

October 2025

Addressing Mental Health of Refugee Children & Youth

Practical Strategies for Trauma-Informed,
Culturally Responsive Support



Who Are We?



- Refugee Services
- Policy and Advocacy
- Legal Services
- Trafficking Services
- International Programs
- Children's Services

**Note: USCRI is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)*



Who Are We?



Refugee Youth Resource Center

- National Training & Technical Assistance (TTA) initiative
- Part of USCRI Children's Services
- ORR grant-funded program
- Focus on building provider capacity to foster refugee youth resilience, integration, and child safety

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the webinar, you will be able to...

- ① Identify signs and symptoms of grief, trauma, and transitional shock as they relate to displacement of refugee children and youth
- ② Describe culturally responsive approaches to address mental health needs with refugee youth and families
- ③ Apply strategies for effective psychosocial support with resettled children and youth



Understanding the Trauma of Displacement

Factors Contributing to Displacement



Factor

Example Countries

Armed Conflict

DRC/Rwanda, Israel/Palestine, Ukraine/Russia

Civil War

Iraq, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, Syria

Ethnoreligious Persecution

Bhutan, China, DRC, Eritrea, India, Iraq, Myanmar, Sudan

Political Instability

Afghanistan, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Myanmar, Venezuela

Government Repression

Afghanistan, China, Cuba, Egypt, Honduras, India, Russia, Venezuela

International Terrorism

Afghanistan, Iraq/Syria, Somalia/Ethiopia/Kenya

Gangs & Organized Crime

El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico

The Three E's of Trauma



Event(s)

The event or events that cause or threaten physical or psychological harm



Experience

How the event(s) are experienced (e.g., feelings of helplessness or terror)



Effect

The effects of the event(s) immediately following or developing later

The Triple Trauma Paradigm

Trauma experienced by refugee youth during the three stages of transition



PRE-FLIGHT

In one's country of origin

- Fearing for one's life
- Persecution & violence
- Witnessing death
- Injury & sickness
- Prolonged hunger



FLIGHT

En route to safety

- Loss of home & family
- Displacement in camps
- Regular exposure to danger
- Assault, abuse, & exploitation



POST-FLIGHT

Resettlement

- Shock of a new environment
- Isolation
- Language & cultural barriers
- Unfamiliar with U.S. laws & rights
- Discrimination & xenophobia

Case Example: Jibreel



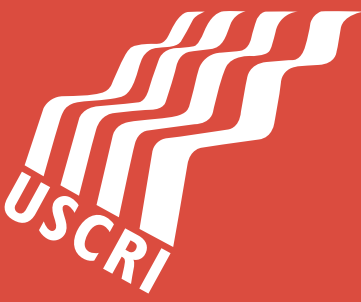
Jibreel's Story
USCRI Children's Services



Rescued in Greek waters, Jibreel and the rest of his family were transported

Watch on  YouTube

Case Example: Jibreel



What are some of the losses and trauma that Jibreel has experienced?

Based on your experience working with refugee children and youth, what are some of the emotional and physical ways that Jibreel may respond to these losses and traumatic events?

