

# Refugee Youth Mental Health



*Refugee youths' positive attributes, strengths and capacities are assets that counsellors and other mental health service providers have the opportunity to illuminate.*

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

### WHY THIS MATTERS

Although refugee youth show incredible resilience in the face of adversity, a significant number of refugee youth experience mental health problems.

### KEY POINTS

- ❑ While some experience mental health challenges, refugee youth demonstrate agency and resilience in the face of migration and resettlement stressors.
- ❑ Mental health challenges that refugee youth experience can be linked to hardships experienced along their journey or to the settlement experience itself.
- ❑ Unaccompanied refugee youth are at a higher risk for mental health problems than youth who resettle with their families.
- ❑ Refugee youth face barriers to accessing mental health services, including distrust of authority, stigma around mental health, and lack of culturally competent services.

- ❑ The levels of conflict or unsettlement that refugee youth face and, correspondingly, their experiences of trauma, are highly variable. Each youth's reaction to trauma is unique.
- ❑ Direct and indirect exposure to violence, as well as personal injury, are associated with mental health challenges for young refugees.
- ❑ The theme of loss, including loss of loved ones, a sense of home and belonging, and culture, is frequently expressed by young refugees receiving mental health services.
- ❑ Migration threatens cultural identity, especially if young refugees face discrimination, and maintaining their culture heritage is often challenging.
- ❑ Social support is key to an adaptive transition to refugee youths' new country; these youth rely both on family and community supports, and on new social connections forged in the host country at school or in the broader community.

*Finding positive connections either in school or other places in the community is a key strategy employed by refugee youth to protect their mental health.*

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

**Mental Health services should be designed with the following in mind:**

- Involving refugee families and their communities in the design and delivery of mental health services for refugee youth can help to establish trust.
- One strategy for avoiding stigma-related avoidance of mental health services is to embed them within more acceptable supportive systems, such as schools.
- If refugees can maintain a connection to their cultural identity, this can be a resource for strength and resilience, not only for refugee youth but also for the family unit as a whole.
- Other resettlement stressors can be a greater focus than mental health issues for refugee youth. Broadening the scope of mental health services to include helping refugees to meet their basic needs or referring them to other resources that are better able to address these needs could solve this problem.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

**There are many barriers to refugee youth accessing mental health support:**

- Refugees may develop an understandable distrust towards authorities after being victimized – at minimum, this may increase the time it takes to develop rapport and a sense of safety.
- Some refugees see enduring mental health challenges as less aversive than being ostracized and branded as mentally ill.
- For clients from refugee backgrounds, the need for safety is greater. Without a strong therapeutic alliance, mental services may not successfully support these youth.
- Services that are not designed with refugee youths' culture in mind may fail to take into account their conceptions of mental health, important cultural values and beliefs, or relationships

*Practitioners should focus their attention on identifying what refugee children need to feel safe and secure*

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