to know about the children, direct the conversation from lack of food to the children's diet and health and then on to their schooling.

Types of information

Everyone has behaviour, thoughts and feelings. To help someone with an emotional problem it is necessary to understand how behaviour, thoughts and feelings contribute to the problem. Probing, questioning and leading can be used to get information about all three areas.

Behaviour

Many people ask for help by talking about a problem of behaviour: "I have a headache", "My heart races", "My child refuses to go to school", "My husband and I argue", "I don't have enough money", "I cry all the time", "I can't think clearly", "I don't want to have sex."

It is easiest for the person to begin by describing behaviour. To understand fully the behaviour, ask for details that enable you to envisage what the person's daily life is like and ask the person to describe the problem exactly.

People may make their problems worse by their own behaviour. You may, for instance, find that people behave in ways that are self-defeating.

Thoughts

Ask what the person thinks about the problem. What really are the thoughts going on inside the person's mind?



Try to find out a person's inner thoughts