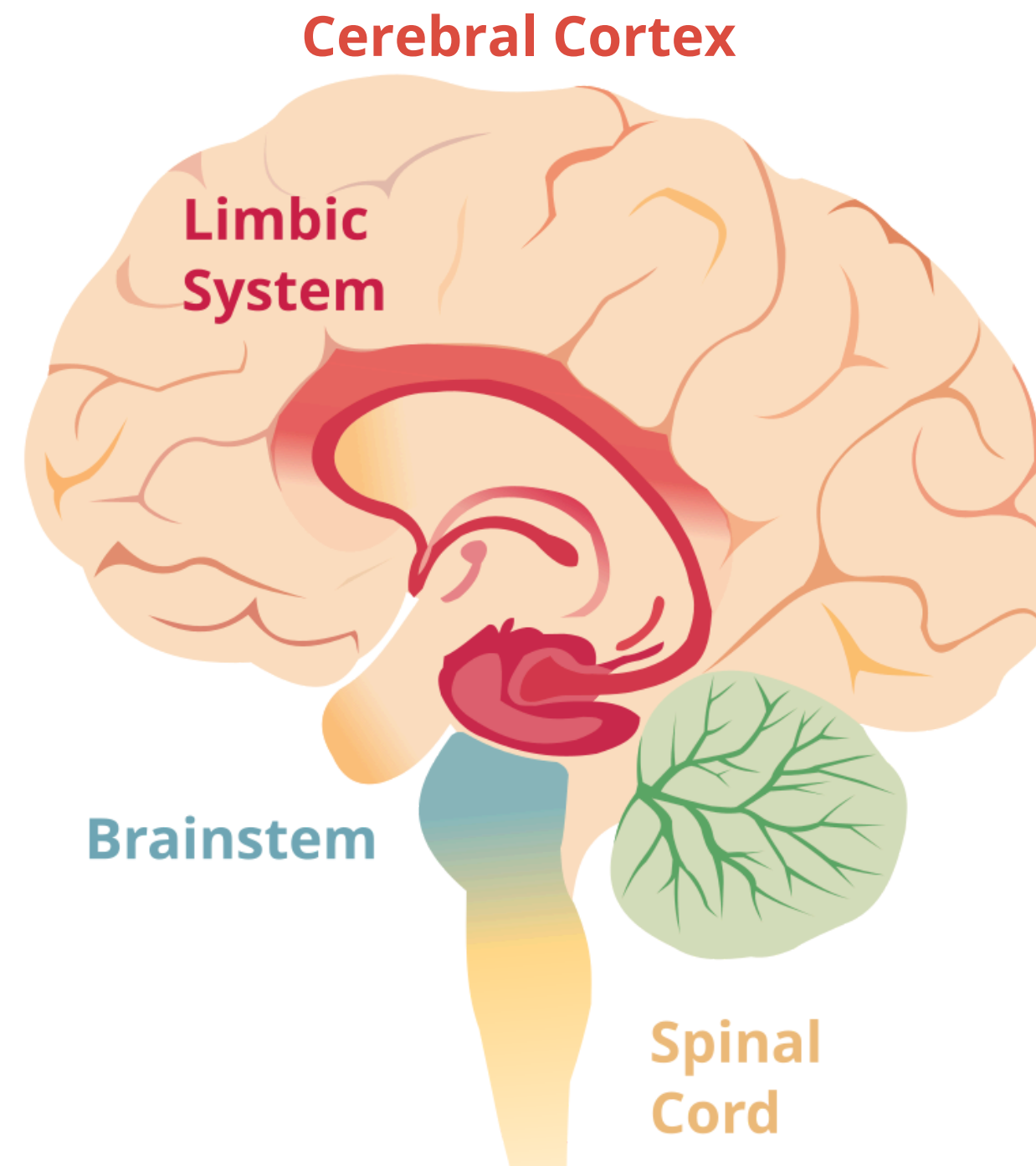


Mental Health & Impacts of Trauma on Refugee Children & Youth

Understanding Transitional Shock

Transitional Shock

Detectable changes to a refugee youth's brain, body, and behavior resulting from prolonged high stress levels.



The limbic system becomes more sensitive, with the body's "alarm" more easily activated.

