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## UNIT 8

# Helping victims of torture and other violence

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### **Learning objectives**

After studying this unit you should be able to:

1. Recognize the problems and symptoms that may occur in other people who have been tortured or who have suffered other forms of violence.
  2. Recognize the effects that torture or other abuse may have had on you. Learn how to deal with the memories of these painful experiences so that you will find it easier to help others.
  3. Organize groups with other refugee workers to discuss your experiences in helping people who have been tortured and your feelings while helping these people.
  4. Help these people through individual or group support.
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Torture takes place in about one-third of countries. Torture means the infliction of physical or emotional pain, anguish, agony and torment in order to obtain information or to change the views of the tortured person. Torture methods are designed to force the victim to do what the torturer wants. Physical techniques include all kinds of beating and electric shock. People may also be deprived of food, water, sound or light, or submerged in water. Or they may be tortured with other kinds of violence and physical and sexual abuse. Psychological techniques such as false accusations, threats of death or fake executions are used to confuse the victim and break down resistance. The most common consequences are psychological ones such as fear, depression and nervousness. The person who has been tortured may experience difficulty in concentrating, may be unable to sleep or may have nightmares. These problems usually start immediately but in some cases they may begin months or years after the original torture. They may last for a long time.

Many refugees have also suffered other forms of violence, which may have been as severe as torture. They may have lost one or more family members and may even have witnessed their death. Some may have been wounded or physically disabled. They may have seen others starve or may have been bombarded during their escape.

### **How to recognize people who have been subjected to severe forms of violence**

Everyone who suffers painful and very hurtful experiences reacts physically and emotionally in a similar way. They are not sick or weak. Usually they will get better with time. Here are some common reactions to severe violence:

- Some people think about the painful experience all the time. Some may even feel as if they are undergoing the same experience again and again. They may see vividly the violent event or torture.
- Some people feel sick and experience pain. This may lead them to visit a health worker more often than in the past. (See Unit 3.)
- Some have difficulties with sleep; they may be unable to fall asleep or they may wake up very early. (See Unit 2.)
- Some have bad dreams and nightmares.
- There may be loss of interest in life, loss of energy and a feeling of tiredness all the time. This can lead to difficulties with work or with daily tasks.
- Some people have problems with eating; they may eat too little or too much.
- Some lose interest in sex.
- Some have poor concentration, poor memory or tell the same story again and again.
- There may be a tendency to become angry about little things or change moods quickly.
- Some people feel afraid, nervous or jumpy.
- Some feel guilty about being alive when others have died.
- Some show no interest in other people or in their families.
- Some people avoid situations or discussions that remind them of the painful experience.
- Some drink too much alcohol or take drugs. (See Unit 7.)

Most people who have been tortured or treated violently show some of these symptoms. Someone who has suffered severe violence or torture may have most of these reactions. Every person is different and some people can tolerate suffering better than others, but any person who complains about several of these reactions will probably need extra support. This unit will help you to help these people.

### **How to recognize in yourself the effects of having been treated violently**

Many refugees have gone through similar difficulties. Maybe you are a community health worker, a religious leader or a local healer and you realize that you have suffered the same kind of violence as the people around you. Because of this, you may even find it hard to listen to other people who want to talk about their problems.

People may expect that they can come to you for help at any time. Maybe you share this view. Perhaps you have been in this position in your community for many years. Of course, your own life may have changed because of the trouble or the disaster that made you flee your homeland.

To find out whether you also need support, ask yourself some questions about your past since you left your home.

- Have you had an opportunity to talk to others about your experiences?
- Do you have such an opportunity now?
- Are you able to recall what happened to you and your family without crying or getting angry?
- Do you ever have a chance to relax after long days of work?
- Can you be pleasant and nice with the people you work with and with family members?

If your answer to most of these questions in "No", you may have had a difficult time. This will make it hard to support others who have lived through similar hardships.

To find out if supporting others will be difficult for you, ask yourself some further questions:

- Do people seem too ill-at-ease in your presence to talk about the violence or the torture they have endured?
- When people discuss their experiences with you, do you find it hard to give them your full attention?
- Do your thoughts often wander and you feel as though you are not really there?
- Do you get very bored, tired, annoyed or restless?

If your answer to most of these questions is "Yes", it may be wise to organize some kind of support for yourself.

***How to help yourself and others to recover from violent experiences***

If you want to support others, it is best to solve your own problems first. When you have dealt with your own hardships you will be better able to support others. This section explains how to set up a support group for yourself and other refugee workers in your camp or area. You can use such a group to support other refugees who have suffered torture or other kinds of violence. This section also explains how to counsel individuals.

