

ABSTRACT

Working with trauma: how to help migrants to overcome it

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Migration can be connotated by traumatic experiences, reported in research literature and directly experienced by those who work in this field. Trauma can leave its mark in many ways, affecting the adjustment and integration processes from the early stage of arrival across the subsequent stages.

Working on trauma requires psychological support and specialized treatment provided by qualified mental health professionals with expertise, and a dedicated setting and time. The ideal should be to provide services of psychological support and treatment, this is not always the case as they may not be always available to those in need and not all people need or are willing to receive a treatment.

Working with trauma – meaning working with people who have experienced and still present the effects of trauma – is a common experience of many operators and volunteers involved in the field of migration, in different roles, and it has to do with the challenges faced in their work and effort to help and support migrant people overcoming their difficulties.

Empathy and compassion are fundamental ingredients in an effective helping relationship. These qualities need to be balanced and integrated with a self-care attitude, respectful interpersonal boundaries, healthy lifestyle and habits.

The risk of vicarious traumatization is connected to extensive or repeated exposure to traumatic experiences of other people and compassion fatigue is connected with a sense of being overwhelmed by feelings the suffering of others and a sense of not being able to do enough to be helpful. Especially volunteers sometimes work in non-structured conditions and are over-exposed with little guidance and support.

There are helper-centred good practices and strategies originating from to the helpers' resources, behaviours and attitudes. There are also highly valuable resources in the social environment and also the tools and resources provided in practice exchange projects and strategic partnerships like the *Support Me* Project.

At the same time each one can assimilate those good practices, strategies and behaviours which can be applied within the frame and boundaries of one's specific professional role (including volunteering or stages, etc.) in order to support identity continuity and facilitate the activation of skills and resilient responses of migrant people.

A variety of professional roles involved in the field of migration, among which: rescue team members, workers in reception centres, teachers and trainers, social and community workers, program and project managers and coordinators, cultural and linguistic mediators, education, health and mental health professionals, volunteers, intercultural programs, public officials and policy makers. Students who have chosen to study and work in the field of migration are highly motivated. Being equipped with awareness, positive and balanced attitude helps to develop and sustain effective actions over time.

Challenges, mindset and the helping relationship

Neuroscience has shown evidence of the potency and benefits of having positive experiences for regulating feelings and emotions, and this is true both for the helpers and the helpees.

When thinking of challenging situations in working with migrants each of us may associate different ideas or experiences: events, states, feelings, thoughts, relationships, contexts, experiences, scenes/images...

Our mindset affects the capability to cope with and handle challenging situations.

Allowing our mind to rest on the knowledge of good events, situations, experiences, intentions helps consolidating them and fosters a sense of direction and meaning in life. There is a circular mutual influence within the helping relationships.

The helper is affected by the experiences beard by the helpee (even when these are not verbalized). This is a major challenge! At the same time, the helper brings into the process and relationship one's own personal attitudes, emotional and affective states. There is a mutual interaction of levels of arousal and emotional alertness.

In interaction and shared activities, we can value and focus activities on resources, skills. For example, in learning environments topics and exercises may promote the recognition of skills, strengths, self-worth, resources, thus fostering a sense of direction and of resiliency. Also, there could be a balance between stimulating and calming activities and this can also be adapted to specific cases (for teachers, social workers, volunteers), thus relaxing the avoid-threat system:

- Realistic and optimistic expectations and attainable goals.
- Practicing deliberately and constantly skills, abilities, a sense of direction and scope to prevent the effects of long periods of inactivity and uncertainty.
- Permeate activities with a practice of transferring skills across different situations, activities and social roles.
- Share interests, creative activities, recognise the uniqueness of each person, let prevail a positive attitude and keep a mental image and nurture thoughts of others in positive terms.

Interpersonal relationships take place within space and environment. Provide an orderly living space and workplace where people spend their time and relate to each other helps reducing alert responses, self-regulation, and a perception of a safe place. Good teamwork and mutual support among operators convey a sense of safety to those present.

Present centeredness and concentration help both modulation of arousal and boundary keeping. It ensures safety and prevents risk of violations/ exploitation.

- Our mindset affects the capability to cope with and handle challenging situations.
- Self-care behaviours include balancing exposure to stressful situations and alternating with less stressful activities and duties.
- Mobilize resources and those available in the environment.
- Cultivate and nurture positive thoughts, emotions, attitudes and behaviours about oneself and others. The way we think about our experiences, people, situations influences the way we behave and the results we obtain.

Hardiness is the capacity to resist to prolonged stress. A person characterized by this quality, when faced with difficulties, instead of feeling overwhelmed, decides to face actively the situation, mobilising resources, both personal and those available in the environment, accepts change and considers crisis as a challenge, as an opportunity to test herself, to grow and learn.

Coping strategies are behaviours and attitudes shown by people when facing challenging and stressful situations in order to find an adjustment to changing situations.

Provide a safe, nurturing, positive environment offering opportunities and encouraging to use one's skills. Repetition increases the likelihood of naturally inducing lasting neural changes (involving also feeling and interpersonal dimensions).

Keeping boundaries helps both self-care and preservation, and a caring-relationship building. It allows the helper to distinguish one's own personal needs from those of the helpee. Boundaries are necessary also within teams and working groups and they are a primary strategy in terms of:

- exposure (refrain from additional exposure)
- Relationship and topics of conversation
- Respect for others privacy
- Wise use of time (working, volunteering, leisure = balance)
- Boundaries in terms of focus of attention and our thoughts

SELF CARE STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

- Thinking attitudes affect the self-care strategies
- Create time for yourself (rest, care for your body)
- Quality and length of sleep
- Nutritious food, regular meals
- Reflect and recharge batteries
- Exercise, relaxation and breathing practices
- Always keep a positive attitude

It means becoming a positive role model. Self-care on behalf of operators conveys a role model of self-worth of emotional balance. The more we are able to handle these processes in ourselves the more we will be able to facilitate the same processes in our interactions with people in need.

The results of our actions may become visible later and make easier the work of other operators. It means having sown the seeds of trust, resiliency by being of support in a very sensitive period. They will remember and be able to recall positive moments and experiences after long time in their life.