Nervous System Responses to Trauma

Sympathetic



Fight

- Anger
- Rage
- Confrontation



Flight

- Anxiety
- Panic
- Avoidance

Parasympathetic



Freeze

- Dissociation
- Numbness
- Shutting down
- Low energy





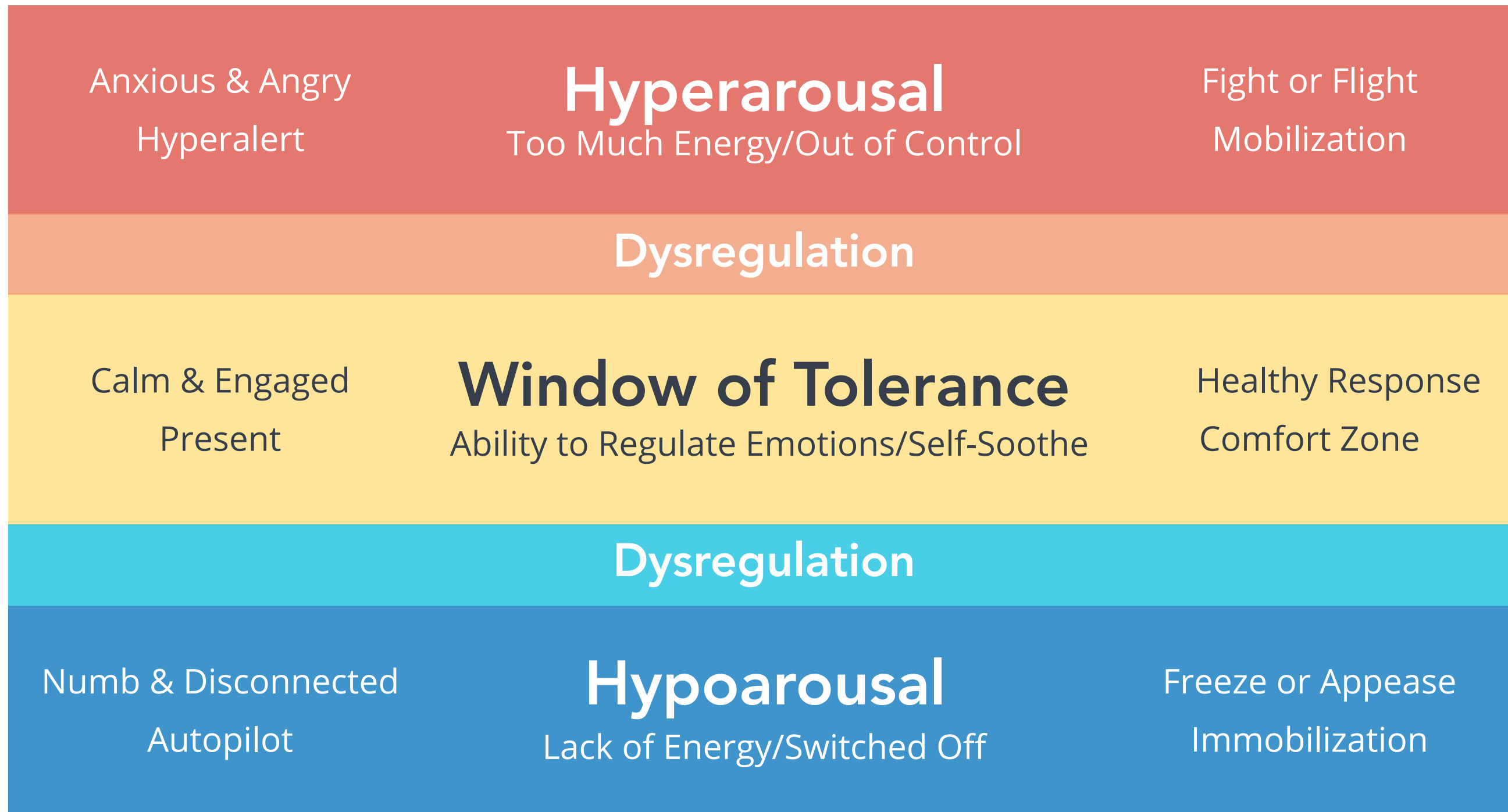
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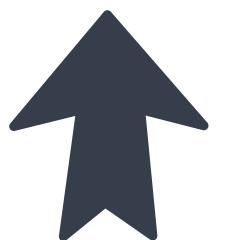

- People-pleasing
- Codependency
- Lack of boundaries



The Window of Tolerance


 Stress and trauma can shrink the Window of Tolerance




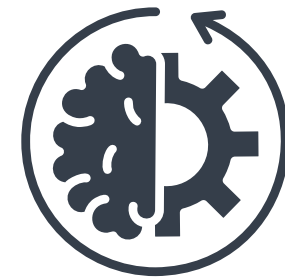

 Techniques that foster resilience and calm the mind/body help enlarge the Window of Tolerance


Impacts of Transitional Shock



Physical

- Bodily pain
- Nausea
- Stimuli sensitivity
- Coordination challenges
- Bladder issues
- Appetite changes
- Sleep difficulties
- Fatigue



Cognitive

- Impaired learning
- Concentration difficulties
- Impeded speech
- Stalled creativity
- Challenges with problem-solving
- Poor recall and reflection



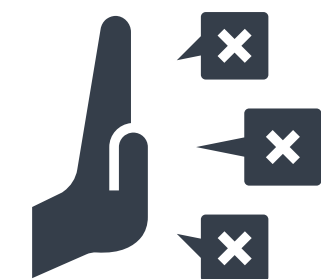
Emotional

- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Anger, irritability
- Sadness
- Hopelessness
- Diminished motivation
- Self-awareness challenges
- Negative self-talk



Social

- Clinginess, fear of being alone
- Withdrawal
- Lack of trust
- Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships



Behavioral

- Self-regulation challenges
- Defiance
- Poor attendance
- Substance use
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Regression in age-appropriate behaviors

Assessing Mental Health



Concern

- Symptoms that often cause stress and impact the youth's daily life
- Warrants ongoing management

Crisis

- Acute, intense emotional distress which overwhelms the youth's ability to cope
- Urgent situation, but with time to plan
- May pose risk of harm

Emergency

- Immediate, life-threatening situation
- Urgent action needed to protect the safety of individuals
- Typically require external support from first responders (ambulance, fire, police, etc.)