In some situations almost everyone has experienced violence or torture. This can be the case, for example, after a war. In these situations a group approach may be the best way of helping people. You can still give special attention to individuals who had an experience that was not shared by many others, or who have taken part in group sessions but still continue to have serious symptoms.

**How to set up a support group for colleagues**

Invite some colleagues to form a mutual support group to exchange experiences in dealing with victims of violence. If your culture permits, the group should include both men and women because they often deal with their problems in different ways. The members of the group can come from different professions or backgrounds. Your group might include a nurse, a local healer, a local chief or a religious leader, a doctor, or a teacher, for example. A good size for a group is between 6 and 10 people.

When the group first meets, the members should know clearly their reasons for coming together. These may include:

- To give one another the opportunity to talk about the past.
- To gain experience on how to deal in a group with the effects of torture and other forms of violence. Later each member can start a separate group to help other victims of violence.
- To learn from one another's experiences about effective ways of helping people who have suffered.
- To allow group members to talk about their feelings in dealing with victims.
- To learn to respect confidentiality. What you tell each other must remain within the group. Also respect confidentiality when supporting other people later.

In the first or second session the group members can discuss how the group should be organized and how its meetings can best be fitted into the local routine. For example, meetings may be held weekly and last between 1 and 1½ hours. Group members can take turns in leading the meeting.



**Invite some colleagues to a mutual support group to exchange experiences in dealing with victims of violence**

Once you know one another a little better, spend one meeting on group relaxation exercises (see Unit 2). Each subsequent meeting should start with these group relaxation exercises.

At the next two or three meetings discuss stress and people's reactions to stress. The following text may be helpful. With the other group members you can adapt this text to your circumstances and then make copies of it. Later the copies can be used for group and individual counselling.

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***Text to use in counselling victims of violence or torture***

What has happened to you is so terrible that anyone with the same experience would have the same complaints. Most people who undergo extreme stress, for example, in an accident, war or rape, react automatically. Usually they react very well and do what is necessary to escape or to survive. When the danger is over they may feel shock and find it hard to believe that they have escaped. They may tremble and feel fear, anger or grief for hours or days. It is very

comforting to have someone to reassure you and tell you it is all over and that you are safe.

Then you start to go over the experience. Often you do not want to be reminded of what has happened. You go on living as you have always lived. Or you do not want other people to talk about the past. At other times it is as though all the terrible things are happening again. You remember everything, you see all the details before you, and you feel unhappy, afraid, humiliated or angry. Most people are worried about this process of not remembering anything and, then, remembering everything.

People may change. For example, a man may be irritable all the time although before he was always a likeable person. He may avoid contact with other people although before he liked to chat, play games or dance. Or he may drink too much or take drugs, which he never did before.

If you have been tortured, remember that torture is used to damage the personality. Torturers often try to frighten people by telling them that they will have difficulties with sleep or with sex. If you have been frightened like this, remember the words of the torturer. Under torture, victims can enter into a state of mind that later makes them think the threats may be real for the rest of their lives. Remember that the torture was not your fault. You do not have any responsibility for what happened during the torture.

The group sessions will help you to digest the painful memories little by little, just as you take your food in small pieces so that you can digest it more easily. It is normal to have problems like nightmares, painful memories, irritability and crying. Do not worry that you might be going crazy because you have never felt like this before.

Some people explain their hardship with ideas from their local culture. They may say that their problem is caused by witchcraft, or by the anger of spirits, or their Supreme Being. Or they may think that they have lost their soul, or that they are being punished for something they did either in this life or in a previous one. This way of looking at your problem will not help you.

Everyone experiences more or less the same problems after such hardships. Some people feel ashamed or guilty, perhaps because they were humiliated, perhaps because they imagine that they could have saved others, or even because they are still alive. Some people even feel like a traitor despite all the suffering they have been through. But most of them could not have done otherwise and they did the best they could in the situation. Some people were forced to do bad things in the past. In that case it is best to go through the proper ceremony or ritual to pray or to make a sacrifice in order to obtain forgiveness and prevent the anger of the spirits or the Supreme Being.

These sessions will help you to feel better in the future. Many people all over the world have found comfort and support in this way. Their memories of what happened have become less painful and less frequent. You will also be able to enjoy life again, even though at first it may only be from time to time. But to feel better, you will also have to go through some hard times. You will have to face the painful past before you can get rid of it.

From time to time you will still hear stories or see things that will remind you of the horrors you have gone through. But slowly you will begin to feel better. Think of your problem as an old wound with a lot of dirt in it. To heal the wound you have to take out the dirt. This may hurt a lot, but only then can the wound close

and a scar form. Sometimes the scar still hurts. It can hurt by itself, or because the weather changes, or because somebody puts pressure on it. But the scar is also a good thing — it prevents more serious illness and it will protect you in the future.

