



The  
CENTER for  
VICTIMS of  
TORTURE

## Restoring Hope, Rebuilding Lives: Lessons from the Field

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### Overview of Approaches, Content

- Center for Victims of Torture, Video
- Brief experiential: Packing your bag
- Immigration Statuses and Implications
- Triple Trauma Paradigm, Stages of Resettlement
- Effects of Torture, War Trauma at 3 Levels
- Nature of Traumatic Memories & Implications
- Resources: National and Local
- Creative Approaches: Sampler of Story & Expression Imbedded Throughout

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*In some respects, every person is like  
all other persons, some other  
persons, and no other person.*

The challenge is how to work in a way that acknowledges and honors each level of truth, without privileging OR minimizing any one level. The same holds for recognizing and responding to both *vulnerability and resiliency*.  
Levels: Universal, Cultural/Subcultural/Family, Individual

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### CVT Clients in Twin Cities

- 70+ countries (highest: East & West Africa, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Central and Southeast Asia)
- Already living in Minnesota
- 20+ languages at a given time
- Most severe cases
- Complex, interdependent needs
- 75% asylum seekers; 25% refugees
- Attempting to recover in exile, not here by choice

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### A refugee... An asylum seeker...

is a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of **race, religion, nationality**, membership in 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.”

Source: *Protecting Refugees: Question and Answers*, published by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) Public Information Section.

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### What's the Difference?

**Refugees** apply and are processed in other countries **before** reaching the United States.



**Asylum seekers** apply and are processed in the United States **after** they have entered the country or are at the border.

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### Packing your Bag

You are a social worker in the country of L. Your business partner “disappears,” probably because of his efforts to organize support for mental health legislation opposed by the government. During the next months you are detained and released several times, and your name appears in a newspaper article listing suspected subversives. When you arrive home from work tonight, you find an anonymous letter promising you won’t live through the night. You decide you must flee at once and seek political asylum elsewhere.

Adapted from Local Action Global Change: Learning About Human Rights of Women and Girls, 1999, UNIFEM & Center for Women’s Global Leadership

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### Pack your bag in 2 minutes

You have 2 minutes to pack your bag. You may only take what is in your house at the moment and what you can carry with you. You do not want to look like someone who is leaving the country. You may choose 6 categories of things (e.g., clothing).

Adapted from Local Action Global Change: Learning About Human Rights of Women and Girls, 1999, UNIFEM & Center for Women’s Global Leadership

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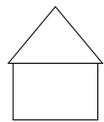
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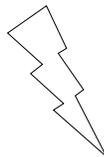
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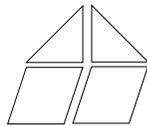
### Triple Trauma Paradigm



Pre-flight



Flight



Resettlement

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### Pre-flight

- Harassment/intimidation/threats
- Fear of unexpected arrest/imprisonment
- Loss of job/livelihood
- Loss of home and possessions
- Disruption of studies, life dreams
- Repeated relocation
- Living in hiding/underground
- Societal chaos/breakdown
- Prohibition of traditional practices
- Lack of medical care
- Separation, isolation of family
- Malnutrition
- Need for secrecy, silence, distrust
- Being followed or monitored
- **Arrests, physical / sexual assault, rape, torture**
- Witnessing violence
- Disappearances, Death

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### U.S. Definition of Torture

“An act committed by a person acting under the color of law specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering (other than pain or suffering incidental to lawful sanctions) upon another person within his custody or lawful control.”

18 U.S.C. 2340(1)

Critical elements are: the acts committed; the presence of the color of law; intent of perpetrator; deliberate targeting of the applicant; issue of custody

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### Common Methods of Torture

- Beating, kicking, striking with objects, (esp.)
  - Head, Ears [telefonos], Soles of feet (falanga)
  - Caning, flogging, rubber batons
- Forced postures (suspension or traction)
- Exposure to extreme environments
- Burning (thermal, electric) (external or internal)
- Deprivation of food, water
- Suffocation (water or dry)
- Exposure to infectious environments
- Rape, genital targeting & mutilation
- Mutilation (avulsion, crush, amputation). Administration of toxic substances
- Humiliation (sexual, religious, hygienic)
- Threats, humiliation
- Sensory deprivation or stress (e.g., forced to stare @ sun)
- Sleep deprivation
- Being tied to others, forced to witness their torture, or forced to torture them.
- Being confined in a very small space
- Mock execution
  - Modified from *Torture* 1996; Suppl 1: 19-42.

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Torture occurs within a socio-political, historical, and cultural context. It aims to break connections between individuals and, ultimately, to break social bonds at all levels of society. When defended, torture is always justified as necessary for national security.