Knowledge Check

- 1 What are the three E's of trauma?
- 2 True or False: Our brains are hardwired to respond to stress in the same way every time.
- 3 What are some impacts of transitional shock? (select all that apply)
- 4 A newcomer youth shared they have suicidal ideation and a plan to carry it out. Is this a mental health concern, crisis, or emergency?



Case Examples

- Three case example videos:
 - Nang from Myanmar
 - Kidane from Eritrea
 - Parvin from Iran
- Question following each video
- Discussion



Case Example: Nang



 **Nang's Story**
USCRI Children's Services

A YouTube video player thumbnail for "Nang's Story". The background is a photograph of the New York City skyline with the American flag flying on a tall pole in the foreground. A large red play button is centered over the image. At the bottom, there is a dark grey overlay with white text and icons.

She lived in Thailand before resettling in the United States two years ago with her parents.

Watch on  YouTube

What are potential mental health concerns or signs of trauma you noticed in Nang's story?

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obJumsf-eSs>

Case Example: Kidane



Kidane's Story
USCRI Children's Services

He attends school regularly and has made some friends.

Watch on YouTube

The image shows a video player interface. At the top left, there is a circular logo with the USCRI symbol and the text "Kidane's Story" and "USCRI Children's Services". The main video area shows three young Black people sitting on the grass outdoors, smiling and talking. A red play button is centered over the video. At the bottom, there is a dark grey bar with a circular icon on the left, the text "He attends school regularly and has made some friends.", and a "Watch on YouTube" button on the right.

What are potential mental health concerns or signs of trauma you noticed in Kidane's story?

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZ-OzV4BHN8>

Case Example: Parvin



Parvin's Story
USCRI Children's Services

Her teachers notice she avoids interacting and making eye contact with male peers and staff.

Watch on YouTube

The video player shows a man with glasses and a dark jacket pointing at a map. A red play button is centered over the video. The video title and description are at the bottom. A small USCRI logo is in the top left of the video frame.

What are potential mental health concerns or signs of trauma you noticed in Parvin's story?

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zoPDGELAV8>

Discussion Questions

- ① How might any of the behaviors of Nang, Kidane, or Parvin be influenced by factors other than mental health or trauma?
- ② How would you further assess whether these behaviors are indicative of a mental health concern or expressions of culture?





Mental Health Across Cultures and Backgrounds

Mental Health Across Cultures



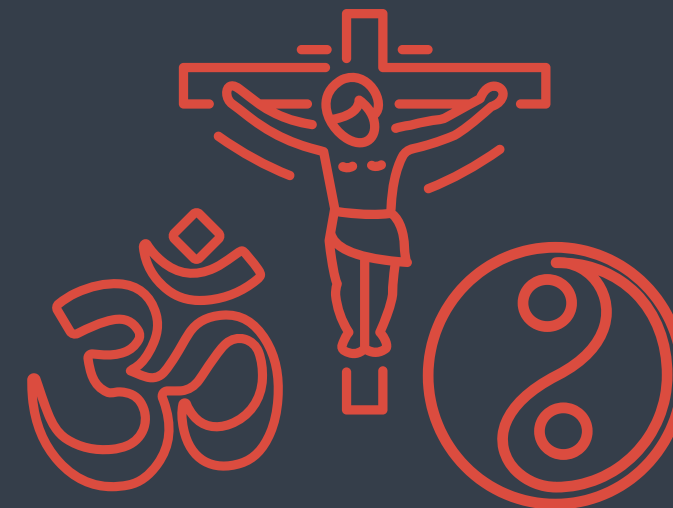
Western/Modern
Medicine
vs.
Holistic Medicine



