





# Supporting the Behavioral Health Needs of Immigrant Students and Families





Alisa B. Miller, PhD

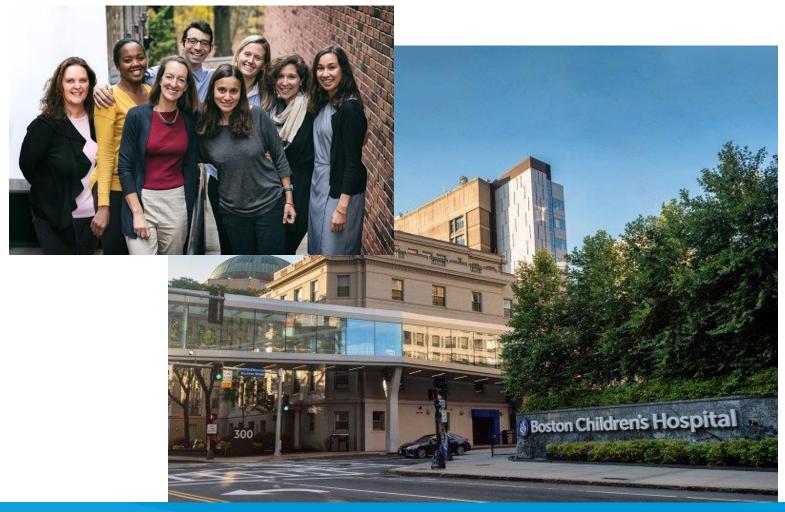
PBHUC In-Person Learning Community

Massachusetts Association for Mental Health (MAMH) meeting

November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025



## Boston Children's Hospital Trauma and Community Resilience Center (BCH TCRC)





# Refugee & Immigrant Assistance Center (RIAC)





## TCRC and RIAC: An Academic – Somali Community Partnership

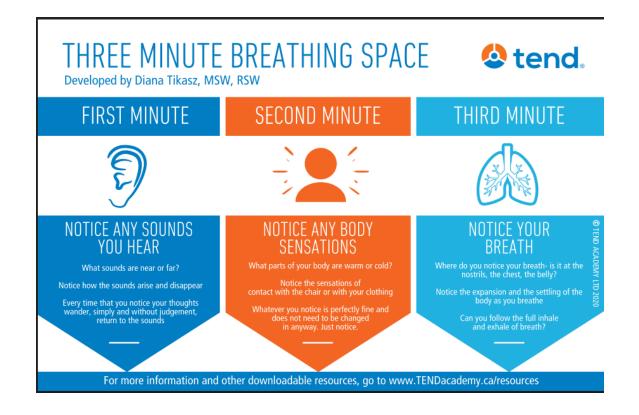






### Moment of Mindfulness

https://tendtoolkit.com/the-three-minute-breathing-space/





Forcibly Displaced Populations and the Migration Journey

Mental Health and the Impact of Trauma

### Agenda

Intersection of Trauma and Culture

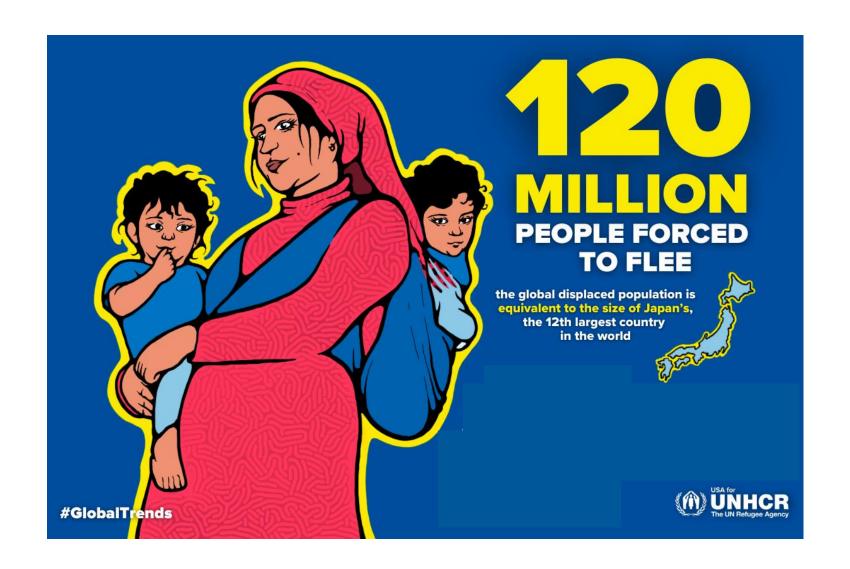
Parenting in a New Context

Take care of Self/Actions



## Forcibly Displaced Populations and the Migration Journey









## 1 in every 69 people on Earth have been forced to flee their home

UNHCR, 2024











### **Internally Displaced People**

Illegal Alien

**Immigrant** 

**Migrant** 

Newcomer

**Noncitizen** 

Lawful permanent resident

**Asylum Seeker** 

Refugee

**Undocumented** 

**Unaccompanied Minor** 













## Terminology is Powerful and Evolving

- Labels carry highly significant legal, political, and social meaning
