

Relating to Survivors of Torture in Bureaucratic Settings: Developing Sensitivity in Office Procedures

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Although torture is associated with physical pain, the main aim is to dehumanize and degrade victims to the extent that they feel like they are no more than "things". The attitude demonstrated by service providers who relate to survivors of torture is therefore extremely important. In order to avoid reinforcing the dehumanization of the torture experience, one must be sensitive to the individual who has survived such an experience. Willingness to understand the person and treat him or her decently, as a "whole person" rather than merely a "victim", is required. For survivors, being related to humanely, and understood as a unique individual helps reestablish a sense of self-esteem, as a person of value.

Avoid Labeling that Dehumanizes and Objectifies

Service providers need to develop sensitivity about what survivors of torture have been through. However, they should take care not to use the labels "refugee" or "victim of torture" in a way that objectifies individual survivors, implying that such labels sum up the totality of the person and their situation. Labeling can be a defence on the part of the service provider against the stresses produced by dealing with the individual's subjective, inner experiences. However, empathizing with the survivor of torture as a fellow human being, whose traumatic experience are only one aspect of the entirety of his or her life is much more helpful.

Service providers need to actively resist a prevalent attitude that refugees are a burden to Canadians and should not really be here. Sharing such misinformed attitudes, whether consciously or unconsciously will reinforce in the service provider a sense of superiority with regard to the survivor of torture which intensifies excessive detachment. It also promotes the attitude that survivors of torture should be thankful for whatever they get. Survivors of torture, like anyone else, can detect whether there is a genuine desire to be helpful or whether the service provider is just going through the motions.

Show Sensitivity in Discussing the Past

Refugee-survivors often have difficulty talking about their past experiences because of the great emotional distress involved in remembering what happened. Recounting past events may cause the survivors to experience them as if they were reliving the experience, rather than as something from the past from which they have some emotional detachment.

It is important to respect that survivors of torture may wish to keep certain information private for the present time. Survivors may have trouble containing strong emotional reactions to their past experiences. Pressuring them to talk about these experiences can overload their ability to deal with their feelings, rather than provide a helpful release.

As a result, when questioning is necessary, it is best to avoid a style which may resemble interrogation to a person who has been tortured. While certain information may need to be obtained, doing so in a way which is intrusive or insensitive generally leads to less trust and less information. The most helpful approach is to have a dialogue, and gently guide the individual through the experiences necessary to provide the required information.

It is common for survivors of torture, as a result of traumatic experiences with state authorities and security personnel, to have difficulty trusting others, particularly people in authority or people working for the government. This distrust can be overcome to some extent by clearly explaining what information is required, why it is required and what use is going to be made of it.

Develop Awareness of Ways Survivors May React

Service providers can encounter certain problems and frustrations dealing with survivors of torture in bureaucratic settings, which stem from the emotional distress commonly experienced by survivors of torture, along with disturbance in emotional and cognitive functioning. Developing awareness about how torture affects individuals will help service providers to understand their behaviour and how to work with them most effectively.

Survivors of torture can experience problems with memory and concentration, resulting in forgetfulness, confusion, saying things which appear to be contradictory, and missed appointments. These problems are intensified with increased anxiety. Service providers can therefore reduce the potential for problems by helping survivors of torture to relax, and showing a willingness to be patient. It will also be more productive if service providers view these difficulties as symptoms of emotional distress, rather than signs of uncooperativeness or lack of motivation on the part of the survivor of torture.

Survivors of torture also may be excessively withdrawn, due to depression, especially if they feel shame about their torture, as in the case of women who were sexually abused, as well as others. Service providers can be supportive by demonstrating a positive attitude, providing encouragement and hope that things will be better in the future, while at the same time appreciating realities associated with depression.

Survivors of torture can be overly demanding, as a result of excessive preoccupation with their own situation. They may show excessive dependency, produced or exaggerated by their experience of torture, unrealistic expectations about what is available in Canada, or belief that demanding is the way to get results. Refugee-survivors need to be informed in a firm, supportive manner about how things work in Canada and what are realistic expectations. They need to be reassured that failing to immediately obtain what they want is not due to personal rejection and may be normal, under the circumstances.

Survivors may express marked concern about relatives still at risk in their country, rather than dealing with their own problems. This can be intensified by feelings of guilt, especially if their relatives suffered as a result of them leaving the country, or are in a difficult financial situation. These concerns may play a positive role in helping distract the survivor from preoccupation with his or her own past experiences.

Towards More Supportive Interactions

Service providers who are able to communicate some basic knowledge about the refugee-survivor's country of origin will greatly increase his or her feeling of being understood. An empathetic approach includes listening to information provided about survivors' countries, rather than dismissing it as irrelevant.

It is important to avoid encouraging denial of the survivor's past, and communicating the idea that only what happens in "their new country" matters. The positive attachment which survivors of torture have for their country of origin is still important to them, even though they may have suffered greatly at the hands of government authorities there. Refugee-survivors fled persecution in their country, but they still regard it as "their country", especially if they were involved in the struggle for social justice or to change the political situation.

Practical assistance is very important to survivors of torture. Resolving difficulties associated with practical matters such as jobs, housing, day care and so on have a very high priority in their lives, much higher than talking about issues connected with the traumas they have lived through. Being able to provide practical assistance will greatly increase trust in the helping relationship.

It is of the utmost importance for service providers to recognize that although refugee-survivors face enormous difficulties, they also have many strengths. They benefit from being treated as competent individuals rather than being relegated to the passive role and limitations of "victim". Most have a strong sense of independence and are well motivated to improve their situation. Effective interaction with survivors of torture therefore requires service providers to relate to them as "regular" members of society, with "regular" expectations, while at the same time appreciating sensitivities and cultural differences.