Stigma
Surrounding
Trauma & Mental
Health



Collectivism
vs.
Individualism



Cultural & Religious
Views on Suffering

Prioritizing Cultural Humility over Cultural Competency



Cultural Competency vs. Cultural Humility

- Seeks personal knowledge of foundational information about a culture
- Can lead to generalizations and assumptions, inadvertently reinforcing biases and negative stereotypes
- Can lead to a false sense of expertise and competency
- Develops and maintains mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships and relationships
- Engages in self-reflection and self-critique and asks thoughtful questions of others
- Levels power imbalances that exist by focusing on client-centered care



Continued Discussion



Returning to the case examples of Nang, Kidane, and Parvin, what are some strategies you can utilize to address mental health concerns in a culturally responsive way?



Psychosocial Support for Refugee Children & Youth

Trauma Informed Care



Six Best Practices for Prioritizing the Well-being of Newcomer Youth

Regulate your emotions and thoughts before interacting with newcomers.

Respect youth's personal voice, choice, and cultural differences.

Relate to each youth with genuine care, consistency, and authenticity.

Redirect conversations towards empowerment and constructive outcomes.

Recognize adaptive coping strategies and normalize them.

Resist re-traumatization and avoid potential triggers.

Key Responsibilities of Providers



Screening & Monitoring



Documentation



Confidentiality & Mandatory Reporting



Crisis Stabilization



Partnering with Parents



Referral to Resources



Safety Planning



Psychoeducation & Psychosocial Support

Key Categories of Psychosocial Support



Self-Awareness



Self-Regulation



Interpersonal Connection

Psychosocial Support: Self-Awareness



Tracking

Tuning into one's mood, emotions, and feelings as they relate to different environments and circumstances.



Resourcing

Taking inventory of the tools and resources one possesses to cope with challenges.

Psychosocial Support: Self-Regulation



Grounding

Reestablishing a sense of calm and safety through connection with one's body, senses, and environment.



Shifting

Reorienting our brain and body from feeling stuck or overwhelmed to being regulated and in control.

Psychosocial Support: Interpersonal Connection



Connecting

Strengthening bonds and empathizing with those you love and trust.



Sharing

Learning to express one's thoughts, feelings, and ideas in community; making meaning of our experiences.



