

Overcoming the Psychological Effects of Trauma

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” Helen Keller

Many refugees coming to Ireland have experienced traumatic and often life threatening events including bombing, torture or rape or may have witnessed such events. Healing from trauma involves rediscovering inner strength and resilience and a feeling of optimism for the future. Having traumatic experiences can obscure your sense of competency and belief in yourself. This leaflet is designed to inform you about the types of mental health problems people can experience after traumatic experiences. The principles of trauma recovery are also outlined.

Normal human reactions to extreme stress include psychological and physical symptoms and these symptoms are not a sign of weakness. Psychological problems can be made worse by the presence of physical injuries, pain and ongoing stress. Being in a new environment in a new country with an uncertain future is very stressful.

People without prior childhood trauma who have been functioning well prior traumatic experiences generally recover well psychologically over time. Having stable living arrangements and good social supports greatly facilitates natural recovery. People who have endured longer and more severe trauma or who have a prior history of trauma and mental health problems may need specialist intervention. Mental health services in Ireland are mainly delivered on an outpatient basis and are accessed via your doctor.

Examples of Psychological trauma symptoms include:

- Recurrent intrusive daytime thoughts or images of the trauma
- Recurrent traumatic nightmares
- Severe emotional distress or physiological reactions at reminders of the trauma
- Feeling watchful or on guard without reason
- Exaggerated startle response
- Marked irritability
- Concentration or short-term memory problems
- Feeling distant or cut off from others
- Numbing of emotion
- Avoidance of thoughts or situations that serve as reminders of the trauma

Symptoms of trauma fluctuate in severity over time and can range from very mild to very severe. You may be feeling well for periods of time and then symptoms may reappear after a stressful event or situation.

People may experience other psychological issues as they adjust to life in Ireland including:

- Grief
- Lack of interest or pleasure
- Depressed mood
- Appetite disturbance
- Energy or motivational disturbances
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts

Moreover, your views of the world, of human cruelty, and possibly your faith may be severely impacted by your difficult experiences and things you have lost in your previous life.

These are things that you can do to help feel better

- Think about what things you were good at before the problems began and how you can use these skills again in re-building your life. Instead of just looking back on all the things that you have lost in life, also think of how you want the future to be in your life. Think about what you can still do rather than what you are no longer able to do.
- Do some kind of exercise every day such as walking, riding a bicycle, working in a garden, or playing sports. If you have injuries ask your doctor what form of exercise would be helpful.
- Try to focus on small things you can do to help others.
- Do discuss your problems with people you can trust.
- Think of ways to help yourself relax. Some people like to walk near a lake, work in a garden, listen to music, or participate in arts and crafts. When you are thinking too much about your problems, try to do something that is relaxing to you.
- Many people find taking part in religious activities helpful.
- You may be grieving lost family members or friends, try to think of appropriate ways to remember them.
- Try to find ways to meet new people, either from your own group or from other groups. Being alone too much of the time is not good.
- Avoid drinking a lot of alcohol or using drugs. People sometimes use alcohol or drugs to help them feel better. Take only drugs prescribed by your doctor.
- Try to eat foods similar to the foods you ate in your country and try to avoid fast foods like biscuits and cake.
- While it is helpful to keep in touch with events in your own country, try not to spend too much time on social media viewing war or violence.
- It may be helpful to keep a diary or write down things you are worrying about. This will help you to keep track of your progress.
- Try to read inspiring accounts of people who have endured great difficulties and have overcome them.
- Be patient with the process of recovery and try to notice small improvements over time.

Know that, if necessary, there are good trauma treatments which can be accessed via your doctor. To get access to these services your doctor has to refer you and it is important that you attend any appointments offered even if you feel better on the particular day of the appointment. These treatments tend to work best when other factors such as your housing situation have been worked out.

Material adapted from:

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