  - Immigration status has direct implications in regard to rights, benefits, and resources that are afforded and available
- Terms also have the power to influence public perception and response



# Defining Forced Migration and Displacement

Involuntary or coerced movement of a person or people away from their home or home region in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.



## There is no single immigration story

- Designation as refugee or immigrant is a sociopolitical construction designed by political and socio-cultural systems at different times
- Forcibly displaced youth and families are amazingly resilient AND many understandably suffer the downstream effects of systematic trauma and oppression



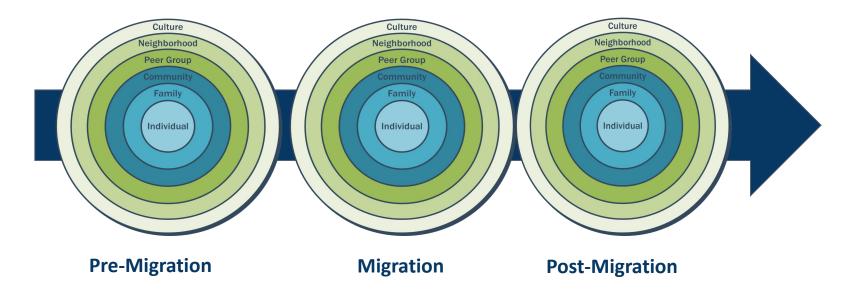


Culture Neighborhood Social Ecology **Peer Group** Model Community **Family** Individual Bronfenbrenner (1979). The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.



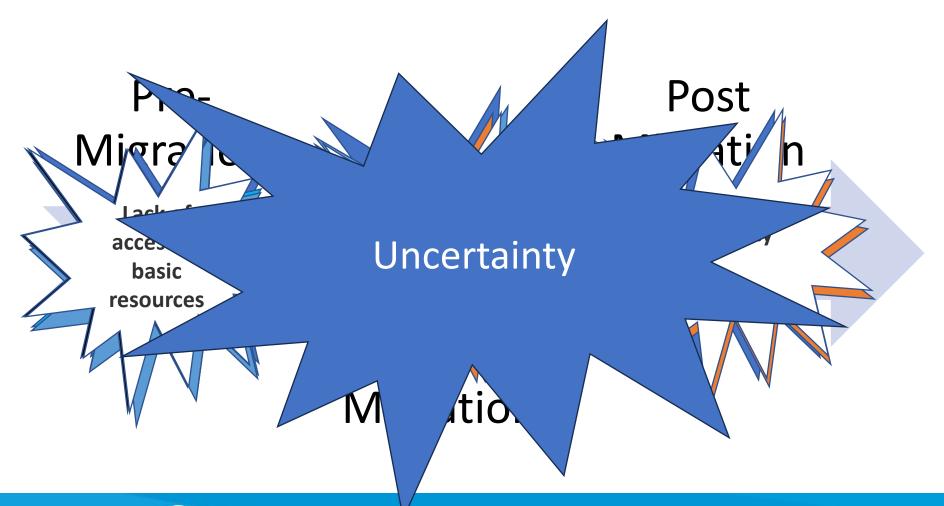


## Migration Journey: Pre, Migration, Post-migration





## Trauma Across the Migration Journey





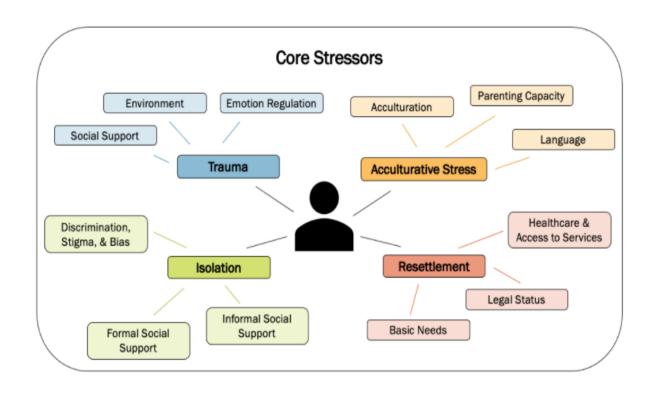


# United States as a focus of hope and new beginnings





## Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors



Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Web-based Toolkit:

https://redcap.tch.harvard.edu/redcap\_edc/surveys/?s=RCDFFHWK4P7THRL4





## Recognize Strengths

- Strong family connections and relying on one another
- Extreme bravery
- Well-utilized networks of communication among people of the community
- Power of word of mouth and ripple effect (one trusting relationship)





Mental Health and the Impact of Trauma



# Mental Health and Forcibly Displaced Communities

- Most forcibly displaced youth have witnessed violence
- Most common mental health diagnoses among refugees
  - Major depressive disorder, Post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and adjustment disorders, and substance use
- Lower rates of mental health service use, especially among undocumented populations
- Even though this population experiences disproportionately high trauma exposure, many do not have chronic psychiatric impairment

(Derr, 2015; Jaycox et al., 2002; Refugee Health Domestic Guidance, CDC, 2024; Steel et al., 2022; Silove et al., 2014)





# Mental Health Impact of Forced Migration and Displacement

Disconnection from self, others, dignity Trauma Compounding Effect What we expected and did not receive Loss Ancestral grief Cultural Adjustment Adaptation to a new culture Caregiver stressors and Bereavement Basic needs Resettlement Stress Legal stressors Navigating a new community





## **Defining Traumatic Stress**

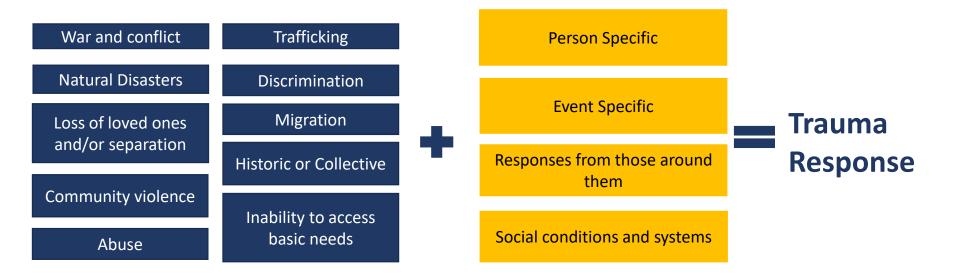
Experiences or situations that are emotionally and psychologically painful and distressing and that overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving them powerless

- Traumatic experiences are inherently complex never weakness or failing
- Trauma and post-trauma adversities can strongly influence development
- People can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma that are influenced by culture

(Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice)



## Trauma Response



**Migration Adversities** 

**Availability of Resources** 





#### Short-Term

**Traumatic Response** 

#### Fight

Urge to act

Anger outburst

Irritability

#### Flight

Urge to leave

Withdrawing

Avoiding others

Avoiding discussing

#### Freeze

Feeling numb

Unable to move or act

Stiffness

Difficulty making a decision

#### Fawn

Deny own needs

People pleasing

Difficulty with boundaries













#### Delayed

**Traumatic Response** 

#### **Emotionally**

Shock, disbelief, confusion

Horror, fear

Anger, rage

Depression, sorrow, grief

Emptiness, numbness

Feeling disconnected or distant from others

Shame, self-loathing

Humiliation

Helplessness

Hurt, betrayal

Desire for revenge

Feeling dirty and "icky"

#### **Physically**

Shock, (cold, faint, disoriented)

Feeling "out of body"

Feeling adrenalized or exhausted

Sweating or heart palpitations

Soreness and tension

Changes in sleep patterns, appetite

Changes in interest in sex

Constipation of diarrhea

Easily startled by noise or touch

More susceptible to colds and illnesses

Pre-existing medical conditions, or unrelated medical conditions get worse

#### Cognitively

**Nightmares** 

Flashbacks (reliving traumatic memories)