SAVE THE DATE: 10/25 Seattle Benefit Dinner



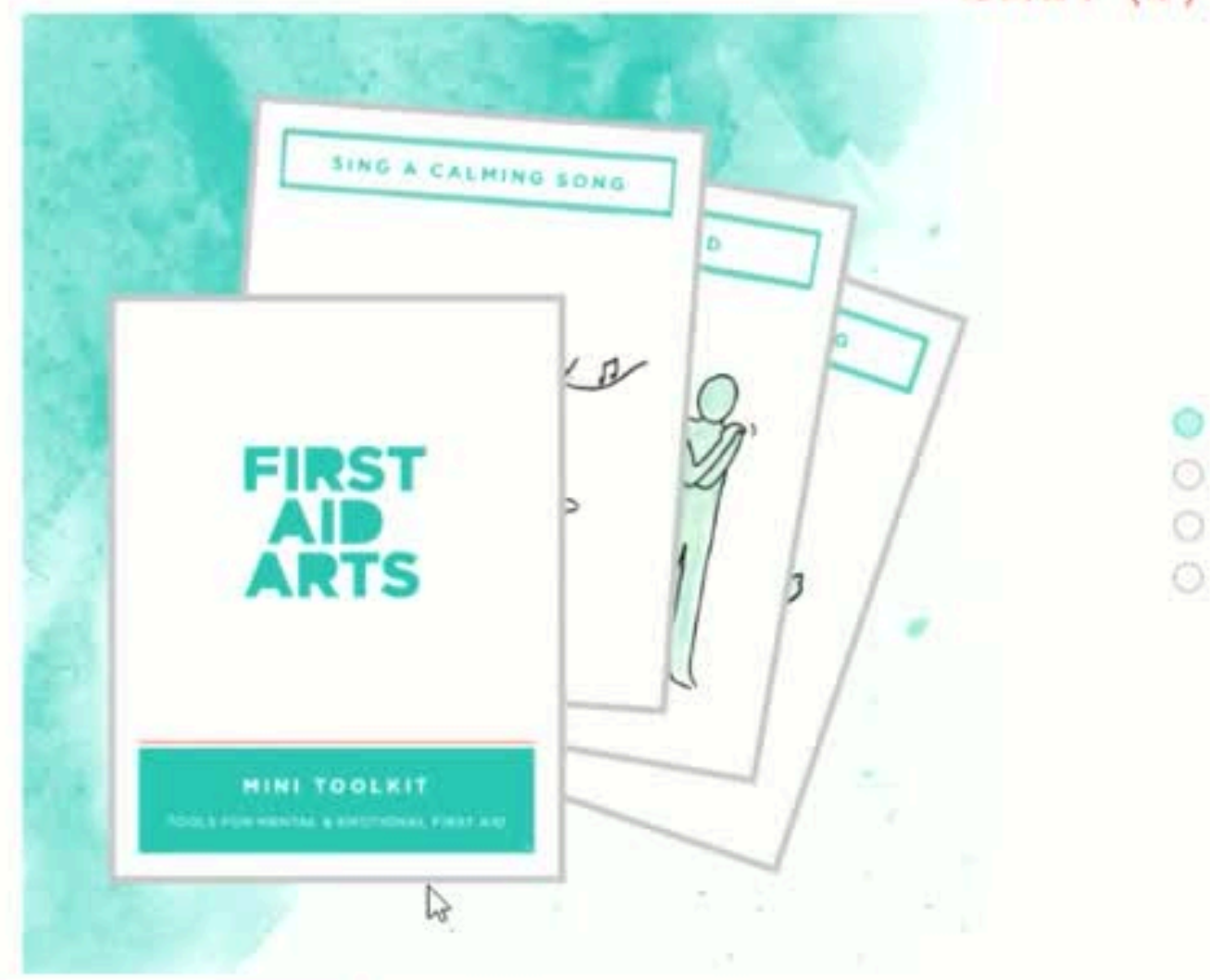
ABOUT US WHAT WE OFFER FREE TOOLKIT STORIES UPCOMING EVENTS

SHOP DONATE

CART (0)

First Aid Arts Mini Toolkit: Tools for your Mental and Emotional Health

Try these science-based First Aid Arts activities to address stress, boost your mental and emotional immune system, and build resilience!



DOWNLOAD THE FIRST AID ARTS TOOLKIT

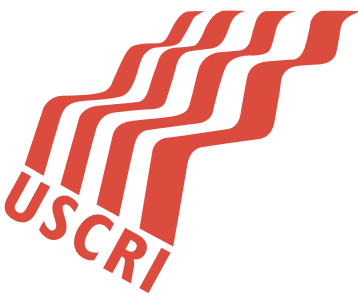
We have the Mini Toolkit available in 7 other Languages, too! Click the images below to download the Mini Toolkit in Ukrainian,

Discussion Question

What are other activities you have used or considered using to help refugee children and youth foster self-awareness, self-regulation, and interpersonal connection?



Other Psychosocial Support Strategies



- Empower youth using a strength-based approach
- Establish routines & regular connection
- Be open about your role & talk through expectations of all parties
- Write out rules & boundaries, especially when working with groups



Other Psychosocial Support Strategies



- Incorporate fun & play
- Provide praise & positive feedback
- Focus on the present & future
- Encourage youth's involvement in cultural activities, community connection, religious practice & spiritual exploration



Knowledge Check

- 1 True or False: Cultural humility requires knowing everything about the culture of those we serve.
- 2 Which of the following is not considered a trauma-informed approach?
- 3 What are three key categories of psychosocial support?
- 4 What are some responsibilities of non-clinical service providers in supporting refugee youth mental health? (select all that apply)





Conclusion & Resources

PRESENTATION TAKEAWAYS



Signs & symptoms of grief, trauma, & transitional shock as they relate to displacement



Culturally responsive approaches to address mental health with refugee youth and families



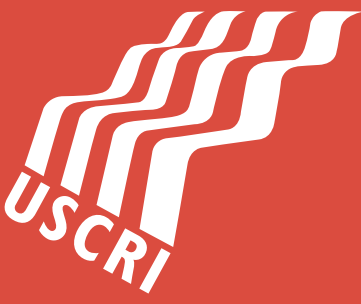
Strategies for effective psychosocial support with resettled children and youth

Reflection

Share one strategy or new piece of information that you are taking away from this training that you will implement to support a refugee youth/family you are currently working with.



