

SENIORS AND TORTURE



The longer one has lived in one culture, the more difficult it can be to settle into another. Refugee survivors of torture who are seniors have a particularly difficult time adjusting to a new culture and are at increased risk for many problems such as mental health problems, stress, and anxiety during resettlement. Seniors who are survivors of torture, particularly those who have been in a new culture for only a short period of time, are commonly isolated from everything they've ever known. In turn, many seniors in this situation are forced to rely heavily on younger relatives for financial, social, and psychological support. The dislocation of roles and loss of social respect in the circumstance can impact on the entire family.

The following two testimonies are, first, from an elderly Croatian man, and second, from an elderly Croatian woman, both of whom were tortured.

After May, 1991, when the aggression started they tried to kill me. In imprisonment in the camp, they tortured us, beat us, broke my teeth, my legs have suffered much. I fell into a coma and had to be taken to hospital. I was already on the list to be liquidated. They suggested I jump out the window. The old people, we were put onto separate buses from the others. We were driven at night and were unable to see where we were being taken to. We were told that our country no longer wanted us. I could never forget that they killed my husband, I never gave up

mourning, more so now when other members of my family are being killed and tortured again. It's as if fate were repeating itself.

To survive this kind of torture is a miracle. For seniors who are survivors of torture and manage to flee safely to Canada, survival continues to be challenging and difficult. It can be profoundly demoralizing for seniors in this situation because of their loss of status as respected elders in their community. In addition, the isolation imposed by language barriers and the alienation from a culture to which their younger relatives are able to adapt with greater ease can compound feelings of hopelessness and isolation. As the younger generations adapt to Canadian customs and values, the wisdom and experience of their elders can be lost.

Seniors who are survivors of torture have special needs (i.e., health care, community support) and these need to be accessible to them culturally, linguistically, and physically. Ethno-specific support programs are important in meeting the mental health and social needs of seniors in this situation so their participation is facilitated.

Unable to adapt and deal with their trauma, senior survivors of torture may remain alienated from their new environment as well as from their family members.

It is essential to remember that survivors of torture who are seniors (as all survivors of torture) have special needs. They also have many gifts and a wide range of abilities and skills. Through encouragement and support, the special needs of seniors can be met while encouraging and utilizing their skills for settlement of families and communities.