

Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network  
Southeast Asia Refugee Mental Health Training

## Trauma & Psychological Consequences for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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HEALTH EQUITY INITIATIVES

### Fleeing Persecution

LOSS  
INSECURITY  
THREAT  
TRAUMA

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### Traumatic Event and Traumatic Stress

**What is a TRAUMATIC EVENT?**  
A traumatic event is an event in which the person "experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others"

American Psychiatric Association (APA), (2001). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth edition Text Revised). Washington, DC.

Examples of Traumatic Events	Self Experienced	Witnessed / Heard
Single / Accumulated	Getting wounded	Torture
	Being threatened with death	Sexual violence
	Being subjected to gross human rights violations	Killing (strangers or loved ones)
	Significant loss (of people or property)	Dead bodies, mutilations, severely wounded
	Confrontation with actual fighting (crossfire, bombardment and shelling)	Stories of traumatic experiences

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### PTSD-Result of Experiencing a Traumatic Event

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Case Study

STS, a 38 year old Sri Lankan man, came to Health Equity Initiatives (HEI) in order to be assessed and treated for symptoms of PTSD. Currently, he has concerns about his personal safety due to the risk of deportation as he is not registered under UNHCR. STS reported to be experiencing severe headaches, trouble sleeping with consistent nightmares, excessive sweating on his hands and memory loss. He also reported having flashbacks regarding his previous traumatic experiences and would sometimes "see a man" in his room.

STS was diagnosed with PTSD by a psychiatrist in United Kingdom 3 years ago due to his history of being physically and psychologically abused on various occasions since 1999. According to STS, he was physically assaulted, harassed, and threatened by "thugs" and policemen after he confronted the Minister who attempted to take over his father's land in Sri Lanka. STS had suffered severe injuries to his head, face, neck and body due to the attacks (mostly with sticks, knives and physical attacks) and once had gasoline poured on him. STS escaped and fled to the United Kingdom with the help of an agent from India, where he stayed for 3 years and received psychiatric treatment as well as legal advice from a lawyer. However, STS was denied refugee status from the court in UK and was sent to India. His documents were also confiscated by the border agency. Then, he was detained for 3 months by immigration officers in Bahrain airport during his flight transit and was sent to jail where he was incarcerated for another 3 months. He attempted suicide in the jail in Bahrain due to the physical and psychological torture there (i.e. not given food and medication, forced to eat meat). After that, STS was deported back to Sri Lanka from where he would travel in/out to/from India. However, he was abducted and almost murdered in Sri Lanka which had led him to escape to Malaysia in year 2011.

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### PTSD-Result of Witnessing a Traumatic Event

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – Case Study

TT, a 39 year old Karen man, was a participant in Health Equity Initiatives' (HEI) mental health screening. He was found to have moderate depression and anxiety. Upon assessment, TT reported that there was "something heavy" in his heart and he was having sleeping difficulties. He had nightmares and felt that his head was "burning". He also stated that he had gastric problems.

During the clinical interview, TT reported witnessing his parents being killed during a shoot-out by the Burmese army in Myanmar. He had also witnessed some of his relatives being burned alive in year 1997. As such, he has refused to speak the Burmese language and is easily frightened. He is afraid to hear any "bad news" about happenings in Burma.

According to TT, it is impossible for him to forget his traumatic experiences which make him feel depressed. TT arrived in Malaysia on 28 December 2010 and is registered by UNHCR.