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At the next 10 meetings or so you can discuss each other's experiences with violence and how they have affected your lives. The group members can help one another to feel the emotions linked with the painful events. After 10–15 meetings the group members may want to continue the meetings until they feel that they have had enough opportunity to tell their own stories. Telling a story several times helps a person pick up the threads of life again. Make sure that sooner or later each member gets the opportunity to talk about the past.

During these meetings you can use the various techniques mentioned in the other chapters of this manual. As well as breathing and relaxation techniques or physical exercise, it is important to find some forms of recreation.

To help others, start similar groups with victims of violence. Run the groups along the lines of your colleague support group. Again, use the various techniques described in this manual. The colleague support group can continue to meet from time to time to provide help.

### **How to help individuals who have suffered serious violence**

It has been explained above that it is better to use a group approach if you work in a situation where many people have had painful emotional experiences, such as after a war. Sometimes, however, an individual approach is better — for instance, if the victim's experience is not shared by many others or if the person has already been a member of a group but still has serious problems. Some people feel so frightened by group meetings that it may be good at least to start with individual counselling. For some people, their position in a community or political movement may make it impossible for them to talk in front of others about the violence or torture they suffered. It would be best to help them individually.

This section outlines a step-by-step approach to supporting individuals with serious problems. You will probably need between 10 and 15 sessions. However, psychological and social problems can be so complex that the person who seeks help may need more sessions. Each session will take 40–45 minutes. For the first three sessions ask the person to bring along one or more family members or friends.

This part of the unit is not simple. It would be a good idea at the beginning of each session to repeat to yourself what you are going to do in the session.

**Plan for individual support sessions**

## Session 1

**Goal:** To create a relationship of trust and faith with the person needing help and with the family members or friends who have come with him or her.

At the first meeting try to make the person feel at ease.

Find a quiet place where other people will not interrupt you. Give your name and say what your job is. Make sure you have at least 45 minutes free to talk. Listen carefully with all your attention so that the victim of violence and possibly the family members can speak openly. Show respect. Treat the victim with dignity and understanding. Say that all you are told will be kept confidential. Show that you care about the person seeking help. Ask questions when you are not sure what the person means. Simple questions are best, such as "What happened then?" or "What did you feel like when that happened?" Help the person to express feelings or talk about the past by nodding your head, by saying "I understand" or by asking simple questions. It is very important that you let the person talk first, without trying to give advice or solve the problem.

First allow the person seeking help and his or her relatives to explain what happened. Let them tell the whole story. They should tell you what they did, what emotions they felt, what they felt physically and what they thought, especially at difficult moments. It may be useful to take a few notes, especially when people talk about their complaints and symptoms. When they have finished their stories, use the list of 14 common complaints on page 111 and note how many of those complaints are present.

To end this session, tell the person that you will meet together once a week another 10–15 times. Say that many people like to talk about what happened to them. Say that at the end of the sessions the person will still have problems and will still be preoccupied with the past. But he or she will be able to go on living and pick up the threads of life. Thank the other family members or friends for coming and tell them that they will also be given information and advice. Then make the next appointment.

If people seeking help have many social problems, first help them to sort out their problems and get their lives in order. This may take one or two extra sessions. You can help them individually to solve their problems by making a list of what they think are the most serious and the least serious problems. Help them to think of different ways to solve their problems and to decide on the best way to solve each one. Encourage them to take action and see how it works. Talk about the positive aspects of the action. In this way, those seeking help will learn to have more confidence both in themselves and in you. They will start to feel they have some control over their lives again.

## Session 2

**Goal:** To enable the person seeking help to learn relaxation techniques.

Teach the relaxation exercises described in Unit 2, page 25. It may take several sessions for people to learn to do the exercises without your help. If there is a tape recorder available, they can listen to a tape of the relaxation exercise twice a day. After a week they should be able to do the daily exercise without the tape. Do the relaxation exercises at every session. If possible, the victim of violence should continue doing the exercises even after the series of sessions has finished. You can teach relaxation exercises to individuals or to groups.

If possible, also teach some simple massage techniques or encourage the use of massage techniques known in your culture (see page 27). This may be especially helpful when partners have trouble talking with each other or have difficulty with sexual relations. Explain to them that massage helps a person to relax and that it gives new strength to both body and soul.

## Session 3

**Goal:** To provide information about stress and common responses to stress.

Explain what stress is and how people react to stress (see page 16). Read the text that you used at the meetings of the colleague support group. Give a copy of the text to the person you are helping or give a tape recording of the text if the person has a tape recorder or can borrow one. The person should either read or listen to the text repeatedly until he or she is able to repeat the important parts to a family member or friend.

