

GUIDE FOR VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

To support refugees' mental well-being



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Table of content

Introduction	4
Purpose and objectives of the Guide	4
To whom is this Guide for?	4
Importance of mental well-being support for refugees	5
How to use this Guide	6
Understanding refugees experience and cultural competence	8
Trauma-informed approaches and communication skills	14
Practical support and resource navigation	20
Self-care and sustainable support	26
Conclusion	33
Recap of key points	33
Ongoing learning and development	33
Call to action for creating welcoming and supportive communities	33

Introduction

Purpose and objectives of the Guide

The Guide for Volunteers and Community Leaders supporting refugee mental well-being was developed in the scope of the Erasmus+ project NewFuture – Better wellbeing for the refugees in their new future, that run between 2023 and 2025.

Its main objectives are as follows:

- **Enhance cultural competence:** promote cultural sensitivity and strategies for developing cultural competence when working with diverse refugee populations and address misconceptions and stigma surrounding mental health in refugee communities.
- **Implement trauma-informed approaches and develop effective communication skills:** introduce trauma-informed care and its application in supporting refugee mental well-being, provide guidance on recognising signs of trauma and stress in refugees, focus on communication techniques, including active listening, empathy, and non-verbal communication in cross-cultural contexts, and offer strategies for building trust and rapport with refugees.
- **Facilitate integration and resource navigation:** support refugees in accessing healthcare, social services, housing, education, and employment in their new environment, and encourage the development of supportive community networks to reduce social isolation.
- **Promote self-care** for volunteers and community leaders: emphasize the importance of self-care and provide strategies for managing secondary trauma and burnout and offer tools for building resilience and maintaining sustainable support practices.

To whom is this Guide for?

This Guide is specifically designed for volunteers and community leaders from various backgrounds and experience levels who work directly with refugees in various settings such as refugee camps or community centres and play a crucial role in supporting their mental well-being.

Volunteers can range from newcomers just starting their journey in refugee support to experienced individuals looking to enhance their skills. They may be formally affiliated with organisations or informally engaged in community-based efforts. Community leaders targeted by this Guide include established community figures who interact with refugee populations, religious leaders, cultural mediators, representatives of refugee-led organisations, and local government officials and social workers involved in refugee integration.

These groups are essential in providing front-line support to refugees, as they often have the most direct and frequent contact with refugee communities. This positions them ideally to identify early signs of mental health challenges, provide immediate, culturally sensitive support, bridge the gap between refugees and formal mental health services, and foster community integration and social connections.

Volunteers and community leaders have specific roles and responsibilities in supporting refugee mental well-being. Volunteers provide day-to-day support in various settings such as refugee centres and community events, assist with practical needs like language support and navigating local services, offer emotional support and a listening ear, and organise and participate in community-building activities. On the other hand, community leaders act as cultural bridges between refugee communities and local institutions, advocate for refugee needs within broader community contexts, coordinate support efforts, mobilise resources, and provide guidance on cultural sensitivities and community dynamics.

This Guide also addresses different levels of experience to ensure relevance and value for a wide range of individuals. For new volunteers, it offers a basic introduction to refugee experiences and mental health challenges, fundamental communication skills and cultural sensitivity training, clear guidelines on roles and boundaries, and information on when to seek professional help. Experienced volunteers will find advanced techniques in trauma-informed care, leadership skills for coordinating volunteer efforts, strategies for sustainable long-term engagement, and opportunities to contribute to training and mentoring programmes. Emerging community leaders can benefit from skills in community needs assessment and resource mapping, basics of project management and volunteer coordination, and an introduction to advocacy and policy engagement. Established community leaders will find advanced conflict resolution and mediation techniques, strategies for building sustainable support networks, guidance on collaborating with mental health professionals and institutions, and leadership strategies in promoting mental health awareness and reducing stigma.

Importance of mental well-being support for refugees

The importance of mental well-being support for refugees cannot be overstated. Refugees often experience significant trauma and stress throughout their journey, from the events that forced them to flee their homes to the challenges of adapting to a new environment. These experiences can have profound and lasting impacts on their mental health, affecting their ability to integrate into new communities, find employment, and rebuild their lives.