Intrusive thoughts and images

Difficulty concentrating

Expecting to be judged or rejected by others

Changed beliefs about yourself

Changed beliefs about life or the world

Changed beliefs about other people

Thinking or reacting to situations as thought it were the past

Questioning one's faith

Suicidal thoughts













#### Persistent

**Traumatic Response** 

#### **PTSD**

A more intensive, long term impact on:

- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Physiological Experiences

Impacts functioning & daily experience

#### Other Lingering

**Traumatic Responses** 

Depression

Anxiety

**Acute Stress** 

Stronger Pathways for Activation













## Trauma and Development

- Development of our brains is use dependent
- Development of particular skills depends on
  - Need for a particular skill
  - Available resources
  - Environmental feedback and input
- The experiences of complex trauma in childhood impact development
  - Prioritizing developmental skills and tasks relevant to survival
  - Interference of developmental tasks most dependent on availability of safe attachment system and context



#### Developmental Areas Impacted by Traumatic Stress

#### **Common Presentations**

Safety & Regulation



Threat to physical and/or psychological safety; under or over reaction to stimuli; increased activity level; withdrawal; difficulty identifying, expressing, and managing emotions; difficulty with impulse control

Connection & Relationships



Difficulty trusting others; difficulty in building and maintaining relationships; over or under reliance on others

Cognition & Learning



Difficulty with expressive and receptive language impaired executive functioning; difficulty with memory; difficulty with planning ahead and anticipating future; abstract reasoning skills

Sense of Self



Alterations in self-perceptions; low self-esteem; alterations to external world; increased hopelessness and helplessness













## Trauma Expression is Culturally Bound

#### **Culture affects:**

- symptom expression
- help seeking patterns
- healing mechanisms
- meaning ascribed to trauma
- · type of trauma experienced
- Cultural bereavement, cultural trauma, generational trauma
- Acculturation

When cultural differences are not understood they are often misconstrued as deficits, and over-pathologized.



What does it mean to be trauma-informed?



### Applying a Trauma Lens...



"What's wrong with this individual?"

to

"What has happened to this individual?"

"What's the individual's perception of what is happening to them?"

"What strength(s) help them survive?"





## Being trauma-informed means grounding our work in five key principles

- **1. Safety** creating environments where youth feel physically and emotionally secure.
- **2. Trustworthiness** being consistent, honest, and predictable.
- Choice giving youth a sense of control whenever possible.
- **4. Collaboration** working with youth and families, not for them.
- Empowerment highlighting strengths, resilience, and cultural identity.



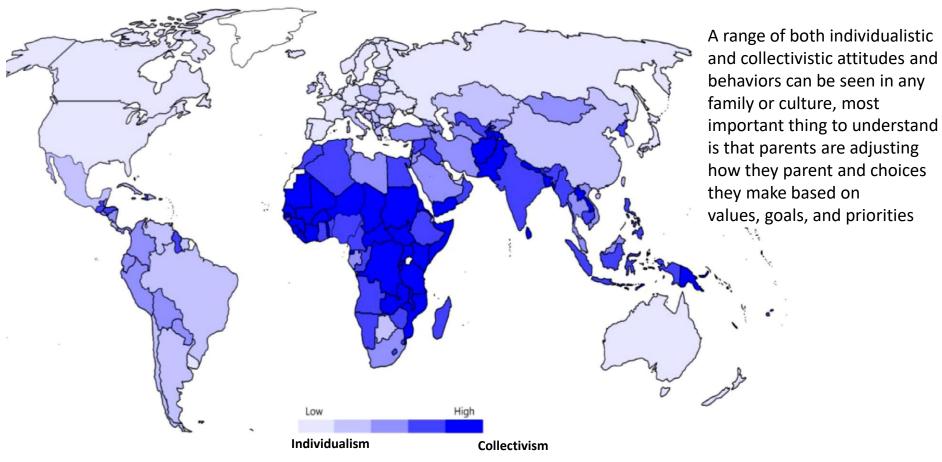
### Parents & Parenting in a New Context











Pelham, B., Hardin, C., Murray, D., Shimizu, M., & Vandello, J. (2022). A truly global, non-WEIRD examination of collectivism: The global collectivism index (GCI). *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, *3*, 100030.



## Individualistic Cultures

Emphasis on autonomy, individual achievement, self-reliance, and self - assertiveness.

Raising children becomes an individualistic matter.

## Collectivistic Cultures

Emphasis on collective achievement, sharing, collaboration, and maintaining harmony in relationships. Encourages interdependence.

