

# **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.

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UNIT 1

# Useful helping skills

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## ***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*

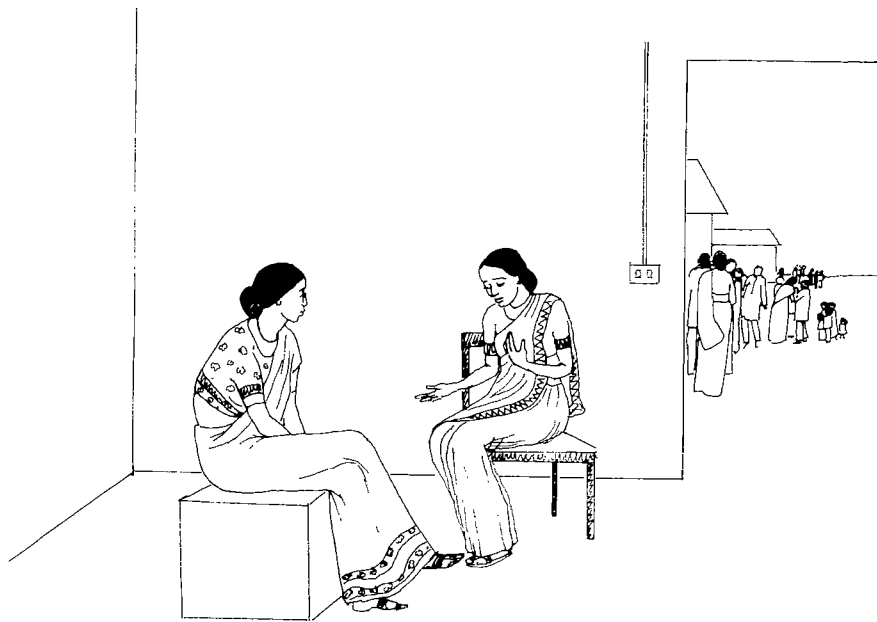
Many people ask for help by talking about a problem of behaviour: "I have a headache", "My heart races", "My child refuses to go to school", "My husband and I argue", "I don't have enough money", "I cry all the time", "I can't think clearly", "I don't want to have sex."

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**

Many people constantly talk to themselves in negative terms. They say: "I can't do it", "I am a failure", "I am no good", "I am stupid."

---

### **Example**

A young widow comes to talk to you and complains, "I cry all the time."

*Helper first asks about the behaviour:* Tell me about when you began to cry so frequently.

*Widow:* After my husband died I cried, but then it stopped. Recently I tried to train for a job and I didn't get the job. Then I began to cry all the time.

*Helper:* What are you thinking when you cry?

*Widow:* I think that my life is terrible and it can never be better.

*Helper:* Do you think there is anything you can do to make your life better?

*Widow:* I think that I am too stupid. There is nothing I can do.

From this you learn that this person's inner thoughts have led her to convince herself that she is incapable.

---

### *Feelings*

It is very important to try to understand people's feelings. People should be encouraged to express feelings openly. This is often difficult because many cultures discourage expression of feelings in this way and people believe they must always appear confident and strong.

If you provide a safe environment, appear caring and listen closely, most people will eventually open up about their feelings. Once they realize that expressing feelings is permitted, the feelings often come out like a flood. Encourage the flow but be careful not to overdo it. People who seem to be saying too much should be slowed down, but be careful not to silence them completely.

People will tell you their feelings and may often show them as well. They may cry or get angry or show frustration or stress. This is good and should be encouraged. Holding those feelings inside can cause emotional and physical problems.

It can be stressful for the helper to listen to a person expressing emotions in this way. Stay calm and resist the impulse to try to make the person feel better at once. First, the feelings must be expressed. This is not the time to make a plan for improvement or to give advice; it is the time to listen and probe for information. It is no use being too logical; feelings are not usually based on logic.

If the person begins by describing behaviour, start there with your probing. Next move on to finding out what the person thinks and eventually find out about feelings.

---

**Example**

*Young man:* I can't sleep at night. I need pills.

First the helper examines the young man's behaviour.

*Helper:* How long have you had difficulty sleeping?

*Young man:* One month.

*Helper:* Is it difficult every night?

*Young man:* Most nights.

*Helper:* What is different on the nights you can sleep?

*Young man:* I keep the lights on all over the house.

The helper tries to understand the person's feelings.

*Helper:* Tell me what you feel when you lie in bed.

*Young man:* I feel tired.

You can see from the response that the helper asked about feelings too soon. The person was not yet ready to share his feelings. So the helper asks about thoughts.

*Helper:* What thoughts do you have as you lie in bed?

*Young man:* I think about when the soldiers came and took me into detention.

The young man becomes tearful. The helper makes a comforting statement.

*Helper:* Those must be painful thoughts to have night after night.

*Young man:* Yes.

More tears. The helper wants to encourage the young man to express his feelings. The helper does not want to make him feel better yet, but wants him to feel that someone empathizes with his pain.

*Helper:* I know it can be difficult to share such painful feelings. Take your time. When you are ready, please tell me more about what you feel.

*Young man:* I lie in bed and listen for every sound. The quiet is scary. Little noises are scary. I start to sweat.

*More tears.*

*Helper:* What frightens you the most?

*Young man:* I think the soldiers will come again and this time they will kill all of us.