Then ask the victim of violence and the family member or friend if they recognize in their own lives some of the things mentioned in the text. Take care that the partner gets an opportunity to express views about the problem. Ask whether the partner and other family members feel that this problem affects them (such as through violence at home) or affects their environment (such as through alcohol abuse). Thank the partner or friend for coming. At the end of the session, write down the problems mentioned by the family members or friend and the person who came for help.

## Session 4

**Goal:** To identify the most frightening moments.

Let the victim of violence tell the whole story of what happened. Ask what the most difficult periods were. The answer may be "When the war started", or "When the drought came", or "When the soldiers started shooting", or "When they tortured me" or "When we had to leave our land". Most people will mention two or three difficult periods. Write down the answers.

Next, mention the first difficult period the person told you about. Ask whether during this period there were any especially difficult or agonizing moments. People may mention one moment or several moments. Write these moments down. They may be, for example, “When they blindfolded me”, “When he took out his knife” or “When I heard the planes coming”. Then for every one of those moments ask the following questions and write down the answers carefully:

- What did you do at that moment?
- What did you feel in your body?
- What else did you feel? (If the person does not answer, ask, “For example, did you feel afraid, or angry, or powerless, or ashamed?”)
- What did you think?
- What did you hear?

People may become emotional in replying to these questions. This is good. It helps them to relive some of what happened. If a person hesitates do not hurry. Some people need time to talk, or to cry, or to be silent. After this pause, you may say that you understand that it can be difficult to find words for what has happened. Ask whether the person wants to carry on with the session.

Then take another difficult period that has been mentioned. Again ask about the most difficult moments. Write down the answers. For each moment, ask the same questions: “What did you do?”, “What did you feel?”, “What did you think?” and so on.

Then ask whether one particular period was more difficult than the others. Write down the periods in order of the most difficult, the second most difficult, and so on.

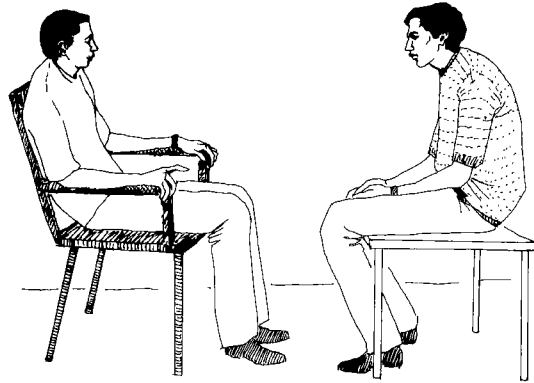
At the end of this session, express in your own words your appreciation of the person’s courage in talking about these experiences.

#### Sessions 5–7

**Goal:** To change the effect of the violence or torture on the life of the person.

Tell the victim of violence that during these sessions both of you will go back to the painful periods mentioned in the previous sessions. It will not be easy, but being cured is like the healing of an abscess — it hurts to take the pus out but then one begins to feel better and the abscess disappears.

First explain that, if the experience of remembering becomes too painful, the person can take a pause. All the person has to do is lift one finger, or a hand. Demonstrate this by putting your hand in a resting position and raising your first finger a little, or raising your hand.



**The refugee can use the finger signal to indicate he wants a pause**

Ask the person you are helping to relax in the way learned earlier. Then go back to the least painful moment of the most difficult situation which you wrote down during the previous session. Help the victim to cast his or her mind back by reading the details that you wrote down about that moment. Use the present tense, as if it is happening now. From your notes talk through what the person does, feels, thinks, hears, smells and so on. For example, "Again you are in your cell. The footsteps are coming. You think, 'They are coming to fetch me to torture me.' You feel afraid. You feel them slap your face . . ."

If the person signals that he or she wishes to pause, say, "Let the images slowly go away until you don't see them any longer. Continue breathing and relaxing the way you have learned until you feel at ease." When the person is relaxed, take up the memory at the point where you stopped when the person gave the signal. After you have gone through the whole difficult situation again, ask the person to relax once more. Then repeat the process, talking through the difficult moment from beginning to end.

Again ask the person to relax. Ask whether the confrontation was less painful the second time than the first time. Then ask whether the person still felt tense as you repeated the episode. Say that it is better to repeat the exercise again until the tension feels less. Talk through the difficult moment again. Afterwards ask whether the tension is reduced or perhaps has almost gone. If the answer is "Yes", ask the person to repeat the following words: "It is all over and it is all finished. I can let go of it. I am free of it."

After you have gone all the way through this moment three or four times without the person having to stop you, take a more painful moment from that most difficult period and do the same thing. Keep doing this until you have gone through all the painful moments of that most difficult period. In one session you can go through one, two, three or four moments of one difficult period. After the session, tell the person that he or she has succeeded in completing the most difficult part of the healing process. Say that if he or she goes on like this, the counselling sessions will soon be completed.