refugee-youth.org



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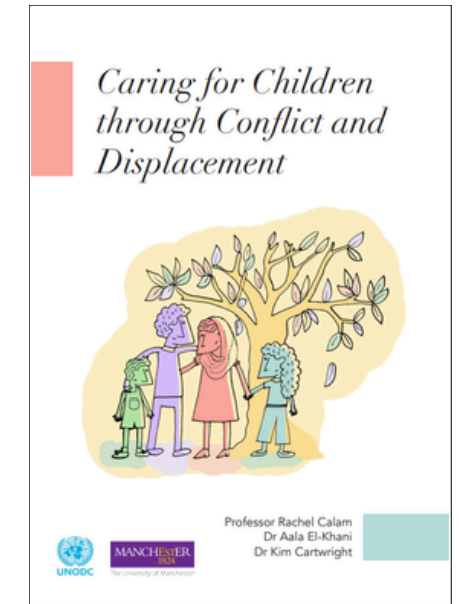
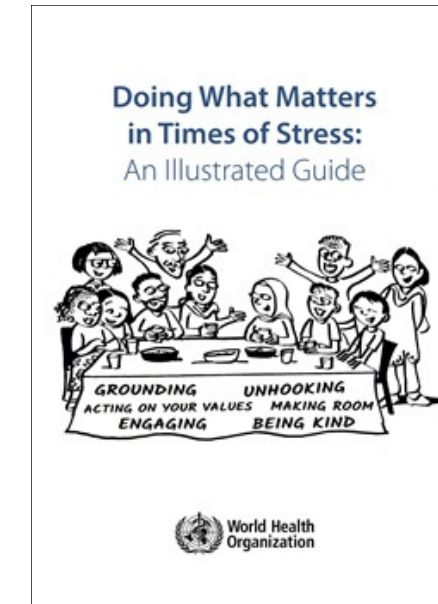
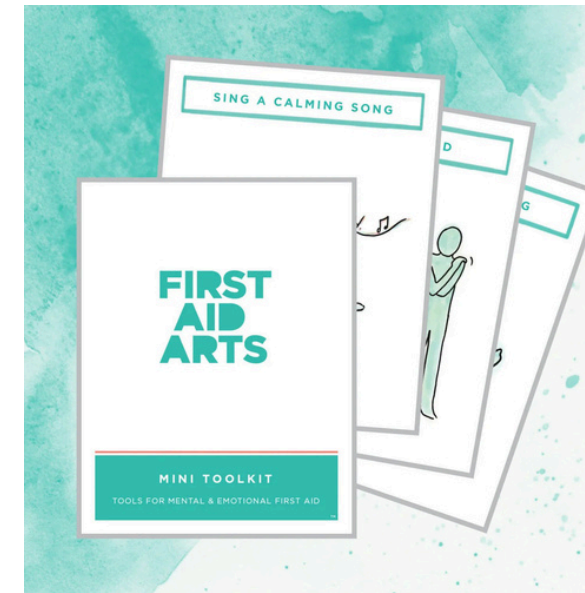
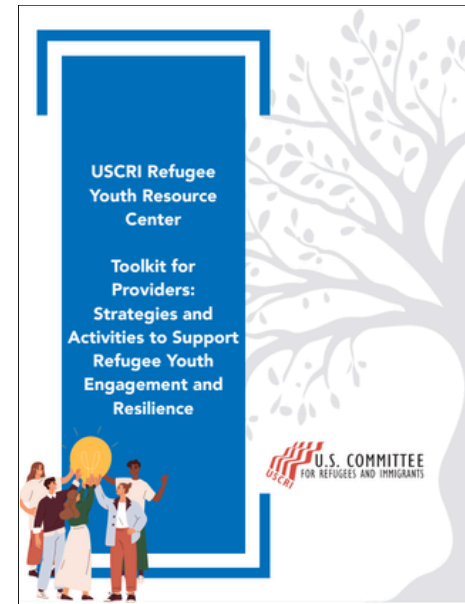
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REFUGEE YOUTH RESOURCE CENTER