Thus, mental well-being support is crucial in helping refugees process their experiences, develop coping mechanisms, and regain a sense of control over their lives. It plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of trauma and preventing the transmission of mental health issues to future generations. Moreover, addressing the mental health needs of refugees is essential for their overall health and well-being, as mental and physical health are closely interconnected.

Therefore, proper mental health support can enhance refugee's resilience, enabling them to overcome obstacles and contribute positively to their new communities. It also helps in reducing the stigma surrounding mental health issues within refugee populations, encouraging more individuals to seek help when needed. By providing comprehensive

mental well-being support, volunteers and community leaders not only assist refugees in healing from past traumas but also empower them to build fulfilling lives and become active, engaged members of their new societies. This support is fundamental to upholding the human rights and dignity of refugees and it contributes significantly to the creation of more inclusive, understanding, and cohesive communities.

How to use this Guide

This Guide is a resource for volunteers and community leaders supporting refugee mental well-being. While it is beneficial to read the Guide sequentially, you can also refer to specific sections as needed. Each module focuses on a different aspect of refugee support, building on previous information. Engage with the case studies, reflection questions, and practical tips throughout the Guide to deepen your understanding. Apply the knowledge you gain to your work with refugees and reflect on your experiences. Consider discussing the content with fellow volunteers or community leaders to enhance your learning and keep this Guide easily accessible for quick reference in your work.

Remember, this Guide is a flexible tool to support your important work with refugees, so adapt its use to your specific needs and challenges.

UNDERSTANDING REFUGEES EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE



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Understanding refugees experience and cultural competence

In our interconnected world, the refugee crisis poses significant humanitarian challenges. This module aims to equip volunteers and community leaders with essential knowledge and skills to support refugees' mental well-being effectively by exploring their complex experiences, from pre-migration trauma to adaptation challenges in new cultures. You will gain insights into their resilience and develop cultural competence to provide sensitive support. This module also addresses diverse cultural perspectives on mental health, challenging misconceptions and stigma. Therefore, you will learn culturally appropriate communication strategies and how to recognise refugees' strengths and resilience. In the end, you will be better prepared to offer compassionate, informed support, fostering a welcoming environment for refugees in your community. Your enhanced skills will contribute significantly to their well-being and successful integration.

Section 1 – Challenges faced by refugees

Refugees encounter a complex array of challenges throughout their journey, which can be broadly categorised into three phases: pre-migration, displacement, and post-migration.

Pre-migration trauma

Pre-migration trauma often stems from exposure to war, persecution, or natural disasters. Many refugees have witnessed or experienced violence, loss of loved ones, or severe deprivation. These experiences can lead to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The severity and impact of pre-migration trauma can vary widely, influenced by factors such as the duration of exposure, the nature of the events, and individual resilience.

Displacement stress

The displacement phase, which occurs during flight and in temporary settlements, is characterised by profound uncertainty and loss. Refugees often face dangerous journeys, separation from family members, and extended periods in refugee camps or transit countries. This phase is marked by a loss of home, community, and often identity. The stress of displacement can manifest in various ways, including heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, and difficulty in forming new relationships due to fear and mistrust.

Post-migration difficulties

Upon arrival in a host country, refugees face a new set of challenges. These include language barriers, where difficulty in communication can lead to isolation and hinder access to essential services. Cultural adjustment poses another significant hurdle, as adapting to new social norms, values, and systems can be overwhelming and disorienting. Economic hardship is common, with many refugees struggling to find employment or facing restrictions on working, leading to financial stress. Additionally, discrimination and social

exclusion present additional obstacles, as prejudice and negative attitudes in host communities can significantly impact mental well-being and integration. Legal uncertainties add to the stress, with the asylum process often being lengthy and stressful, accompanied by the looming fear of deportation. Moreover, many refugees experience a loss of social status and professional identity, as highly skilled individuals may find themselves unable to practice their professions in the new country.

