

Refugee Trauma and Mental Health

Who is a refugee?

In 2022, there are over 100 million forcibly displaced people globally, including over 20 million refugees and over 50 million internally displaced people – this is the highest number of forcibly displaced people ever recorded.

Refugees & asylum-seekers are forced to flee their home country because of violence, persecution or conflict.



Refugees are recognized as having a well-founded fear of persecution (usually by the host country or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR).

Asylum-seekers have not yet been granted refugee status.

An internally displaced person has been forced to leave their home but has not crossed an international border.

Where are refugees living in 2022?

The majority of refugees reside in low-and-middle-income countries. Around one quarter of refugees live in refugee camps, while the remainder live in community or urban settings. In 2021, less than 1% of refugees permanently resettled in a new country, such as the USA, Canada, Sweden or Australia.

What kinds of experiences do refugees have?

Refugee experiences may be different to other trauma-exposed groups.

01

Refugees commonly report exposure to torture, mass violence, political terror, deprivation, gender-based violence, and conflict. These different types of traumatic events may occur repeatedly and over extended periods of time.

Refugees may also experience traumatic events associated with their forced displacement, including making dangerous journeys to reach safety.

Refugees endure significant losses. This can include the traumatic loss of a loved one, forced separation from family, as well as the loss of community and social connections, homes and livelihoods.

Following displacement, refugees often face ongoing insecurity and uncertainty regarding their future. This may include long periods of time in temporary accommodation, refugee camps or immigration detention.

03

Even if refugees resettle in a new host country, they often encounter significant daily stressors. These may include:

- Economic stressors relating to employment, financial security or safe housing
- Social stressors such as isolation or discrimination
- Settlement stressors including communication difficulties and not feeling connected to their new home.

02

What are the psychological consequences of refugee experiences?

Refugees' exposure to traumatic events related to conflict, persecution and displacement puts them at increased risk of developing a psychological disorder relative to the general population. Research estimates that one in three refugees may have a diagnosis of PTSD and/or depression. Other psychological conditions reported by refugees may include prolonged grief, moral injury, anxiety, complex PTSD and suicidality. These psychological difficulties may persist over the long-term, even following resettlement.

Research shows daily stressors experienced in the post-migration environment can adversely affect refugee mental health and exacerbate the psychological effects of past trauma.

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How do refugees cope with their difficult experiences?

Refugees are highly resilient and possess many strong coping mechanisms that they have developed to adapt to their circumstances. Many refugees will benefit from psychological treatments that are trauma-informed and culturally attuned. In a supportive and secure environment, with access to services and interventions that facilitate innate coping, refugees can recover and thrive in their new homes and communities.