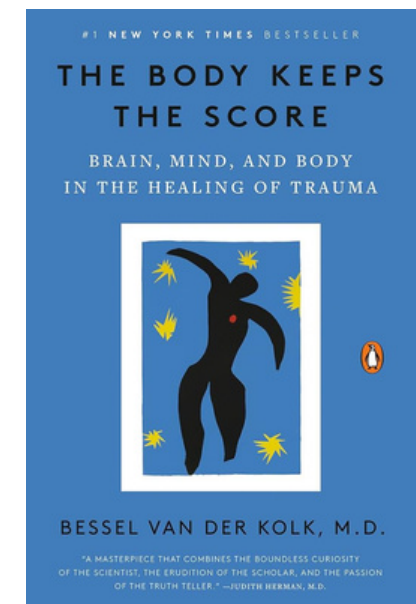
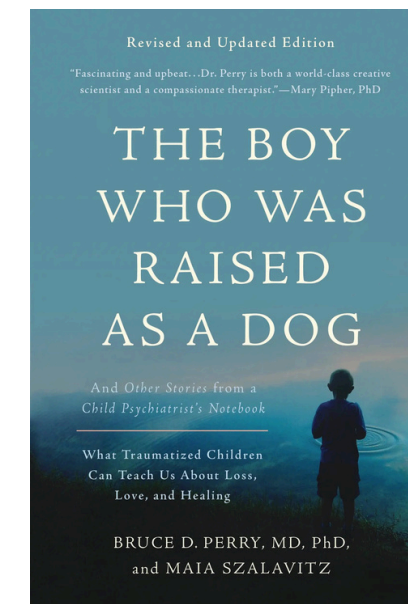
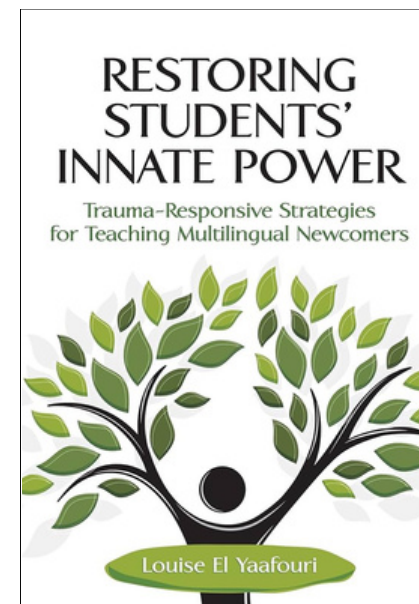
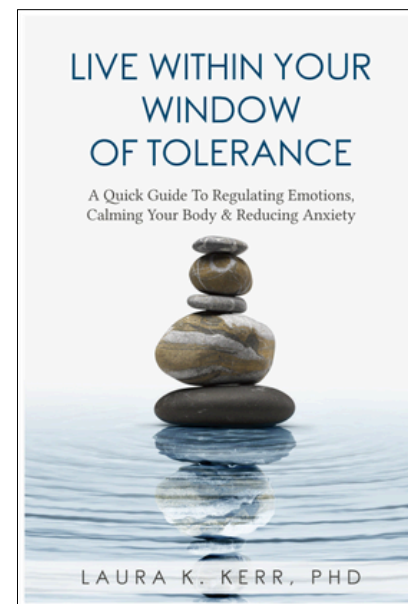
Improving outcomes for refugee children, youth, and their families through resources, education, and provider support

Resources

Toolkits



Books





Organizations



Information and training on
trauma-informed care
<https://nctsn.org>



National Help Line: (800) 662-4357
<https://www.samhsa.gov>



988: National Suicide Prevention Hotline
Help Line -800-950-6264
Text NAMI to 62640
Chat: [988 Lifeline Pre-Chat Survey](#)
Email: helpline@nami.org

Resources

Additional Resources



Switchboard - *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Newcomers and Working Across Cultures in Mental Health Services*

World Health Organization - *Mental Health of Refugees and Migrants: Risk and Protective Factors and Access to Care*

UNHCR - *Refugee Youth and Children*

Children & War Foundation - *Measures*

Multicultural Psychology Consultation Team - *Addressing Identities Worksheet*

Edith Grotberg, PhD - *A guide to promoting resilience in children: strengthening the human spirit*

Melanie Tervalon & Jann Murray-Garcia - *Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in Multicultural education*

Bev Moss-Reilly - *Understanding the Three E's of Trauma: A Path to Healing*

Council of Foreign Relations - *Global Conflict Tracker*

First Aid Arts - *Mental Health Toolkit*

USCRI - *Suicide Risk Assessment*

SAMHSA - *SAFE-T Suicide Assessment*



Thank You!

Contact Us:

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The production of this material was supported by Grant #90RB0054 from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) and do not necessarily represent the official views of ACF.