These challenges can compound the effects of pre-existing trauma and create new mental health concerns. The cumulative impact of these experiences often results in what is termed the 'refugee trauma experience', a complex interplay of past trauma, ongoing stressors, and adaptation challenges.

Section 2 – Cultural perspectives on mental health

Understanding diverse cultural perspectives on mental health is crucial for providing effective support to refugees. Mental health concepts and approaches to healing can vary significantly across cultures, influenced by historical, religious, and social factors.

Western vs. non-western approaches

Western mental health models often emphasize individual psychology, cognitive processes, and biomedical explanations for mental distress. In contrast, many non-western cultures view mental health through a more holistic lens, considering the balance between mind, body, spirit, and community.

Collectivist vs. individualist societies

The cultural dimension of collectivism versus individualism significantly influences mental health perspectives. Collectivist societies often prioritise group harmony and interdependence. Mental distress might be seen as a disruption to social harmony rather than an individual problem. On the other hand, individualist societies tend to focus on personal autonomy and self-reliance, which can shape how mental health issues are perceived and addressed.

Expression of mental distress

The way mental distress is expressed and interpreted can vary widely. For instance, some cultures may not have specific terms for conditions like depression or anxiety, instead describing physical symptoms or using culturally specific idioms of distress, while in others, expressing emotional pain openly may be discouraged, leading to somatisation – the physical manifestation of psychological distress.

Help-seeking behaviours

Cultural norms significantly influence help-seeking behaviours. For instance, in some cultures, seeking help outside the family or community may be seen as bringing shame or dishonour and traditional healers, religious leaders, or community elders may be preferred over western-style mental health professionals.

Section 3 – Developing cultural competence

Cultural competence is a crucial skill for those working with refugees. It involves developing awareness, knowledge and skills to work effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Components of cultural competence

- **Cultural awareness:** this involves recognising one's own cultural background, biases, and assumptions. It requires ongoing self-reflection and a willingness to challenge one's own worldview.
- **Cultural knowledge:** this entails learning about different cultural practices, beliefs, and values. It includes understanding historical contexts, migration patterns, and the specific challenges faced by different refugee groups.
- **Cultural skills:** these are the practical abilities to interact effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. This includes communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, and the ability to adapt one's approach based on cultural context.

Cultural humility

Cultural humility is an essential aspect of cultural competence as it involves recognising that one can never be fully competent in another's culture, maintaining an open mind and a learner's attitude, being willing to challenge one's own assumptions and biases, and acknowledging power imbalances in helper-client relationships.

Developing cultural competence: a process

Becoming culturally competent is an ongoing journey rather than a destination.

Key steps include:

- **Self-assessment:** regularly reflect on your own cultural background, biases, and areas for growth.
- **Continuous learning:** engage in formal training, read diverse literature, and seek out cultural experiences.
- **Community engagement:** build relationships with diverse communities and learn directly from their experiences.
- **Supervision and feedback:** seek guidance from culturally competent supervisors and be open to feedback.
- **Adapting practices:** modify your approach based on the cultural needs of the individuals you are supporting.



Learning from a case study

Ziauddin Samadi, an Afghan refugee, is a testament of the complexity of refugee experiences. Upon arrival in Portugal, he encountered significant economic and social challenges. Making friends with locals was particularly difficult as he struggled to communicate in a new language. He often found himself misinterpreting social cues, leading to awkward encounters that only heightened his feeling of being an outsider. The search for employment proved to be another challenge as, despite his skills, Samadi found that his qualifications did not easily translate into his new home. However, amidst these struggles, Samadi found a lifeline in the Afghan community in Portugal. The Association of Afghan Community became a second family, a place where shared experiences and cultural understanding provided comfort and support. It was here that Samadi began to bridge the gap between his past and present, finding ways to preserve his cultural identity while adapting to his new home. As Samadi's role in the Afghan community grew, he became a living example of the importance of cultural competence in supporting refugees. The pre-departure orientation sessions and information provided to local communities, which he now helps facilitate, are bridges of understanding, helping both refugees and host communities to navigate the complexity of cross-cultural interaction.

To reflect...

