

# A Trauma – Informed Approach to Integration

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## *Mental Health & Refugees*

# The Humanitarian Principle of Impartiality

***Humanitarian action:***  
must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.



# Humanitarian Interventions

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- What do you usually think of when you think of humanitarian interventions?
- What is the average length of displacement?

# Today's Refugee Reality: *Protracted Situations*

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- Increasingly protracted situations – in both camps and urban settings.
- The average length of displacement – in both camps and urban settings– is 17 years.
- More than half of the world's refugee are in urban areas.

# The Triple Trauma Paradigm

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**Refugees in our communities:**

are often believed to be  
“in the midst of a chronological interaction  
of three distinct traumatic periods”

# Understanding Triple Traumatization

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1. The trauma of the country of origin
2. The trauma of the escape/  
journey to “safety”
3. The trauma of the relocation process

# Defining Trauma

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## **According to the American Psychological Association:**

is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

## **Another helpful definition in the refugee context:**

a rupture of the continuity of life

# The Trauma of the Country of Origin

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- Oppression
- Discrimination due to an identification with an “undesired group” –frequently via the refusal of basic human rights, employment, housing, medical care, etc.
- Targeting: receiving threats, being watched, being forced into hiding
- Torture – which could include: beatings, death/injury of family members, detention, isolation, mock assassinations, rape, and starvation





# Understanding Triple Traumatization

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## II. The trauma of the escape/ journey to “safety”

- Individuals may be forced to leave their families, friends and possessions with minimal warning or time to plan and gather valuable belonging and legal documentation.
- Some immigrants may experience extreme travel conditions as a result of walking expansive distances, being locked in enclosed places, having minimal food and water, and ensuring fluctuating climates
- Due to the dangers that many immigrants face during their journey, many become victims of crimes such as robbery or rape, but frequently have minimal (if any) resources to access legal services.



# Understanding Triple Traumatization

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## The trauma of the resettlement and integration process:

- re-traumatization by a hostile legal system, poverty, social isolation, forced family separation, and a loss of a social role
- face trauma-related symptoms which they may not make sense of if they do not receive mental health services and therefore could add to their level of stress.
- loss of family identity, community and culture
- challenges of adjusting to a new job, language, “changes in familial and gender roles,” and not knowing the social structures of the host country cause further isolation
- fear of retribution and continuation of conflicts from the country of origin
- Immigration policy, bureaucratic and confusing systems to navigate, and deportation
- Anti-immigrant attitudes





# The final trauma...

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## Integration and the mental health considerations...

*“Put a roof over my head and then I’ll tell you what my psychosocial needs are.”*

*--A refugee from Bosnia Herzegovina*

**...and why I would advocate for a mental health informed approach to trauma.**

# Negative Impacts of Trauma include:

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## Chronic stress fundamentally changes the way the cells work:

- High rates of depression and PTSD are a response to chronic and multiple di/stress factors in an environment. Chronic and multiple-stress factors, such as unemployment, lack of access to medical care, etc. aggravate distress
- Anger is a key outcome of trauma
- Traumatic experience is an underlying cause of chronic disease, including:
  - 1) *Overall poor health,*
  - 2) *Chronic disease: cancer, diabetes, heart disease*
  - 3) *Chronic pain: back pain, neck pain, migraines*
  - 3) *Death*
  - 4) *Diet and obesity*

# Positive Impacts of Trauma include:

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## High levels of resilience

*What is resilience?*

the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences.

## Post-traumatic growth

*What is post-traumatic growth?*

- In short, the transformative power of suffering
- Positive psychological change that is the result of the struggle with challenging life circumstances
- A change in the understanding of the world and one's place in it



# A Trauma-informed Approach to Integration:

Seeks to create healing environments for those who have experienced the world's mass violence.



## KEY COMPONENTS *of a healing* ENVIRONMENT?

- Where have you seen examples of this during your encounter here in Rome.
- Where have you seen examples of this this in your home community?

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Throw  
kindness  
around  
like confetti