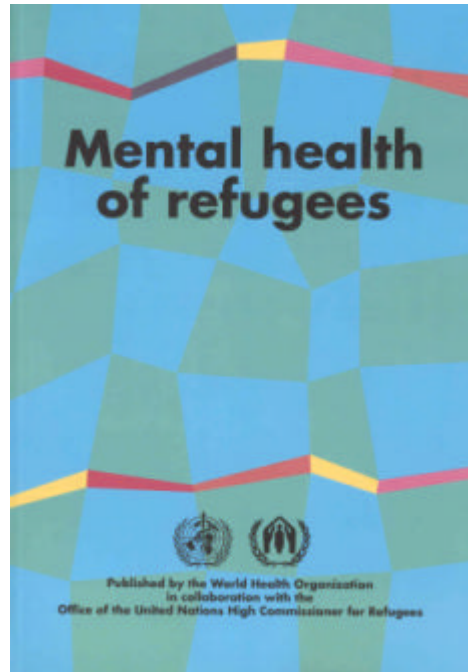


MENTAL HEALTH OF REFUGEES

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The World Health Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations with primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. Through this organization, which was created in 1948, the health professions of some 190 countries exchange their knowledge and experience with the aim of making possible the attainment by all citizens of the world by the year 2000 of a level of health that will permit them to lead a socially and economically productive life.

By means of direct technical cooperation with its Member States, and by stimulating such cooperation among them, WHO promotes the development of comprehensive health services, the prevention and control of diseases, the improvement of environmental conditions, the development of human resources for health, the coordination and development of biomedical and health services research, and the planning and implementation of health programmes.

These broad fields of endeavour encompass a wide variety of activities, such as developing systems of primary health care that reach the whole population of Member countries; promoting the health of mothers and children; combating malnutrition; controlling malaria and other communicable diseases including tuberculosis and leprosy; coordinating the global strategy for the prevention and control of AIDS; having achieved the eradication of smallpox, promoting mass immunization against a number of other preventable diseases; improving mental health; providing safe water supplies; and training health personnel of all categories.

Progress towards better health throughout the world also demands international cooperation in such matters as establishing international standards for biological substances, pesticides and pharmaceuticals; formulating environmental health criteria; recommending international nonproprietary names for drugs; administering the International Health Regulations; revising the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems; and collecting and disseminating health statistical information.

Reflecting the concerns and priorities of the Organization and its Member States, WHO publications provide authoritative information and guidance aimed at promoting and protecting health and preventing and controlling disease.

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INTRODUCTION

Disasters and wars are happening constantly. One sure result is that some people have to leave their homes and countries and become refugees. While many refugees suffer physically from injury or hunger, far more suffer psychological harm. It is estimated that there are 18 million refugees in the world today, and twice that number of persons are displaced within their own countries. In the past, concern has often focused on the deaths, physical diseases and traumas that resulted from wars and disasters but nowadays there is also growing concern about the psychosocial and mental health consequences. Such consequences are not always short-lived; some can last a lifetime and some may even have an influence on the children of those affected. Yet in the midst of these negative experiences there may also be positive signs. Refugees should not be seen as helpless people who totally depend on help they are given. Refugees are often people with strong determination to survive, which is why they became refugees. People who provide help to refugees or other displaced persons should look for the capacity to survive and cope and try to help build up this positive element. In this way refugees and other displaced persons will be encouraged to use their own abilities to help themselves.

What can be learned from this manual? This manual is intended to help those who work with refugees or other displaced persons to:

- recognize people with high levels of stress and teach them how to cope with their stress;
- understand what "functional complaints" are and recognize and help people with such complaints;
- help refugee women who have been raped;
- understand the mental health and development needs of refugee children;
- understand traditional medicine and work with traditional healers;
- recognize common mental disorders;
- deal with alcohol and other drug problems;
- help victims of torture and other violence.

WHO IS THIS MANUAL FOR?

This manual is written primarily for relief workers, community workers, primary health care workers, primary school teachers and others who provide support to refugees and other displaced persons who have fled war or disaster. These personnel may be working for international organizations such as UNHCR, WHO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies or other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in this field. The whole of the manual will be relevant to many workers while others, according to their responsibilities, will find parts of it useful. It is written in simple language and the reader does not need special training in psychology or mental health. Health professionals may also find it useful, particularly as an aid for training and supervising others. The term "refugees", as used in this manual, should be understood as including all displaced persons.

ADAPTATION OF THE TEXT

The manual provides broad guidelines, which should be adapted as necessary to the local culture. It may also be useful to translate the manual into the local language, even if the persons using it know English as a second language. The process of translation will help to put the principles set out in the manual into a form that is relevant to those who will use it, thus helping them to be more effective.

THE NEED FOR TOLERANCE AND ACCEPTANCE

Relief workers may or may not be of the same religion, culture or social class as the refugees themselves. If they are not, they should be encouraged to be tolerant of other religions, customs and beliefs. In difficult times, people need the support provided by their religions and customs, and relief workers should be aware of this. Refugees have left the security of their homes and they need to feel accepted in their new surroundings.

THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE HELPERS

Finally, those who work with refugees and other displaced persons need to take care of their own mental health and put the principles in this manual into practice for themselves. A helper who is mentally exhausted cannot help anyone. Refugee workers need leisure time and the opportunity for healthy enjoyment of their life away from their work. The first unit of this manual aims to help workers prepare themselves for their role and help others as effectively as possible.

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