### Sessions 6 and 7

In the same way as in Session 5, confront the person with the other two or three difficult periods that you noted down in Session 4.

### Session 8

**Goal:** To help the person to stop avoiding certain situations or other people.

Tell the person that you will have two or three more sessions together. Explain that in the future the person will sometimes feel disturbed again. Say that this is normal, like an old scar that has healed but sometimes hurts again.

In this session find out what other problems are troubling the person. Focus especially on things that the person would like to do but is afraid of doing. Write down the answers. If the person does not mention a problem, repeat the text used in Session 3. Read the text slowly. Ask the person seeking help to stop you when you mention something that is difficult. Again make a list of the problems mentioned. Then ask what is the least difficult and what is the most difficult problem. For instance, the least difficult problem may be to walk through the camp and the most difficult problem may be to leave the camp to work on a vegetable plot because it makes the person think of bombardments or mines.

First suggest an exercise to help with the least difficult problem. Start this first exercise during the session. Start by doing the relaxation exercise and then leave your counselling room or meeting place together. If the least difficult problem is to walk through the camp, walk together through the camp. Do this for at least 20 minutes. Then get the person to go through the relaxation exercise for at least 20 minutes before going home. The person must repeat the walk, followed by the relaxation exercise, every day. At first the person may do the walk with a partner or friend, but after one or two weeks it must be done alone. If the person agrees to try to do these things every day with a friend and eventually alone, make a new appointment for three weeks later.

### Session 9

Take the next most difficult problem. Do the same exercise as in Session 8. The person seeking help should continue this again for another three weeks. If necessary, a further session can then be held to deal with a third problem.

### The final session

**Goal:** To spot setbacks. To integrate the difficult, painful experience in the person's life and, if possible, find a meaning for it.

Explain that this is the last session. Express your appreciation for the way the person has been able to face up to the difficult past. Give assurance that the improvement will continue gradually and that setbacks will usually be overcome without help from anyone. Recovery from setbacks usually takes a few hours or at most a few days. After that time anyone who still feels unable to carry on alone can make another appointment with you.

The victims of violence or family members may feel that some ceremonies, prayers or offerings are necessary. This may help them. They may want to join a group of people who have had similar experiences or who share a political goal. That would be a good thing to do. Remember, it is important for the person to find a useful role in life.

Tell victims of violence that people sometimes discover that suffering has had some positive effect, even though at that moment they may find it hard to believe.

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## UNIT 9

# Helping victims of rape and their communities

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### **Learning objectives**

After studying this unit you should be able to:

1. Describe the problem of rape among refugee women and girls.
  2. Recognize and assist victims of rape.
  3. Help the refugee community discuss the problem of rape and learn not to blame the victim.
  4. Speak out on behalf of rape victims for better services and programmes.
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Rape is a form of sexual violence commonly committed against refugee women and girls. It can occur in their home countries, during their flight, or in refugee camps when there is no protection. Sexually violent acts such as rape are very frightening experiences for female refugees. Some of those who are raped find the experience so traumatic that they commit suicide. Rape affects the life of the victim and her family as well as the community in which she lives.

### **Some facts about rape and rape trauma**

- Rape is a violent and forceful act. It is commonly committed against refugee women and girls.
- Rape should not be considered primarily as a sexual act. Men who rape women and girls do so to gain control and to show power. They may be angry and want to hurt someone.
- Rape and other forms of sexual violence are against the human rights of refugee women and girls.
- Any refugee woman, of any age, may be raped. She may be over 60 years of age or younger than nine years.
- Refugee women and girls may be raped in their own countries, in camps in the first country they arrive in, or in the country where they finally resettle.



**Rape should not be considered primarily as a sexual act. Men who rape women and girls do so to gain control and to show power**

- Men who are supposed to protect refugee women and girls are sometimes those who rape them.
- The rape of refugee women and girls is often planned in advance.
- Rape has serious harmful effects on refugee women and girls. It can change their lives.

Rape takes place in all countries of the world, against females of every race and every social and economic class. Statistics show that every five minutes a woman is raped. Many women do not report rape. Rape is often not a means to

sexual satisfaction. Studies suggest that it is most often used as a way for men to show their power over women. This applies particularly to refugees, as after war men are more likely to feel the need to regain power and control. Rape is only one form of violence against women. Other forms include family or domestic violence.

Female refugees may be raped at any time during their flight. They may be raped by pirates, border guards, patrol-men, other refugees, and “cayottes” — men who are paid large sums of money to help refugees flee illegally to other countries. The cayottes may rape women and girls in exchange for safe passage. They may do this instead of, or often as well as, taking money. In refugee camps women may sometimes be forced to have sex with men in authority in exchange for food rations and other necessities.