Raising children is a community effort.



## Culture and Parenting

Parenting through the migration journey--many strengths

Social Ecological Model—caregivers are most important in the development of a child; caregivers who are able to soothe and provide for their children can help maintain attachment and feeling of *relative* safety

Trauma and resettlement stressors may lead to a breakdown in responsive, supportive parenting

(Brycs, 2007)







## How Trauma Impacts Parenting

Caregivers may have their own triggers and their own survival state response; may impact how they engage and discipline their kids; Intergenerational transmission of trauma



(Suardi, 2017)







## The Acculturation Gap

Children often acculturate more quickly; can greatly impact power dynamics within the family; conflict between generations

Leads to breakdown in communication resulting in poor parent-child relations.

Parents and elders who traditionally are highly respected, treated as

'wise, know-all' feel disempowered

(Renzaho et.al 2011)







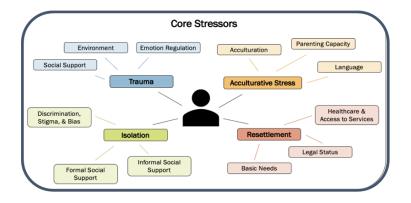


Attending to Contextual Factors of Youth and Families with a History of Forced

Displacement



## Individual Action: Connection to services is (In)valuable



## **Connect** with services that will help with core stressors:

- Resettlement: housing and legal
- Isolation: increasing social support
- Trauma or mental health services
- Acculturation: English Language Learning classes

Note: Something seemingly small may be very meaningful



## Individual Action: Information is power

- Educate youth and families about their legal rights
  - Disseminate "Know Your Rights" information
- Incorporate Deportation Preparedness into Patient Care Planning

#### **AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS TOOLKIT RECOMMENDATIONS**



- Appoint a power of attorney, a trusted adult, who in the event a parent or guardian is taken into detention or deportation proceedings, could take care of the child.
- Maintain a copy of medical and immunization records, give these to a trusted adult.
- Maintain a copy of the child's birth certificate and immigration related documents like passports, with a trusted adult.
- Maintain documentation of public benefits a child is receiving; a parent's deportation might affect these benefits.
- Maintain a record of child's school records, give these to a trusted adult.



Image taken from website:

IRed Cards / Tarjetas Rojas | Immigrant
Legal Resource Center | ILRC.





### **Deportation Planning**





## STEP-BY-STEP FAMILY PREPAREDNESS PLAN

How immigrant families can more proactively prepare for **immigration emergencies** that arise

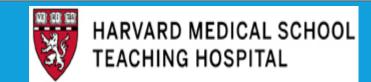
**NOVEMBER 2024** 

Every family should have a family preparedness plan in case of an emergency. The ILRC's **complete** <u>Step-by-Step Family Preparedness Plan</u>, which includes template forms to help you prepare your plan as well as California-specific information on childcare planning, is available <u>here</u> [Recommended].

This condensed version is divided into three sections that give guidance on family preparedness planning, including childcare planning, finding out about your immigration options, and knowing your rights with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the police.

**PART I: MAKE A CHILDGARE PLAN** 







Search our Website.



iupported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition (OFLA)

Demographics & State Data

**OELA Resources** 

Resource Library

**Grant Programs & Federal Policy** 

News and Events

#### Newcomer Toolkit

The Newcomer Toolkit is designed to help U.S. educators; elementary and secondary teachers, principals, and other school staff who work directly with immigrant students—including asylees and refugees—and their families.

The Newcomer Toolkit has 5 chapters, and contains an overview, sample tools, and resources.





## Times of Uncertainty Resources

#### 3 resources:

Coping in Times of Uncertainty: A Resource for Immigrant Youth

Supporting Your Child in Times of Uncertainty:

- Immigrant Caregiver Resource for Early Childhood (3-10 Years)
- Immigrant Caregiver Resource for Teens (11-18 Years)

#### **Available in:**

English Spanish Haitian Creole Dari





#### Resources for additional support for you and your child:

- 988 Mental Health Lifeline: Call or text 988 for immediate support and crisis intervention (https://988lifeline.org)
- <u>UnitedWeDream</u>: List of free or low-cost mental health services for undocumented immigrants (https://unitedwedream.org/our-work/undocuhealth-wellness/)

This resource was developed by the Boston Children's Hospital Trauma and Community Resilience Center. For more information please visit https://www.childrenshospital.org/programs/trauma-and-community-resilience-cent