- How can community organisations, like the Association of Afghan Community in Portugal, be better supported to facilitate refugee integration? Consider both practical resources and policy-level changes that might enhance their effectiveness.
- Reflecting on Samadi's journey from struggling with cultural barriers to becoming a community leader, what strategies can be implemented to identify and nurture leadership potential among refugees in your community?
- Considering the challenges Samadi faced with employment and professional identity, how can host communities and organisations create more inclusive pathways for refugees to use their skills and qualifications? What role can cultural competence play in this process?

Want to know more?

<https://blog.speak.social/long-journey-home-road-toward-refugees-integration>



Practical tips

- Invest time in learning about the cultures of the refugees you work with. Organise cultural exchange events where refugees can share their traditions, food, and customs with volunteers and the local community. This mutual learning process can help bridge cultural gaps and foster understanding, much like how Samadi's involvement in the Afghan community helped him navigate cultural differences.



- Set up informal language exchange sessions where refugees can practice the local language with native speakers, while also teaching volunteers their native language. This reciprocal learning environment can help address language barriers more effectively and create meaningful connections, addressing the communication challenges Samadi initially faced.
- Pair skilled refugees with local professionals in similar fields to help them navigate the job market and potentially regain their professional identities. This can include CV writing workshops, interview practice, and networking events. Such initiatives can help address the employment challenges Samadi and many refugees face, leveraging their existing skills and experience in the new context.



Volunteers and community leaders do's and don'ts

■ Do create safe spaces for cultural expression by establishing regular events where refugees can freely express their cultural identities through art, music, or traditional practices. ■ Do facilitate trauma-informed approaches by learning more about trauma-informed care principles, recognising that many refugees have experienced pre-migration trauma. ■ Do facilitate access to legal and administrative support by setting up information hubs or partnering with legal professionals to provide guidance on asylum processes, work permits, and other bureaucratic procedures.	■ Don't overlook the importance of non-verbal communication and avoid relying solely on verbal language for interaction. Be aware that gestures, facial expressions, and personal space norms can vary significantly across cultures. ■ Don't impose western mental health concepts universally and refrain from applying western psychological frameworks without considering for cultural differences. ■ Don't neglect the potential for refugee leadership and avoid treating refugees solely as recipients of aid. Instead, actively involve them in leadership roles within support programmes.
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Further reading

- **Cultural competence in refugee service settings**
www.ritaresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Cultural-Competence-in-Refugee-Settings.pdf
- **Mental health of asylum seekers and refugees: the role of trauma**
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266662272300031X
- **Cultural diversity and mental health**
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6018386/>



TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS



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Trauma-informed approaches and communication skills

In our globalised world, supporting refugee mental health is crucial. This module equips volunteers and community leaders with essential skills to address refugees' psychological needs through trauma-informed care and cross-cultural communication. You will learn to recognise trauma signs, communicate empathetically across cultures, and build trusting relationships. This module also emphasizes cultural competence, challenging mental health stigmas, and promoting refugee autonomy while navigating ethical boundaries. By the end, you will be prepared to offer compassionate, informed support, fostering a welcoming environment for refugees and contributing significantly to their well-being and integration in your community.

Section 1 – Introduction to Trauma-Informed Care and Cultural Sensitivity

Understanding Trauma and Its Impact on Refugees

Trauma refers to the emotional and psychological responses to deeply distressing experiences. Refugees may have faced war, persecution, or displacement, leading to conditions like PTSD, anxiety, or depression.

Recognising the cumulative impact of trauma (e.g., pre-migration, displacement, and post-migration phases) is crucial for effective support.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

- **Safety:** ensure physical and emotional safety by creating welcoming environments. Design quiet, private spaces for conversations to reduce stress.
- **Trustworthiness:** build reliable and consistent relationships. Maintain clear communication about roles and limitations.
- **Collaboration:** work alongside refugees to co-create solutions. Involve them in decision-making to restore a sense of control.
- **Empowerment:** support refugees in recognising and using their strengths. Highlight their resilience and accomplishments.

Cultural Sensitivity

Mental health is perceived differently across cultures. Western models focus on individual psychology, while many non-Western cultures emphasize holistic or community-based approaches.