### ***Men can be raped too***

Men can also be raped. Men and boys may find it difficult to admit that they have been raped. They may feel that they are weak because they were not able to stop the rape from happening. They may not know that many other men were also raped.

Make sure that men can talk to a male counsellor in private. If many men come forward you could set up a support group for male victims of rape.

### **How to recognize rape victims**

Refugee women and girls are often discouraged by their culture or religion from revealing that they have been raped, or from openly discussing their experience. This means that the problem remains hidden. When the problem is kept secret, it is difficult to help the victim. Try to meet privately with the person you think may be a rape victim. If possible a female refugee worker should do this. If the woman or girl is ashamed or unwilling to discuss her problem, ask discreet and indirect questions.

### ***Some ways to identify rape victims***

- Study background materials and refugee stories describing the circumstances of the escape. This information will help you to identify situations where rape may have occurred.
- Look for signs of post-traumatic stress. These might be nightmares, loss of appetite, sadness, fear, confusion or isolation. Sometimes the rape victim will talk about suicide. (See Unit 8.)
- Look for signs of physical violence on the victim. Sometimes the husband or other male family members may physically assault a rape victim because they believe she is no longer clean.

- Meet with the family to find out whether they have noticed a problem.
- Keep close contact with community members and leaders to discover whether a young girl or woman is being kept in isolation or whether people talk about her in a disapproving way. This may indicate that she is a rape victim.

Unfortunately for the rape victim, when the other refugees in the camp learn of her experience they may speak ill of her. The relief worker should meet with elders, religious leaders and other community leaders to find out whether there are rumours and disapproving talk about a refugee woman or girl who has been raped.

### ***Some reactions to rape***

Depression is a common reaction to rape, but the rape victim may also experience some of the following emotions:

- feelings of shame and disgrace or of humiliation (loss of face in the community);
- guilt about having brought disgrace to the family;
- anger;
- a feeling of resignation to fate or destiny;
- constant thoughts about her problem;
- self-isolation or isolation by her family;
- fear of strangers;
- nightmares or inability to sleep;
- poor appetite;
- lack of hope about the future or fear of change;
- fear of the future;
- helplessness;
- feeling dirty and soiled.

### **How to help rape victims**

- Respect confidentiality by keeping information private in all rape cases. Strict confidentiality is essential. If the rape victim feels that a counsellor or relief worker cannot be trusted, the victim will suffer and the relief worker will not be able to do the job properly. For example, relief workers should be very careful not to tell a story that a rape victim may think is her own

story, even if they do not mention her name. The rape victim, and other women, may feel that the relief worker cannot be trusted to keep their experiences secret. This may discourage other victims who have not yet told anyone of their experience from coming forward.

Confidentiality means not telling other people the victim's name and not disclosing her identity. Written information or files on the victim must be kept locked away from others. Some rape victims may prefer not to tell their stories to the relief workers, or even to their husbands and families.

- Recognize that rape and other forms of sexual violence against refugee women and girls are common. Women and girls who have been raped may not wish to talk to other people about their tragedy because they feel they have become shameful.
- If the victim has contracted a sexually transmitted disease or is pregnant from rape, make sure that she attends a medical facility or health centre. Do not force her to make decisions but make it very clear to her that she needs professional medical help.
- Show your support and care for the rape victim. Listen to her stories. Do not make moral judgements about her.
- Allow the victim to talk when she is ready to do so. She will talk when she feels she can trust you. Do not push her into making decisions.
- Do not make the victim repeat her rape story many times.
- Find ways to end the social isolation of the rape victim.
- Discuss your feelings with other relief workers to share experiences.
- Organize support groups for rape victims and for yourself. Everyone needs someone to rely on for emotional and social support and understanding.
- Help the authorities to prepare leaflets or general written information in the languages of the refugees. Information should be available to everyone. Not only female refugees, but also men, will become better informed about rape and sexual violence in general.

#### ***Four steps to treatment***

Once there is enough evidence that a young girl or woman who has experienced rape is suffering from its consequences, the following steps need to be taken to ensure that she receives attention and treatment:

**Step 1.** Explain to the rape victim that what happened is not her fault. This is especially important for those women who, because of religion or culture, believe that this tragedy happened to punish them for something bad they had done.

**Step 2.** After the rape the victim usually thinks that she is unclean and bad. In some cultures people feel that a woman's value lies in her virginity, modesty and female "cleanliness". In these cultures it is commonly believed that rape makes a woman less valuable and leaves her unclean. To help change such beliefs and attitudes, seek the help of religious leaders. For example, they could help the victim by performing special religious cleansing ceremonies and by praying for, and with, her and her community.

