

Training about Trauma

By Belinda Green

For many people in Australia, war and human-to-human conflict is a far off reality. Facing persecution and organised violence by government forces, or a rogue militia is also a distant truth. But for people from refugee backgrounds these events are a part of their life story.

Yet, how do we translate these experiences and their effects to those who are working with refugee clients but who have only seen such events on the news or at the movies? Also, what can we do to convey these experiences without reducing refugees to either helpless victims or extraordinary heroes? At STARTTS we take these dilemmas very seriously.

Part of our mission and integral to our systemic approach is training mainstream service-providers about the needs and experiences of people from refugee backgrounds. Our training team aims to assist and resource individuals and organisations to provide appropriate and culturally sensitive services to refugee survivors of torture and trauma.

STARTTS' Training Co-ordinator, Melanie Leemon, and her team oversee a comprehensive training program at STARTTS which includes professional development workshops, seminars, clinical master-class evenings, psychovisual online lectures, home and community care service workshops, community sector workshops, and outreach education across NSW.

The most requested and popular STARTTS training is the introductory workshop, which is adapted and delivered according to the needs of each organisation.

The introductory workshop familiarises participants with STARTTS' framework and models of approach in working with refugee clients. Some of the issues and topics for discussion include up-to-date information on the global refugee context; the traumatic experiences of refugees in the context of organised violence; the ways in which torture and trauma impact upon the individual, the family, and the refugee community; and a look at some of the issues and difficulties faced during the resettlement process.

This training also provides participants with some practical strategies on how to work with refugee survivors, with emphasis on the client's recovery, effective means of interpersonal communication, taking into account the complex needs of clients, and rais-

ing awareness about potential triggers in the work environment. The importance of self-care and the possible dangers of vicarious trauma (where workers are adversely affected by their clients' experiences) are also highlighted.

STARTTS' training philosophy aims to deliver participatory and engaging workshops. Training programs undergo a thorough review and standardisation process annually to ensure that they remain on the frontline of current research and evidence-based material. We maintain a detailed evaluation and feedback practice as part of our review process. STARTTS' approach to training also incorporates adult learning principles that recognise the knowledge and expertise of participants. Workshop participants include students, volunteers, and workers from the health, community, welfare and education sectors, as well as other mainstream organisations and government departments.

Over the past 12 months STARTTS' outreach program has performed more than 135 hours of training for 2,870 people who work with people from refugee backgrounds.

One of the highlights of the past year has been the design and implementation of a specific training package for child protection workers from Community Services (CS). As an organisation, CS was interested in finding ways to build rapport, trust and connections with refugee communities.

Thanh Nguyen from the CS Multicultural Programs Unit had identified that there was a need for case-workers to understand the "effects of refugee experiences on individual, parental and family wellbeing and functioning" and to appreciate the way in which torture and trauma could impact upon people's trust in government services.

By working in collaboration with STARTTS to design a training package that dealt with the impacts of refugee trauma on children's physical, psychological and social development, and how this affects family dynamics and resettlement, these workshops have been successfully rolled out to 15 CS offices across metropolitan Sydney and regional NSW.

According to Mohamed Dukuly, one of the STARTTS presenters, developing a partnership between STARTTS and CS based on their shared understanding of trauma and its impact upon children and families, was one of the most positive outcomes



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to these trainings.

Thanh Nguyen explained that CS child-protection workers were now better equipped to meet the needs and challenges of working with people from refugee backgrounds as a result of the STARTTS training.

The House of Welcome, a not-for-profit, drop-in centre for asylum seekers also sought training from STARTTS this year. As volunteer co-ordinator Jo Lee explained, "This sector often engages very passionate workers and volunteers. As a result the risk of over-involvement, burnout, or simply placing an untrained or an unprepared worker into client-support roles is an ongoing difficulty."

Even though the House of Welcome runs its own training and induction program Jo Lee recognised the need to provide specialised training in trauma and self-care.

Volunteers from the House of Welcome found the STARTTS training to be particularly helpful in understanding the importance of boundaries and strategies to maintain workers' wellbeing. Information on the signs of trauma and how it impacts upon families and communities and practical tips for working cross-culturally while encouraging workers to be aware of their own behaviour, including their beliefs and values, were also useful.

A wide range of service providers have also recognised a need for specialist training on the im-

pact of torture and trauma amongst refugee clients. Hospital staff, mental-health teams and specialist multicultural services within Sydney's metropolitan and regional areas have sought training from STARTTS to improve their knowledge and skills on how to work with refugee clients who may be affected with posttraumatic stress disorder or have complex needs as a result of their experiences.

In the coming months, a series of new outreach workshops are being developed in response to recent developments within the refugee sector. These include addressing the needs of asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, as well as creating introductory training packages for services that work with refugee children and adolescents.

At a recent introductory training course one of the participants commented that the STARTTS' workshop reinforced her experiences growing up as a child of refugee parents. The training helped her to understand some of her parents' behaviour and to further appreciate their experience of fleeing their homeland and resettling in Australia. It also consoled her to know that her father had sought counselling at STARTTS.

Her comments reinforce the importance of the work done by the STARTTS training team and their goal of ensuring that the needs of refugee survivors are met through the delivery of dynamic and stimulating training packages throughout NSW. **R**