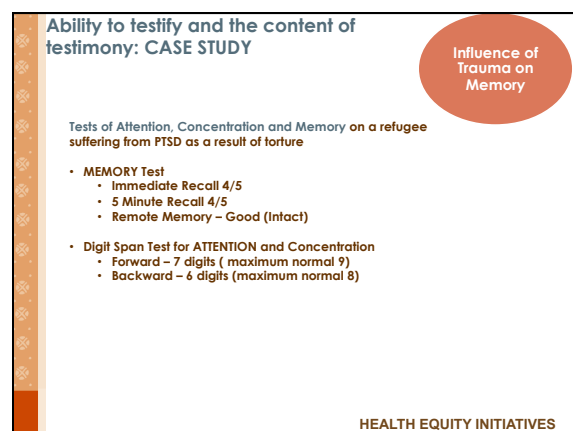
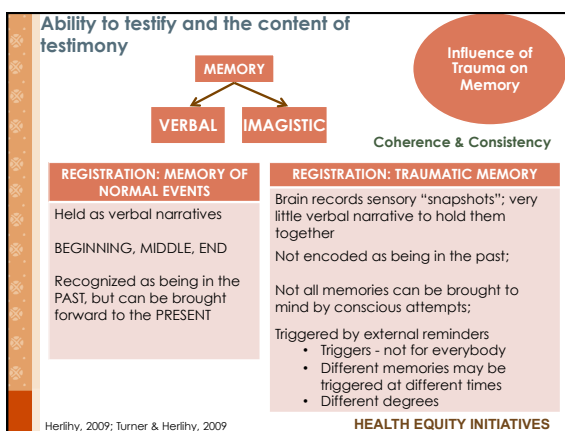
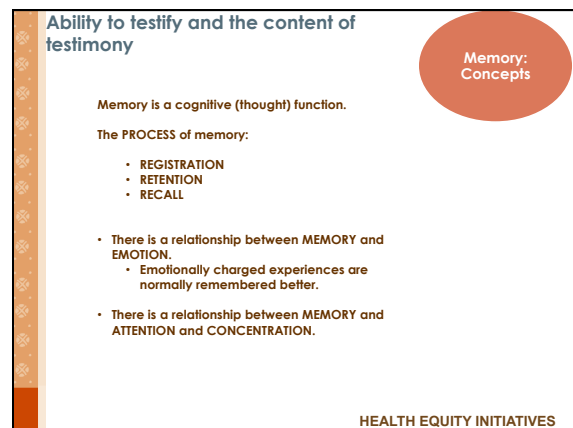
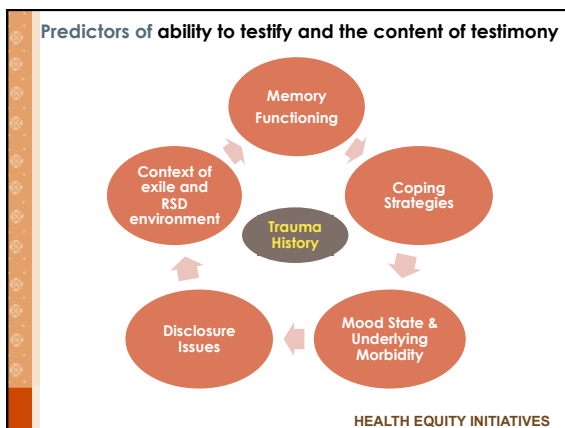
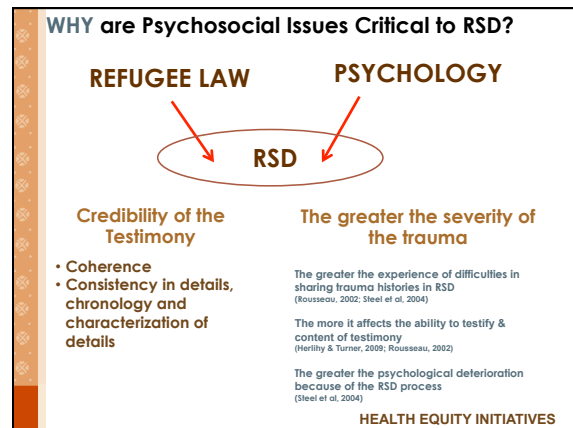
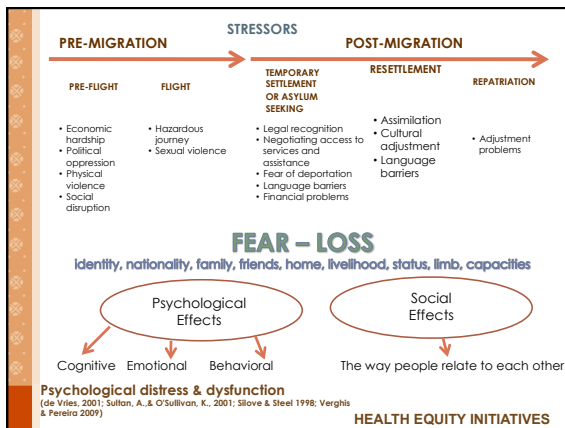
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### Traumatic Event and Traumatic Stress

**What is TRAUMATIC STRESS?**  
Traumatic Stress occurs due to a traumatic event and results in a response that is physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral.

**Difference between STRESS and TRAUMATIC STRESS**  
Traumatic stress is different from general stress as the predecessor for traumatic stress is a traumatic event and as for general stress, the predecessor is a non-traumatic event.

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

**Influence of Trauma on Memory**

**Trauma produces memory blocks** (McNally, Clancy, Schacter, & Pitman, 2000)

**Trauma compromises ability to focus and concentrate** (Steel et al., 2004)

Study in UK-Repeated interviews on 27 Kosovan and 12 Bosnian refugees to investigate consistency of recall in accounts of persecution:

- Discrepancies in peripheral rather than central details
- Refugees with high levels of PTSD presented with more inconsistencies when the time interval between the interviews was longer

Herlihy, Scargg & Turner, 2002

Memories of traumatic events such as torture can be **incomplete**.

'boundary restriction' – a narrowing of focus that causes a failure to remember information that is on the visual or acoustic periphery of the traumatic experience.