Volunteers should be cautious about imposing their own cultural perspectives and instead strive to understand refugees' unique viewpoints.



Section 2 – Effective communication techniques

Effective communication is the cornerstone of providing support to refugees, encompassing a range of skills from active listening to cultural sensitivity, which are crucial for building trust and understanding in challenging circumstances. These are as follows:

- **Active listening skills:** active listening involves giving full attention, paraphrasing key points, and validating emotions. Example: "It sounds like you have been through a lot; that must have been very difficult."
- **Empathy in communication:** empathy requires understanding another's emotions and perspectives. Use reflective statements like, "I can see this is overwhelming for you."
- **Non-verbal communication:** facial expressions, tone, and gestures are crucial in conveying understanding. Be aware that non-verbal cues vary by culture.
- **Appropriate questioning:** ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions to facilitate dialogue. Example: "Are there any challenges you are facing that we can work on together?" or "Would it be helpful if we talked about you need most right now?". Provide an option for dialogue while respecting their readiness to share.
- **Providing emotional support:** reassure refugees that their feelings are valid, and they are not alone. Technique: Use affirming language, such as, "You are very strong to have come this far."

Section 3 – Building trust and rapport

Building trust and rapport with refugees is a critical aspect of providing effective support, encompassing strategies that foster a sense of safety, respect, and empowerment while navigating the delicate balance of power dynamics in helper-recipient relationships. More concretely:

- **Trust-building strategies:** be consistent in your actions and follow through on commitments. If you agree to meet someone to help them with the paperwork, make sure to arrive on time and are prepared and if you say you will find out about available language classes, update the person even if the information is delayed, to show you are still working on it.
- **Confidentiality:** protect refugees' privacy to build a safe and trustworthy relationship. Clearly explain how their information will be used.
- **Empowerment approaches:** empower refugees by encouraging independence and decision-making. Guide them in navigating local resources rather than doing it for them.
- **Understanding power dynamics:** be aware of the helper-recipient dynamic and strive to promote equality. Use language that emphasizes collaboration rather than authority.

Section 4 – Mental health first aid and support

Mental health first aid and support are crucial skills for those working with refugees, encompassing the ability to recognise trauma signs, provide immediate crisis intervention, teach stress management techniques, and facilitate access to professional help while addressing mental health stigma in communities. Therefore, you should consider the following tips:

- **Recognising signs of trauma and distress:** symptoms may include hypervigilance, emotional withdrawal, or physical complaints without medical causes. Observe behaviour changes and gently inquire about well-being.
- **Basic crisis intervention techniques:** techniques like grounding exercises (focusing on immediate surroundings) can help stabilise individuals. Guide them to name objects they see, hear, or touch.
- **Stress reduction and grounding exercises:** breathing techniques or mindfulness can help refugees manage acute stress. Teach slow, deep breathing to reduce anxiety.
- **When and how to refer to professional help:** recognise when professional intervention is needed for severe trauma. Prepare a list of trusted mental health providers.
- **Addressing Stigma:** educate communities about mental health to normalise seeking help. Share stories of recovery and resilience.



Learning from a case study

A University from the United Kingdom has an inspiring initiative through which students volunteer to teach English to displaced Ukrainian learners through a programme called TESOL - Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Recognising that these learners faced significant trauma, this programme incorporates trauma-informed teaching practices into the volunteers' training. The emphasis is on creating a safe, supportive learning environment where students feel respected and understood. Through this approach, the student volunteers can gain a deeper understanding of trauma-informed care, which not only enhances their teaching but also helps them connect more effectively with their student learners. Overall, this case highlights the real-world impact of equipping educators with the skills to address the unique needs of refugee communities.

To reflect...

- How can trauma manifest in a classroom setting and why it is important for educators and trainers to be aware of this?
- What specific steps can educators and trainers take to build trust and a feeling of safety for their students?

- What key elements of trauma-informed care should volunteers and community leaders adopt in a learning environment?

Want to know more?

