

Advocating For Trauma-Informed Circles of Care in Working with Youth Survivors of Torture & War:

Trauma Talks Conference

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Learning Objectives

- 1) Understanding the impact of pre-migration and migration trauma on youth settlement and rehabilitation
- 2) Identifying post-migration challenges around navigating social services as a newcomer youth
- 3) Identifying best practices in advocacy work with newcomer youth, using anti-oppressive and collaborative frameworks

CCVT Mandate

“The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT) aids survivors in overcoming the lasting effects of torture and war. In partnership with the community, the Centre supports survivors in the process of successful integration into Canadian society, works for their protection and integrity, and raises awareness of the continuing effects of torture and war on survivors and their families. The CCVT gives hope after the horror.”

-www.ccvvt.org

CCVT Programs & Services

- One-on-one Counselling
 - Support Groups
 - Settlement Services
 - Crisis Intervention
- Referrals
 - English Language & Computer Skills Courses
 - Public Education
 - Volunteer Program
- Children & Youth Program

Who is a Refugee?

A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..."

- The 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

What is Torture?

According to the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and Punishment, the term "torture" means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as:

- obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession
- punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed
- or intimidating or coercing him or a third person
- or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other **person acting in an official capacity**

-Part 1, Article 1, 1987

What are Some Impacts on Individuals?

- Chronic physical pain
- Sensory impairment
- Scars, burns
- Untreated, persistent injuries
- Anxiety
- Panic Attacks
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Avoidance of persons or places
- Memory loss
- Exile
- Hopelessness
- Social isolation
- Phobias, complex pronounced fears
- Sleep disturbances
- Loss of appetite
- Marked irritability, aggressiveness, outbursts
- Inability to experience pleasure
- Loss of sense of meaning
- Flashbacks
- Guilt
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty establishing trust
- Restricted range of affect

What are Some Impacts on Communities?

Trauma exerts a fundamentally *disorganizing* effect on families

Entire communities can be *collectively traumatized*

Historical trauma arises from identity and shapes identity

“Both the individual victim and precipitating social causes require treatment and remedy...the trauma will remain chronic when the factors that brought it about remain intact”

– Ignacio Martin-Baro

Some Notes on Conceptualizing Trauma

Trauma as “wound” or “soul wound” - Eduardo Duran, 2006

Trauma as not necessarily “outside the range of usual human experience...”

Trauma as a complex continuum - Bonnie Burstow, 2003

Trauma can be **mitigated with support** and **exacerbated by stressors** (e.g. immigration status, poverty, racism, access, underhousing)

Some Common Barriers Faced by Survivor Youth

- Language
- Poverty
- Complex trauma histories
- Racism
- Under housing
- Separation from systems of support
- Assumptions about cultures/communities
- Loneliness of exile
- Shifts in social locations (disempowerment)
- Navigating bureaucracy
- Precarious immigration status
- Lack of access to appropriate services
- Concern for family back home
- Xenophobic discourse