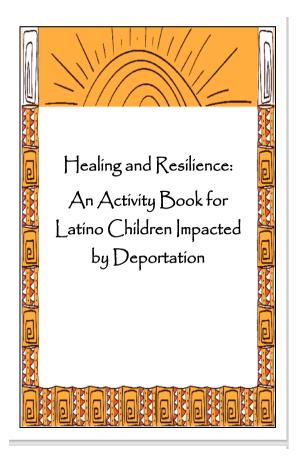




#### SHOULD CARETAKERS SPEAK TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEPORTATION AND SEPARATION?

Caretakers often wonder if it is better to keep silent and worry that conversations could cause fear or further traumatize a child. Although it can be an uncomfortable topic, it is important for affected families to speak with their children – whether that be a parent affected by deportation or a caretaker caring for a child separated from a parent.

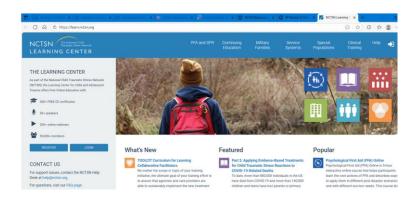
Having an open conversation at the child's developmental level can help to





## Individual Action: Information is power

### Educate yourself



NCTSN Learning Center – As part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), the Learning Center for Child and Adolescent Trauma offers Free Online Education. You will need to register to enroll in the offerings (e.g., written materials, e-learning modules, webinars);

registration and resources are free of charge.



Refugee Trauma | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network





### Trauma and Community Resilience Center Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Toolkit - FREE

Language Learning

Basic needs

Financial

Healthcare.

Core Stressors

esettlem



 $\mathbf{A}_{\mathbf{A}_{\mathbf{A}}}$ **F** 

#### Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Toolkit

This toolkit will provide you with information about four core stressors that refugees and immigrants may face and sample questions to guide your assessment. These sample questions are not intended as a substitute for clinical judgment. If this is your first time using the toolkit, take your time, explore the sections, and then try the assessment component.

We are excited to announce that, as of November 2019, we have implemented updates throughout this toolkit. Previous users may notice subtle changes in language and framing. All updates are in line with up-to-date practice recommendations and feedback from users.





If you would like to learn more about the Four Core Stressors Framework, please consider watching this webinar presented by Dr. Luna Mulder & Dr. Jeff Winer from the Boston Children's Hospital Trauma and Community Resilience Center.

↑ View media

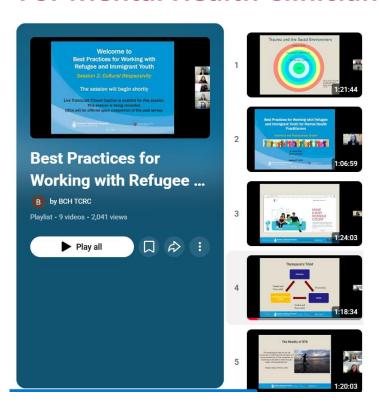
https://redcap.tch.harvard.edu/redcap\_edc/surveys/?s=RCDFFHWK4P7THRL4





