

Diversity Tip Sheet

Refugees & War: The Lasting Effects

Diversity Council
Diversity Toolkit
for Business



Rochester's Refugees

Refugees are those who have sought asylum in a foreign country in order to escape war or persecution. Most have either personally experienced or witnessed terrible atrocities. In some refugee groups, it can be difficult to find individuals who have not been personally tortured or who have not had a family member who has been tortured or killed. Rochester's refugees come from mainly from six countries:

- **Cambodia:** Cambodian refugees fled Pol Pot's brutal Communist regime that murdered nearly 50% of the population.
- **Vietnam:** Refugees from Vietnam fled an oppressive Communist regime and severe reprisals for fighting alongside the U.S.
- **Laos:** Laos was also involved in the Vietnam War. Many Hmong from Laos fought alongside the U.S. and also faced reprisals after the war.
- **Bosnia:** Refugees from Bosnia fled civil war and genocide.
- **Somalia:** Refugees from Somalia flee the civil war that has devastated the nation since 1990 and continues to the present.
- **Sudan:** Civil war and genocide have forced hundreds of thousands of Sudanese to seek refuge in other countries. The tragedy in Sudan continues today.

The Refugee Experience

Refugees from all six countries have experienced unimaginable horrors and terrible losses, which may include:

- Imprisonment
- Physical torture, including beatings, electric shock, burning, asphyxiation, and genital trauma.
- Psychological torture, including threats, isolation, mock execution, forced witnessing of torture or execution, and sleep deprivation
- Witnessing the murder of family members and friends
- Forced labor
- Forced military service
- Rape
- Starvation and malnutrition

The Refugee Experience, Cont.

- Witnessing combat atrocities, including bombing and other means of mass killings
- Loss of family members to imprisonment, murder, or forced separation
- Loss of homes and possessions
- Loss of home country, language, culture, and traditions
- Loss of position (e.g. village elders)
- Loss of social roles that are not transferable (e.g. doctor whose license is not valid in the country of asylum, judge, midwife, army officer, etc.)
- Shift in status from ethnic majority to minority
- Traumatic flight experiences
- Uncertainty about the fate of loved ones
- Primitive and difficult conditions in refugee camps
- Lost or interrupted education

The Effects of Trauma

Such severe trauma may affect refugees in many ways, and while some effects may decrease over time, they will never completely disappear. Effects may include:

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, irritability, outbursts of anger, and intense feelings of guilt.
- Increased risk of depression and other anxiety disorders
- Increased risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Increased risk of suicide
- Lasting physical effects of torture, war injuries, or malnutrition and disease
- Psychosomatic illness. Mental and emotional health is inextricably entwined with physical health. Emotional trauma may have long-lasting physical effects, including headaches, complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain, or generalized pain.
- Chronic unresolved grief
- Paranoia or suspiciousness
- Guilt over family members and friends who were left behind or who did not survive
- Acculturation failure. Traumatized individuals may have a reduced ability to cope. For example, a traumatized child may be unable to learn English. An adult refugee may be unable to learn to use public transportation.
- Malnutrition may cause memory or learning problems.

Adjustment Issues

A number of factors complicate refugees' ability to adapt to the new culture and cope with the effects of trauma.

- Wartime allows little opportunity for dealing with trauma, and PTSD and other mental health issues may go untreated for a long period of time.
- Language and cultural barriers may prevent refugees from seeking or receiving mental health treatment.
- On arriving in a new country, many refugees work extremely hard and have little time or energy to deal with emotional problems.
- Other refugees may be unemployed and lack the resources to provide for basic necessities, much less psychological treatment.
- War, flight, and the challenges of seeking asylum may deny refugees the opportunity to grieve and delay the bereavement process for years.
- Refugees are faced with new values, norms, laws, climate, dress, food, housing, work and recreation. Adjustment in so many areas can be overwhelming, slowing the healing process.
- The culture of the new country is not only different; it may also be perceived as superior, both by the refugee and by those in the majority population. Old ways of life are seldom valued in the new life. Adjustment to the new culture often means losing the old while never quite gaining the new.
- Traditional support structures that help people cope are often missing for the refugee—whether it be family, friendships, employment, or religious institutions.

Case Study: Cambodians

In a recent study, Cambodian refugees reported experiencing an average of 15 different types of trauma.

- 99% nearly starved to death
- 96% were enslaved into forced labor
- 90% percent had a family member or friend murdered
- 54% were tortured

Decades after they fled the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, most Cambodian refugees who resettled in the United States remain traumatized:

- 62% suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- 51% suffered from depression in the past year

Sources

“PTSD, Depression Epidemic Among Cambodian Immigrants,” NIMH.nih.gov

“Refugees More Likely to Suffer PTSD,” www.healingwell.com

“Refugees and Mental Health,” Charles Kemp, www.baylor.edu

“Severity of Trauma Among Refugee Psychiatric Patients,” Joseph Westermeyer, Psychiatric Times, April 2000, Vol. XVII, Issue 4