---

### **5. Provide comfort and support**

There are many ways to let people know that you hear not only their words but also their emotions. Your genuine emotional response is the most powerful way. If you feel tearful, don't try to hide it. Many of the feelings and stories of refugees are very sad.

How to provide comfort and support

- Use a kind and gentle voice.
- Your body can show your interest and caring. Sit close, but not too close, and lean towards the person.
- Offer a tissue for the person's eyes or a drink of water.
- Show concern in your facial expression.
- If appropriate, touch the person's arm to show concern.
- Respond to how the person feels, not to how you feel. If a man tearfully tells you the story of his forced move to the refugee camp, listen and comment, "I can hear how sad it was for you."
- Take care that your show of concern does not make the person feel uncomfortable and stop the flow of emotions.
- Many times a person will feel tremendous relief after speaking openly and knowing that someone listened and cared.

### **6. Encourage self-sufficiency**

Helpers should encourage the self-sufficiency of those they want to help. Although you are available to help at a difficult time, your usefulness is temporary.

You should show that you have confidence in their capacity for self-help. Many people feel uncomfortable if they are in need of help. If you behave in a way that implies you think you know what is best, you can make people feel even more incompetent.

Feeling dependent or helpless can make people angry and resentful and this makes problems worse. Most refugees had normal lives before they had to move. You should express respect for the fact that the person has survived a terrible experience and belief that, although this is a difficult time, the person possesses the strength for self-help. Help people to find their strength again. If you do things for people, or tell them what to do and how to do it, you are communicating a message that you feel they are incompetent. Help people to help themselves. There is an old proverb:

*If I give you fish you eat for a day.  
If I teach you to fish you eat for a lifetime.*

### **7. Assess the problems**

Before you can develop a plan of action you need to assess the problems. Spend some time thinking about what the person has told you. Often the problems presented to you initially are not the only issues to be considered.

- Consider the person's behaviour, thoughts and feelings and how each contributes to the problem.
- Consider the person's life situation and the practical difficulties to be faced in making the change that is needed. Some ways of tackling the problem may not be available to the person because of poverty, restriction of movement or physical risk due to political conflict or other reasons.
- Consider the person's family and community. What impact do other people have on the person you are trying to help?

After considering all this information, try to make a first assessment of just what the problems are that need to be addressed.

People's feelings about their problems may change after their conversation with you. When you next see them, ask how they now view their problems. What do they now think are the problems that need to be dealt with?

Be flexible with your ideas. Both you and the person you are trying to help need to have a similar understanding of the problems so that you can work together to develop a plan of action.

### **8. Develop a plan of action for the person you want to help**

*State the problems clearly*

The assessment should have helped you both to define the problems clearly. State the problems that need to be worked on.

*Determine the goals*

Clarify the goals that the person is trying to reach. For example, the person you are trying to help may state the problem as: "I am always tired." Ask what the person's goal is. The person then may respond, "I want to have enough energy to cook dinner for my children."

*Decide which problem to tackle first*

If there are many problems, put them in order of priority and work on one at a time.

*Set up the plan of action*

You and the person you are trying to help should discuss possible ways of working on the problems. There are many ways to reach a goal. As you help people, offer them ideas and encourage them to come up with others. People should choose the course of action that is best for them.

Discuss how it will feel to succeed. People are often afraid to feel good or to succeed in achieving their goals. Examine both the benefits and the problems that success will bring. Ask how the person's family and community will feel if he or she succeeds. Other people can have a tremendous influence. The person may be worried that success may have both positive and negative effects.

Try to find out what people will do if their plan fails. How will they feel? How will they boost their confidence to try again? What will they do next?

You may be tempted to give specific advice and tell people what to do, especially if a person specifically asks, "What do you think I should do?" Be careful. People do not really want to be told what to do. Often they are stuck in negative patterns and need help to see alternatives. A person needs to be able to choose how to proceed. This will also encourage self-confidence.

*Written record*

It is often useful to write down the plan of action. Some people benefit from having a copy of a written plan. Here is one way of writing a plan of action.

**Plan of action**

Name: . . . . .

Date: 2 August 1995

Follow-up: Meeting with helper in one month to check progress.

<i>Problems</i>	<i>Goals</i>	<i>Improvement plan</i>
1. Daily headaches	To reduce the number of headaches	Do relaxation exercises every morning
2. Loneliness and isolation	Make one friend	Each morning spend at least 15 minutes with a neighbour
3. Daughter behaves aggressively towards other children	Improve daughter's behaviour	Watch daughter at play with other children! Show her other ways to behave when she becomes upset. Enrol her in preschool.

*The person takes action*

The person now uses the plan of action as a basis for working towards self-improvement.

**9. Provide follow-up**

The type of follow-up will vary from case to case. In some situations you will need to meet the person regularly. Setting up a schedule of meetings is part of the plan of action. People need to know that you are dependable and that you will see them regularly. In other cases you will see the person only occasionally, possibly only once. Try to set up a plan of action that the person feels confident in doing independently.

Sometimes it is better to have fewer goals so that the person is more likely to be successful. The feeling of success often helps a person to be more ambitious the next time goals are set.

When people recover it is important that they feel that their own efforts gave them success. This way they will feel confident to help themselves in future. If they praise your efforts and not their own, their self-confidence will not improve. Your most important goal is to help people to help themselves.