**Step 3.** Encourage the victim to express anger at the rapist. Blaming the rapist may stop her from blaming herself.

**Step 4.** Teach the victim some ways to avoid being raped in the future. After dark it is safer to go in groups rather than alone. Refugees should try to set up a system for reporting men who attempt rape to the proper authorities.

### **Very severe trauma**

The trauma of the rape victim is sometimes so severe that its effects cannot be relieved in a short time even with emotional support and medication. Only continuous attention until the victim feels whole again will be successful.

Relief workers may discuss the following steps with a trained counsellor to agree on a more intensive approach to the victim with severe trauma:

**Step 1.** Ensure that the rape victim has access to a trained counsellor with whom she can meet for at least one hour a week.

**Step 2.** The counsellor should work in a team with a trained female health worker or welfare worker of the same culture as the rape victim.

**Step 3.** The counsellor and the refugee worker should work closely with other service providers, members of the community and religious leaders so that all learn to deal sympathetically and skilfully with rape victims.

**Step 4.** The refugee worker and service providers should cooperate to find useful activities for the rape victims. Most refugee women say that doing something that meets their own or their families' needs for survival keeps them from thinking all the time about the rape.

Men who have witnessed the rape of family members also suffer trauma. They need help to overcome this trauma.

### **Support groups**

One way to help rape victims is to organize a support group. The members of the group meet together to support one another and help break down the isolation that each individual feels.

The group should be encouraged to meet frequently. Group activities should be things that the group members find interesting and worth while, and that occupy their minds with positive thoughts. This will prevent them from always thinking about their rape. They will feel reassured that they can still do useful and necessary things. Also, the support group will help each woman to stop feeling like a victim and to start feeling positive about herself and her contribution to the work of the group.

A support group could include both rape victims and women who have suffered in other ways but have not necessarily been raped. The group can discuss individual problems, but opening discussions should focus on the group's general needs rather than immediately dealing with rape or other forms of abuse. Once the group members feel at ease with each other, the group leader may introduce a general discussion about sexual violence against women.

The group should meet once a week if possible. Meetings should be both informative and interesting, so that the women will want to attend. The women themselves should agree on a convenient time and place for the group to meet. Meetings of the support group can also be used to train its members or improve their skills in activities such as sewing, reading and writing, women's health and nutrition, and ways of earning money.

Support group meetings should not be used for counselling or psychotherapy. Usually the relief worker will be able to learn, either directly or indirectly, about group members' medical or psychological needs. The relief worker can do this by listening to discussions during training and other activities. A variety of training models and exercises may be used in support group meetings.

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**Points to stress during treatment**

1. Victims of rape and other forms of abuse are not responsible for the rape or abuse.
  2. The victims are not alone. Many other women have overcome their abuse and are leading normal lives.
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**More suggestions for relief workers**

You will often have to refer rape victims to health or welfare professionals for help. It is important that you know what resources exist in the camp and how to guide victims to the person who can help them. Some rape victims will need help from a trained counsellor to overcome their emotional problems. Do not try to provide intensive emotional counselling yourself. Your role should be:

- to help break the social isolation of the rape victim;

- to help the victim understand the problem;
- to help the victim stop blaming herself;
- to encourage the rape victim to become an active member of the women's community;
- to ensure that victims have access to services that meet their needs discreetly.

These five activities will help the victim gradually recover from the emotional and social scars of rape.

The rape victim may think of you as a member of her extended family. She may also see you as her only link with the outside world. Recognize this and maintain a warm and caring relationship with her.

Do not write notes about the rape victim in her presence. Refugees may believe that the information is going into their files and may prevent them from being resettled. Try to take notes as soon as the rape victim leaves. Do not rush her when she is meeting with you.



**Help the rape victim become an active member of her community**

## **Notes for camp administrators**

### ***Coordinating efforts to help rape victims***

Relief workers and people providing services in the refugee camp should organize discussions of the problems of rape victims and of ways of improving services for them. One outcome of these discussions should be a list of steps to go through when working with rape victims. The list should be prepared with the cooperation of refugee counsellors, relief workers and trained refugee interpreters to make sure that the suggested steps are culturally acceptable.

### ***The role of religious leaders***

Religious leaders can do a lot to help rape victims and to change negative attitudes towards them.

- Arrange meetings with religious leaders and community volunteers and helpers to discuss the problem of rape.
- Seek their help to stop negative attitudes towards victims and their families.
- Discuss the possibility of having special prayers and meetings for rape victims and their families. These meetings could be led by religious leaders in the community.
- Community leaders, including religious leaders (priests, mullahs, monks or other religious figures), must be made aware of their importance in the healing process of rape victims and their families. They can educate the men to be compassionate, and help change negative attitudes towards the victims.