### TCRC Best Practice Series - FREE

#### **For Mental Health Clinicians**



#### **For Educators**

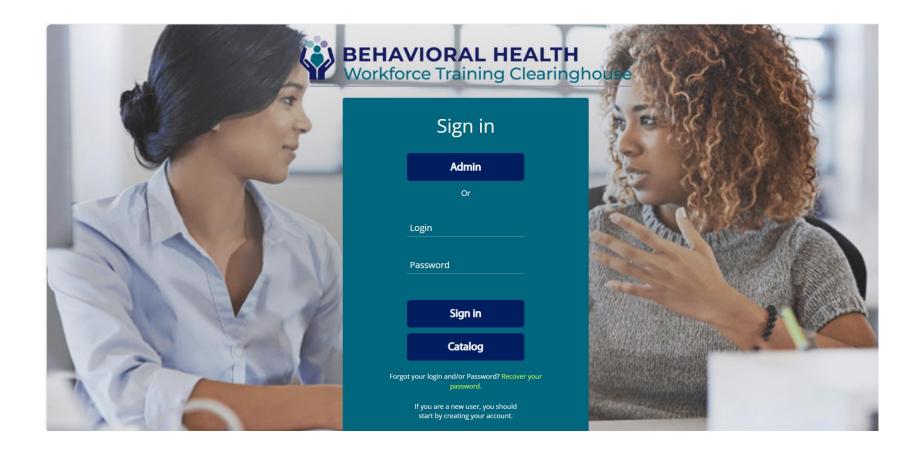






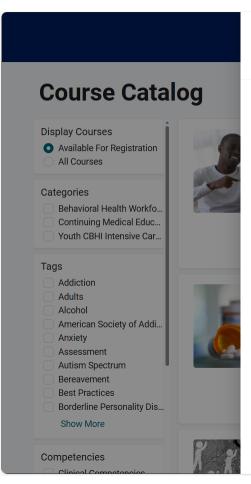


## BH Clearinghouse Learning Portal.





### **Available Course**



### Approaches to Mental Health Care for Forcibly Displaced Youth and Families Course

#### Description:

This 3-hour training consists of three modules:

Module 1 will review the three phases of the migration journey, and the impact that the migration journey has on youth and families. It will also cover the four core stressors that are commonly experienced by refugee and immigrant youth and families when they arrive in the United States, as well as an assessment tool that can be used to determine appropriate interventions.

Module 2 will review best practices for both providers and interpreters regarding how to best work together to make sure that youth and families have appropriate language access to treatment.

Module 3 will focus on the mental health needs of refugee and immigrant youth and families and how to provide culturally responsive assessment and services. Providers will learn how to adopt a trauma-informed, strengths-based, culturally responsive stance when working with refugee and immigrant youth and families.

#### Objectives

After completing this training participants will be able to:

- 1. Describe the migration journey of forcibly displaced populations
- Assess the four core stressors as outlined in the Refugee and Immigrant Core Stressors Toolkit (RICST)
- 3. Use the four core stressors framework in assessment and intervention planning
- 4. Explain the definition of interpreter and distinguish interpreter roles
- Describe the therapeutic triad
- 6. Apply two recommendations for building a true partnership with an interpreter before a session
- Describe the impact of adversity and traumatic stress on mental health and wellbeing of forcibly displaced youth and families
- 8. Use skills to facilitate culturally responsive clinical assessments with forcibly displaced youth and families
- 9. Demonstrate best practices in culturally responsive and trauma-informed treatment engagement and delivery

#### **Continuing Education Credits:**

 MA Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor: This course has been approved by the Department of Public Health, Bureau of Substance Abuse Services/LADC Unit for 3 contact hours for Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors



## Individual Action: Balance and Collaboration

- Recognize and build on parental strengths.
- **Provide** information
- Balance: Honoring culture, values, and experience with other ways of doing
- Collaboration: Working together respectfully while honoring difference



The Photo by PhotoAuthor is licensed under CCYYSA.



## Individual Action: Inquiring about the migration journey

SAMPLE STRATEGY	SAMPLE LANGUAGE
Learn from the family/individual by asking direct questions	"What brought you to the US?"  "Where were your children born?"  "Where was your family before coming to the US?"
NOTE: If a child or family doesn't seem to be ready to share/answer some questions, don't force it.	



## Individual Action: Inquiring about Etiology and Healing

SAMPLE STRATEGY	SAMPLE LANGUAGE
Learn from the family/individual by asking direct questions	"What do you think is the reason you/your child is having the concern you brought up today?"
	"What do others in your community think causes these types of concerns?"
	"Who else have you sought help from for these concerns?"
	"What other ways of healing, recommendations or advice have you sought out about these issues?

NOTE: Culture informs understanding of health and wellness.



## Individual Action: "SANCTUARY" Collaboration

SAMPLE STRATEGY	SAMPLE LANGUAGE
Open a dialogue by placing individuals' fears in context and generalizing any challenges.	"Many of my students are currently experiencing anxiety about immigration problems"
Provide reassurance by contextualizing, explaining your motive for helping, and emphasize confidentiality.	"Many people are going through similar struggles right now. You are not alone."
	"This kind of anxiety can impact your health. You are safe to express your concerns here."
	"I will not share your immigration status."