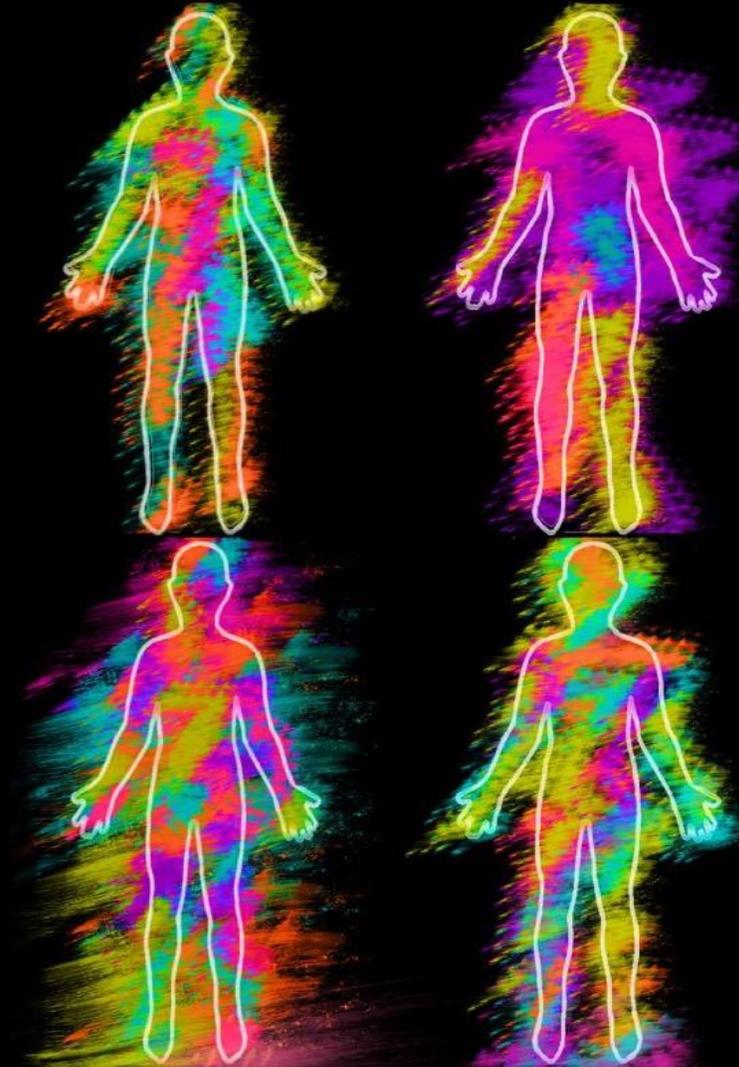
The Youth Voice

*“I would like people to know that **mental health** and the **immigration process** are actually really connected. I feel there are a lot of people who do not realize this...how it affects the individual and also the families of the individual, and how it changes relationships.”*

- 21 year old youth refugee claimant; living with precarious status in Canada since 2010

in·ter·sec·tion·al·i·ty

noun - intersecting social identities such as age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, class, social status, immigration status, sexual identity, experiences with authority, violence, etc., shape our uniqueness and inform our complicated relationships with power, privilege and oppression. Intersectional approaches invite us to value the diversity of those around us rather than make assumptions.



Is It Possible to Reframe How We Explore Impact?

How can we tell our stories in ways that both:
illustrate our strength and make us stronger?

“Any mental or behavioural act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impede, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or the conditions that make such acts possible, **may be understood as a form of resistance**...Further, any attempt to imagine or establish a life based on respect and equality, on behalf of one's self or others, **including any effort to redress the harm caused by violence or other forms of oppression, represents a de facto form of resistance”**

–Allan Wade, 1997

Skillful conversation can also explore some impacts as strengths, eg. exceptional survival skills, resourceful, enhanced understanding/compassion for oppressed peoples, passion for social justice, reimagining, a critical realism, tightly knit communities, perseverance, ways of making meaning ...

Case Studies

- What are some ways this post-migration experience might intersect with pre-migration trauma?
- What sorts of advocacy interventions would you pursue with either of these clients? How might you work to approach this collaboratively?
 - How could this experience have looked differently if a trauma-informed approach had been used?

Towards Anti-Oppressive Trauma Work

- Acknowledge power dynamics
- Contextualize trauma within a socio-political context
- Challenge deficit models; eg. survivors as passive victims
 - Avoid pathologizing discourse
 - Resist dehumanizing trauma narratives
 - Build upon acquired wisdom
- Foster skills of co-investigation, collaboration, curiosity
 - Address needs as expressed by youth

What can “help” look like?

- Ask!
 - Avoid paternalistic/condescending language and attitude
 - Establish clarity about roles and nature of relationship
 - Foster holistic models of support
 - Resist oppressive systems which exacerbate trauma for asylum seekers
 - Build trust – consistency, empathic, validating, encouraging, confidentiality
- Empower! Acknowledge strengths, resiliency, facilitate opportunities for community leadership
 - Avoid asking question that don't serve the person (eg. for your own curiosity/intrigue)

What can “help” look like?

- Encourage participation in physical exercise
- Provide access to reliable sources of information
- Facilitate opportunities for creative expression
- Encourage language development however possible
- Support (re)engagement with fun, activism, intellectualism, leadership, community
 - Seek opportunities to strengthen family unit if at all possible
- Become familiar with community resources and act as a bridge if/when you can
 - LISTEN!

*“Listening is more than not talking. Listening is letting all the weight of the words into you, is opening your hands to what’s unholdable, opening your lungs to what’s unbreathable (and yet she holds — yet, she breathes). Listening is a deep and welcoming silence, it’s more than camaraderie — this isn’t about misery loves company. **This is work, goddamn it, this is intimate solidarity, this is witnessing ...***

This is how to listen: Close your mouth. Have no answers. Make eye contact, or don’t. Take deep breaths, especially if she is breathing shallowly. Let yourself be moved, frustrated, uncomfortable. Especially uncomfortable. Understand that there are no easy answers. Understand you can’t fix her. Understand she can. Appreciate this about her. Be overwhelmed by it. Find yourself at a loss for words when, or if, she finally asks what you think she should do. Be still with the story. Say, I don’t know. What do you think? Listen to how she already has answers — feel pride, amazement, humility, gratitude, and keep listening.”

-Jen Cross, writer, performer, survivor, facilitator www.writingourselveswhole.org

Writing Ourselves Whole; At The Intersection of Trauma & Desire

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Thank you for your participation!

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