### ***Preventing the rape of refugee women***

Relief workers, officials and representatives of nongovernmental organizations should together prepare guidelines for action when rape is reported in the camp. Host governments should also be included in planning the response. The guidelines should include a set of instructions for relief workers to follow when rape or sexual intimidation is reported. The procedure should be made known to the refugee women and their communities. They should know whom to consult when rape occurs. This is in itself a preventive measure against rape.

Service providers and mental health counsellors can do a lot through public education and advocacy to draw attention to, and deal with, the root causes of rape. Because refugees themselves do not hold positions of authority, they rely on higher authorities for assistance. Sharing information with policy-makers and decision-makers will enable them to help prevent rape becoming a continuing problem in the refugee community.

***Some guidelines for collecting information on rape***

1. Keep records on the number of refugee women and girls who have been raped. Also record the number of rapes occurring each week or each month and each year.
2. Make sure that information is general and does not in any way identify the victims.
3. Call together a "protection group" of professionals, service providers and camp authorities to meet regularly to plan and manage a systematic way of protecting against rape in the refugee community.
4. Encourage higher authorities to prepare articles on rape and sexual violence for newspapers and other communications media, and to prepare information for human rights reports.
5. Try to arrange for officials of the host country to be included in the protection group and to report their activities in assisting rape victims. Ask that representatives of international agencies follow up their agreements with host countries and other authorities in writing.
6. Tell others success stories about rape victims who have overcome their problems.
7. Do not house rape victims separately. This will draw negative attention to them in the community.

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## UNIT 10

# **The organization of services that promote the mental health and well-being of refugees**

This manual is primarily for workers in camps for refugees or other displaced persons. It aims to help them to deal with the mental health problems of persons who have fled their homes and, in many cases, their countries also. It does not deal in detail with broader issues, largely because it was felt that the potential readers would not be in a position to take decisions affecting the running of the camp as a whole. However, it may be worth while to give here a few suggestions about how life in a refugee camp might be organized to take account of people's mental as well as physical needs. These ideas are mentioned with only brief notes rather than detailed suggestions about how they could be implemented. In part, this is because methods of implementation have to be geared to specific situations in refugee camps, to structures that are already set up and to the predominant culture of those living there. For this reason, mechanisms have to be found to encourage the refugees or other displaced persons themselves, as far as possible, to take charge of those aspects of camp life that affect their mental well-being. If refugees are to take charge, this means they should have a powerful say in what is done. It may mean leaving some things completely in the hands of people from within the refugee community.

The point of this is not just to ensure that what is done is culturally appropriate. Obtaining broad participation and giving a say to the refugees or other displaced persons prevents the harmful sense of helplessness and enforced dependence which can drain their energy. The refugees themselves, if encouraged, will bring up their own ideas of things that can be done, and although these may seem difficult to accomplish they should be considered and possibly tried. In a situation of demoralization, lack of resources and lack of access to things that used to be a normal part of life, some refugees may become violent and commit criminal acts, taking advantage of weaker and more vulnerable people in the camp. By encouraging mutual support groups and possibly providing the means for them to meet, morale can be raised and measures put in place whereby people can protect each other. If people see that they have some power to control their lives and environment, they can be encouraged to improve both their camp environment and their health. This can produce a circle of benefit whereby as refugees see that they can actually improve things, their feeling of power grows and they feel encouraged to take on more challenges.

The provision of employment is of course very difficult in camps for refugees or displaced persons, and usually only very few persons will be able to get work. However, the provision of tools and materials for cultivating or building can allow people to do things for themselves. Refugees and other displaced persons can be encouraged to organize their own leisure-time activities, and again a small amount of resources may be provided to make it possible for culturally appropriate activities to take place.

Although it may be administratively easier to divide up families, providing one set of accommodation for men and another for women with their children, every effort should be made to avoid doing this. Some way of allowing families a little privacy, if only by hanging clothes or mats between the spaces allocated to them, may also help. In all these matters, of course, the refugees' own wishes, customs and suggestions need to be taken into account. Although families should be kept together, thought should be given to allow for the organization of crèches and day care for children. This can possibly be done using a rota system whereby parents share the responsibility of care, taking turns in looking after a group of children. This allows parents to have time to do things away from their children.

During the first influx of a large number of refugees or displaced persons, the physical demands for food and shelter are greatest. It is tempting for assisting agencies to continue to be preoccupied with these matters, forgetting that once these needs have been attended to — even partially — mental health needs are of equal importance. The raising and maintaining of the morale of the refugees and other displaced persons become concerns that should never be ignored. A small investment in this area will pay enormous dividends, not just for mental health but for physical health as well.