Vloeberghs and Everit Bloemen, 2008

- Modifies perceptions of time and distorts time sequences
- Terr, 1983 in Rousseau et al, 2002
- Distorts perceptions of space
- Pynoos and Nader, 1989 in Rousseau et al, 2002

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

**Influence of Trauma on Coping Strategies**

**AVOIDANCE**

- Deliberate and conscious coping mechanism
- E.g. Psychological numbing

[Ms M] related her recent history to the court: her brother had been killed, her boyfriend mutilated and tortured to death, and her cousin had been detained and tortured. She had been present when another cousin was pulled out of the house and shot to death by Salvadorian security forces. After an attempt was made on her father's life, she was sent out of the country by her family and was now seeking political asylum in the United States. Ms M's application for asylum was denied for lack of credibility. The judge felt that no one who had truly lived through all that would be able to speak about it so calmly and without any expression of emotion. He interpreted her lack of affect as evidence that she had been coached and was lying (p.82) (Aron, 1992 in Steel et al, 2004)

**DISSOCIATION (DSM IV)**

- Unconscious coping mechanism
- Disintegration of functioning of identity, memory, consciousness and perception of the environment.
- Derealization- alteration in the perception or experience of the external world so that it seems strange or unreal
- Depersonalization - feeling of being outside of yourself without any sense of control

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

**Mood State & Underlying Morbidity**

**Emotional state of refugee effects trauma narratives**

Two different accounts of the same incident by a refugee:

"we were badly beaten"  
"we were slapped around"

Herlihy, Scargg & Turner, 2002

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

**TRAUMA → SHAME & NON TRUST → DISCLOSURE PROBLEMS**

**DISCLOSURE ISSUES**  
Non Disclosure  
Delayed Disclosure  
Partial Disclosure

**Disclosure of experiences that are shameful and humiliating**

A research study about the experiences of 27 refugees' and asylum-seekers' with traumatic histories in legal interviews:

- 22 felt that the interviews were difficult
- 12 reported difficulties in disclosing personal details.

Frequently cited reasons

- emotional impact of disclosure
- feeling too traumatized
- afraid and ashamed to talk about the past

Bögner, Brewin & Herlihy, March 2010

**Trust – Torture**  
Torture specifically targets the social bonds of trust. One key purpose of organized state violence is to prevent people trusting each other.

Turner, 1995, in Turner, 2009

Outcome of partial disclosure

- Lesser judgment (interpretation) by decision maker – from persecution to discrimination / harassment (Steel et al, 2004)
- Fabrication of evidence?

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

**Context of exile and RSD environment**

**RSD environment**

A research study about the experiences of 27 refugees' and asylum-seekers' with traumatic histories in legal interviews:

Results:

- Interviewer qualities emerged as the strongest factor in either facilitating or impeding disclosure
- Disclosure was based on interpersonal, situational (interview) and contextual factors

Bögner, Brewin & Herlihy, March 2010

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony-RSD Context

**Context of exile and RSD environment**

**Brief Psychotic Disorder – Case Study**

AB, a 39 year old Chin man was referred to Health Equity Initiatives (HEI) to be assessed and treated for symptoms of psychosis. He was reported to be depressed after his registration was suspended by UNHCR on 26 May 2012. Upon his return to Pahang, AB reported to have heard voices talking to him when he is alone. He also claimed that he was being followed by a group of people who wants to harm him and hid himself in the forest. He was accompanied back to Kuala Lumpur in order to be taken care of by his community leader and treated for wounds on his body due to the cuts from thorns in the forest. However, he ran away twice as he claimed that he was "following somebody" and reacted aggressively (i.e. bit his leader's hand) when his community members attempted to take him home. On one occasion, he was also found to be wondering around the street by the police who alerted his leader. Currently, AB is receiving psychiatric treatment from HEI and stated that his auditory hallucination persisted although the intensity has decreased. He also reported to be feeling sad due to the suspension of his registration and is constantly afraid that other people might harm him.

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### Ability to testify and the content of testimony

Context of exile and RSD environment

**CONTEXT OF EXILE**

**Detention**  
 Study that followed 33 asylum seekers held in detention for an average of 2 years:

- chronic state of fear and apprehension
- A feeling that no one can be trusted
- psychotic symptoms
- chronic impairment in concentration
- Being unable to perform even simple tasks

Sutton and O'Sullivan, 2001

**Vicarious Traumatization**  
 Indirect transfer of trauma through verbal accounts of the claimant to decision maker or others involved in the process

Review of 40 referrals of cases rejected by the Immigration & Refugee Board, Canada- Result of vicarious traumatization of Board members

- Cynicism
- Lack of empathy
- Trivialization
- Officers evading or refusing to hear the details of traumatic incidents

Rousseau et al., 2002

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### Benefits of a legal-mental health approach

Consideration of psychological factors that impact trauma narratives will lead to a more effective assessment of applications by decision makers

Prevention of "retraumatization" (acute exacerbation of trauma related distress)

Referrals made by legal professionals to mental health professionals and vice versa increases well being of the claimant

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### Thank You

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