The purposes of torture include:

- Destroy a sense of identity, family and community
- Eliminate leaders
- Create a climate of fear and distrust
- Produce a culture of apathy and isolation
- Produce confessions, irrespective of truth

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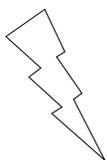
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### Flight & Refugee Camp Experience

- Fear of being caught or returned
- Living in hiding/underground
- Detention at checkpoints, borders
- Loss of job/schooling
- Illness
- Robbery
- Exploitation: bribes, falsification
- **Arrests, physical / sexual assault, rape, torture**
- Witnessing violence
- Lack of medical care
- Separation, isolation from family
- Malnutrition
- Crowded, unsanitary conditions
- Long waits in refugee camps
- Great uncertainty about future
- Danger from war, arrest, abduction

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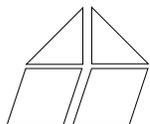
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### Losses Experienced in Exile

- △ Family & community support system
- △ Economic and social status
- ▭ Culture, language, climate
- ▭ Social, cultural and political structures

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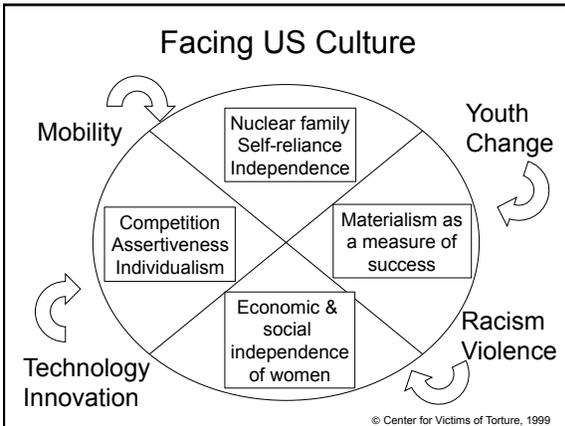
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- ### Stage I: Honeymoon
- Social Behavior
    - Fulfilling basic physical & social needs
    - Seeking out or Avoiding own ethnic group
  - Emotions
    - Enthusiasm
    - Relief
  - Feeling overwhelmed
  - Thoughts
    - Disorientation
    - Confusion
  - Optimism about life, future
- © Center for Victims of Torture

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- ### Stage II: Reality Sets In
- Social Behavior
    - Suspiciousness, Detachment, Paranoid
    - Focus on home country and losses
  - Passivity as defense against fight/flight reactions
    - Problems with Family Relationships
  - Emotions
    - Guilt, shame, fear, anger, depression
    - Hopelessness, helplessness, homesickness
      - Psychosomatic illnesses
  - Thoughts
    - Realization of separation from home, family, etc.
    - Intrusive thoughts, awareness of differences
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### Stage III: Crisis/Opportunity

- Social Behavior
  - Problems with Family Relationship
- Seeking help/alternatives within ethnic community
- Desire (but may not be an option) to return home
  - Emotions
    - Depression, denial, continued helplessness
      - Guilt and shame due to failures
      - Psychosomatic illnesses
  - Thoughts
    - Confusion, uncertain about the future
    - Wish for autonomy and independence
    - Demands from family (here & abroad)

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### Stage IV: Adjustment/Reconstruction OR Marginalization

- Social Behavior
  - Desire to help others, helping family abroad OR Ruptures
  - Experiencing some accomplishments OR Failures/isolation
- Emotions
  - Hope, some optimism OR Despair
  - Feeling burdened, overwhelmed by all the tasks
- Event(s) may still trigger emotions, Old ways of coping
  - Thoughts
    - Questioning old values/behaviors OR Rigidity
    - Building confidence, strengths OR Helplessness

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### Effects of Trauma: Multiple Layers, Multiple Lenses

- Individual
- Family
- Community
- Country/Culture
- World

- Body
- Mind
- Spirit/Soul

- Earlier Trauma
- Torture/War Trauma
- Flight/Refugee Camp Trauma
- Resettlement Trauma

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### Ethno-cultural Factors influence:

- The meaning of trauma
- How trauma and its aftermath are experienced
- The implications of having been traumatized

CVT Colleagues, 2012

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### And the formation of new relationships . . .

Examples that commonly affect service delivery:

- Unwritten rules of “high-context” cultures
- Cosmologies that emphasize spiritual explanations
- Time orientation
- Ways of relating to others (e.g., doing vs. being, the “paper culture” of the U.S., nonverbal communication, etc.)
- Collectivism/Communalism
- Language as an expression of worldview
- Coping Styles

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### Common Physical Symptoms

- |                                              |                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| • Headaches                                  | • Untreated injuries, difficulty being touched/examined |
| • Body pain in areas that were targeted      | • Feeling dizzy, faint or weak                          |
| • Stomach pain                               | • High blood pressure                                   |
| • Chest pain                                 | • Poor immune system                                    |
| • Rapid heart beat                           | • Gastrointestinal complaints or problems               |
| • Head injury symptoms                       |                                                         |
| • Diffuse pain                               |                                                         |
| • Genital, urinary or menstrual difficulties |                                                         |

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### Common Psychological Effects of Torture/War Trauma

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety symptoms
- Depression, Complicated grief (ambiguous losses)
- Somatoform Disorders/Somatization
- Traumatic Brain Injury (thinking, memory, decision-making, judgment, impulse control, mood)
- Substance abuse to self-medicate depression, anxiety
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Triad of Shame, Rage, Fear becomes very interconnected
- Existential issues (loss of meaning, changes in beliefs or worldview or cognitive framework, crisis of faith, etc)

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### Trauma's Assault on Social Health

