Understanding Trauma and the Social Environment in Responding to Child Traumatic Stress Across the Migration Process

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Learning Objectives

1. Review the spectrum of potentially traumatizing situations for children: before, during and after migration

2. Describe a theoretical model of child traumatic stress

3. Outline the key elements of clinical program for the treatment of child traumatic stress in pediatric migrants, Trauma Systems Therapy for Refugees (TST-R)
OVER HALF OF THE REFUGEES WORLDWIDE ARE UNDER THE AGE OF 18 (UNHCR, 2017)
Pre-migration / migration

Identity and beliefs targeted

Disruption of basic scaffolding of childhood

Separation from family, loss

Trauma
Post Migration

- Trauma
- Intergenerational trauma, loss, acculturation
- Acculturative stress, peer acceptance, school readiness
- Discrimination

Post Migration Focus Areas

- Trauma
- Intergenerational trauma, loss, acculturation
- Acculturative stress, peer acceptance, school readiness
- Discrimination
Refugee Youth Core Stressors

Core Stressors

- Social Support
- Environment
- Emotion Regulation
- Trauma

Acculturation
- Family Relationships
- Language Learning
- Cultural Learning

Resettlement
- Basic needs
- Legal
- Financial
- Healthcare

Isolation
- Discrimination
- Loneliness
- Alienation
Understanding Traumatic Stress
What is Trauma?

Trauma occurs when an individual *experiences* or *witnesses* an intense event that threatens or causes harm to his/her emotional and/or physical well-being.

An event is considered traumatic when it...

- Is sudden, unexpected or non-normative
- Exceeds the individual’s perceived ability to meet its demands (McCann & Perlman, 1990)

- Both *subjective* and *developmentally/culturally-bound*
Refugee Trauma

Pre-Migration
- Lack of access to basic resources
- Direct exposure to or witnessing of violence
- Traumatic loss of family members/loved ones
- Sexual assault and gender-based violence
- Torture and detention
- Lack of access to basic resources
- Long, dangerous journeys on foot
- Living in refugee camps
- Displacement
- Loss of/separation from family/
country
- Community violence
- Separation from family/country
- Poverty

During Migration
- Loss of/separation from family/
country
- Poverty

Post Migration
- Loss of/separation from family/
country
- Poverty
Traumatic stress is mediated by...

Survival circuits

fight  flight  freeze
Survival circuits – what happens in an individual with traumatic stress?

What Regulates Survival Circuits?

A stimulating, nurturing environment has a positive impact on brain development.
Survival Circuits are regulated by...

safe and healthy relationships
Signals of Danger

Terrorism

Discrimination

Loss and separation of loved ones

Child
Caring interpersonal signals can remedy the emotional dysregulation created by provocative interpersonal signals.

Subtle interpersonal signals that people send each other, all the time, wittingly or unwittingly

These signals can be signals of:
- care or carelessness;
- safety or danger;
- love or hate

We all have a balance of positive and negative signals in our lives. We base our expectations of the world largely on this balance.

Signals of Care Across the Social Environment

- LOVE
- CARE
- SAFETY

Child
Trauma Systems Therapy for Refugees (TST-R) Continuum of Care

- Intensive Intervention
- Skill building
- Psychoeducation / Outreach

Cultural Brokering
TST-R: Project SHIFA video

“These kids are part of our communities. And if kids in our communities do well, we all do well.”

-Dr. Heidi Ellis, Director of the Refugee Trauma and Resilience Center