Content taken from: \*Mejias-Beck J, Kuczewski M. Sanctuary doctoring: supporting undocumented patients and others affected by immigration concerns. Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine. https://hsd.luc.edu/media/healthsciencesdivision/bioethics/documents/Sanctuary-Doctoringpresentation-June2018.pdf

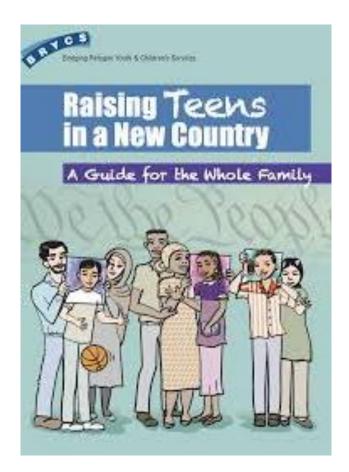




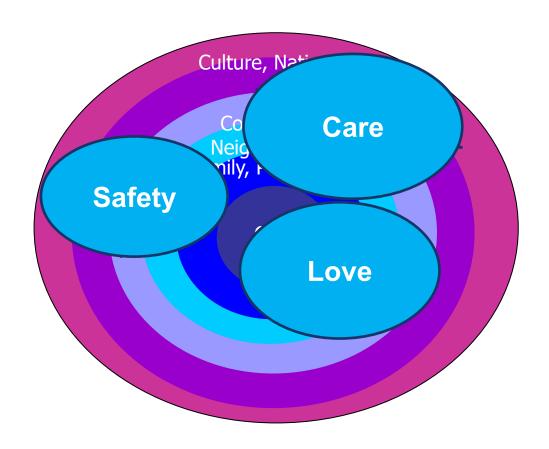
## Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)

- · Parenting in a new culture
- Safety
- Health/Nutrition
- Schools
- Cultural Identity
- Discipline
- Friends
- Discrimination & Bullying
- Self-Esteem & Body Image
- Dating & Relationships

Available in multiple languages...Arabic, Spanish, Somali, Nepali, Pashto, Dari



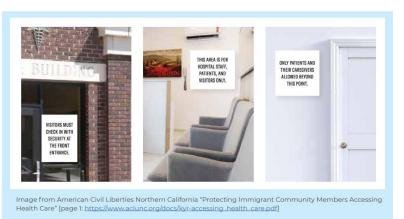
## INDIVIDUAL ACTION: SIGNALS OF CARE





### Institutional actions





- Implement a policy that limits cooperation with immigration enforcement
  - What is your institutional protocol should a law enforcement official appear on campus or otherwise contact you
  - Who is the designated person to handle the situation?
- Designate Public and Private Spaces
- Attend to staff who have shared lived experience (e.g., migration, cultural background)
- Incorporate patient navigators' representative of many cultures as part of our clinical teams to improve care and build trust



# Working with Trauma Impacted Communities

**Compassion Satisfaction** 

Pleasure and satisfying feeling that comes from helping other.

**Burnout** 

Misfit between demands of job and resources available.

Compassion Fatigue

Emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others.

Secondary Trauma

Trauma responses to specific exposure to traumatic material.

Vicarious Trauma Negative transformation in the helper that results from the empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their trauma

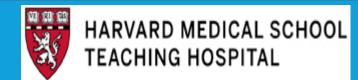












## The Reality of Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet."

Rachel Naomi Remen, MD





### **Compassion Satisfaction**

Positive aspects of the work, such as inspiring and rewarding work with youth and families and belief that one's work makes a meaningful contribution to clients and society.















### Activity: Remembering Your Whys

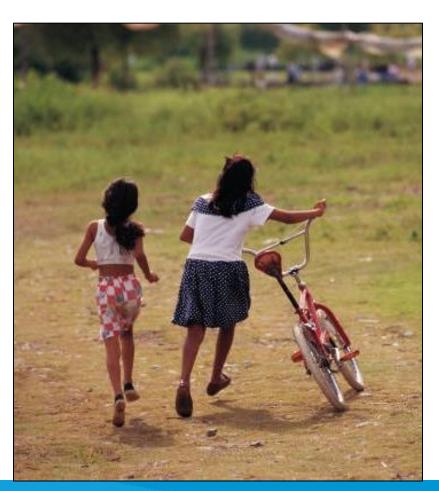
- Think about ONE rewarding moment at your job.
- What are TWO things that you love/enjoy about your job?
- Think about THREE people whose lives you've touched.

Adapted from Volk, K.T., Guarino, K., Edson Grandin, M., & Clervil, R. (2008). What about You? A Workbook for Those Who Work with Others. The National Center on Family Homelessness.





### THANK YOU!



#### **Contact Information:**

- alisa.miller@childrens.harvard.edu
- amiller@riacboston.org