- Distrust
- Learned helplessness
- Dependency, Regression
- Shame and guilt
- Loss of roles, status, place in the social structure – family, workplace, community
- Grief
- Chronic fear
- Feeling unsafe, vulnerable most of the time
- Low self-esteem / Loss of dignity or “respect”
- Conflict with others (at work, with family members, within ethnic community)
- Estrangement, social isolation

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### Common Effects on Families

- Loss of cultural and social supports
- Parent-child role reversal (parental disempowerment; child prematurely assumes adult roles)
- Conflict: marital, intergenerational, ethnic/tribal/clan (broken bonds)
- Parental functioning compromised by parents' symptoms
- Low tolerance for negative affect
- Silence

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Faced with enormous loss and traumatic experience, refugees and asylum seekers have to significantly reduce the number of people about whom they really care.




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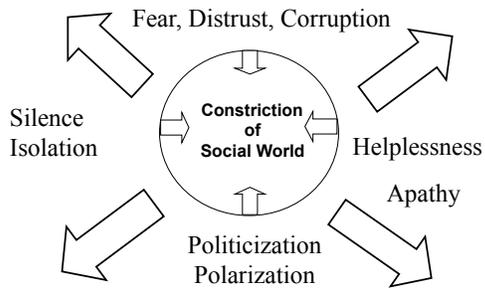
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**Effects of Torture and War Trauma in Refugee Communities**




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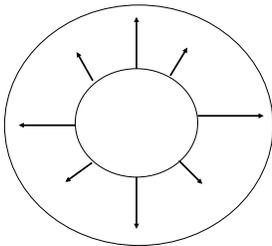
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Community building and interventions need to focus in all possible ways on enlarging the sense of community, sometimes one relationship at a time



Source: Based on work by Mirjana Bijelic, CVT, 1999

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**Summary Statement**

“The primary intervention for children’s psychological responses to trauma has been to establish safe and predictable environments and to allow them developmentally appropriate options for integrating their memories into a clear sense of a valued self in a hopeful universe.”

-Hubbard & Pearson, CVT

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**Focus Differs by Context**

In refugee camps and situations of ongoing conflict (e.g., West Bank), most resources must go toward creating a safe and predictable environment (re-creating a normal developmental context in the midst of ongoing trauma).

In resettlement contexts, more focus on traumatic memories is possible.

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**Summary Statement**

Re-creating a normal developmental context for children & youth necessitates a primary focus on helping adults rebuild family and community support systems, where the most powerful protective factors lie.

The greatest impact in helping a child is delivered by interventions that help his or her caregivers

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Interventions designed to meet relevant recovery goals must be rooted in local contexts and communities.

Nonetheless, there are general, universal recovery goals that flow from the effects of community-wide political violence that cut across age and culture.

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**Recovery Goals: All Levels of Intervention**

- Restore safety and control; reduce disabling effects of fear and anxiety
- Restore attachment and connection to human beings
- Restore meaning and purpose to life
- Restore dignity and value; reduce shame and guilt

From *Guide to Working with Young People Who Are Refugees*, Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Australia

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- ◆ Legal Services
- ◆ Social Services
- ◆ Medical Services
- ◆ Empowerment activities
- ◆ Assistance with family reunification
- ◆ Psychological services
- ◆ Community Connections

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Example of Mental Health Intervention  
For Traumatic Memories delivered at CVT

**Narrative  
Exposure  
Therapy  
(NET and  
KIDNET)**



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**Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)**

Schauer, Neuner, & Elbert, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition manual, 2012

**TWO GOALS:**

▪ **Reduction of PTSD symptoms by confronting/ exposing the client with the memories of the traumatic event.**

**EXPOSURE:** Imaginative reliving, emotional processing, reweaving hot and cold memory.

▪ **Construction of a consistent document.**

**NARRATION** of the client's biography, especially the consequences: survivor testimony.

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**Traumatic Memories Vs.  
Ordinary Memories**

Traumatic memories do not operate the way ordinary memories do: they can be activated **ON THEIR OWN** (without any thoughts or decisions involved), they are stored in a different **LOCATION** in the brain and in a different **FORM** (as pieces or fragments of free-floating sensation, not primarily as words or story)

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Traumatic Memories are stored in the primitive middle of the brain as "Fear Networks"  
("Hot" memories with no "cold" aspects)

• Fear Networks Contain:

- Sensory fragments
- Emotional fragments
- Physiological fragments
- Cognitive fragments

Since activation of fear networks is a frightening and painful → avoidance

HOT Memory You *Experience*; COLD Memory You *Know*

Source: NET manual and Neuner & Catani training for CVT in MN, 2007-8

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### NET: Essential Elements

- ✓ Psychoeducation and Fully Informed Consent
- ✓ Timeline: trauma placed in context of whole life story
- ✓ Full activation of the fear (hot) memory in order to modify the emotional network (in the brain)
- ✓ Working with "hot" (traumatic) and "cold" (autobiographical, declarative) memory at the same time (Fear Network + Narrative)
- ✓ Habituation via repeated exposure
- ✓ End "product" of signed testimony (or story or song or play or poem or memory book, etc.)

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