<https://refugeap-network.net/2023/08/27/case-study-implementing-research-researching-implementation-integrating-trauma-informed-pedagogy-in-training-msc-tesol-students-volunteering-to-teach-english-to-ukrainian-displaced-people/>



Practical tips

- Avoid phrases that might trigger memories of distress. Choose words carefully, focusing on present safety and future possibilities. Be mindful of cultural nuances in language and expression, as certain words or phrases may carry different connotations across cultures. Regularly check in with the refugees you are supporting to ensure your communication style is comfortable for them.
- Create environments where refugees feel comfortable sharing. Ensure physical comfort by providing quiet, private areas with comfortable seating, and establishing clear ground rules for confidentiality and respect. Incorporate culturally familiar elements, such as artwork or music, to create a sense of belonging. Allow refugees to have control over their environment, like choosing where to sit.
- Guide refugees to recognise their strengths and capabilities. Encourage decision-making in daily activities and long-term planning and provide opportunities for skill-sharing within the refugee community. Celebrate small achievements and milestones in their integration journey and connect refugees with local mentorship programmes or volunteer opportunities to build confidence and social networks.



Volunteers and community leaders do's and don'ts

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do provide clear, culturally sensitive explanations of support processes by using simple language and visual aids when necessary. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Don't assume all refugees share the same experiences or trauma. Recognise the diversity of backgrounds and individual circumstances. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do validate refugees' feelings and experiences without judgment, acknowledging their strength and resilience in facing challenges. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Don't push individuals to discuss their past before they are ready. Respect their pace and right to privacy in sharing personal information. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Do promote autonomy by involving refugees in their care and decisions, encouraging them to set personal goals and priorities for their well-being. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Don't overstep boundaries by offering help beyond your expertise. Know when and how to refer to specialised professionals when needed. |

Further reading

- **Trauma-informed services**
www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/immigrant-or-refugee-populations
- **Mental health and psychological support**
www.unhcr.org/media/unhcrs-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-persons-concern
- **UNICEF Bulgaria – Ukraine refugee response Bulgaria fact sheets**
www.unicef.org/bulgaria/en/reports/ukraine-refugee-response-bulgaria-june-2023

A close-up photograph of several hands being held together in a supportive gesture. The hands are of different skin tones, suggesting a diverse group of people. One hand in the foreground is wearing a blue and gold beaded bracelet and a purple rubber band. The background is slightly blurred, showing a person in a blue shirt and a yellow object.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCE NAVIGATION

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Practical support and resource navigation

This module provides volunteers and community leaders with the knowledge and tools needed to support refugees as they navigate essential aspects of daily life in their new communities. By the end of this module, you will learn how to help refugees access local resources, understand healthcare and social services, find housing, enrol in educational programmes, and seek employment opportunities. Through practical guidance and hands-on activities, you will be equipped to offer compassionate, culturally sensitive support that fosters mental well-being and helps refugees build stability and confidence in their new environment.

Section 1 – Local resource identification and access

The process of integrating refugees into host communities is complex and multifaceted. Practical support in navigating local resources, healthcare, social services, housing, education, employment, and community networks is essential. By providing refugees with clear guidance on accessing these services, volunteers and community leaders can play a critical role in supporting mental well-being, reducing isolation, and building a foundation for stability and self-sufficiency.

One of the initial steps in supporting refugees is identifying local and national resources that meet their unique needs. Effective resource navigation starts with mapping available services, including legal support, healthcare, mental health resources, language classes, employment agencies, and community organisations.

Access to community resources enables refugees to engage more fully with their new environment. Practical support in accessing these resources reduces feelings of helplessness and dependency, empowering refugees to make informed decisions and enhancing their autonomy.

What should be considered?

- Creating a directory of services relevant to refugees is essential. This includes not only listing local services but also identifying key contacts, hours of operation, eligibility requirements, and languages supported. Such directories should be comprehensive yet easy to navigate, helping refugees access support without added confusion or frustration.
- Mental health support is a priority for many refugees who may have experienced trauma. Volunteers and community leaders can support refugees by identifying mental health services that offer culturally sensitive care, language support, and a trauma-informed approach.
- It is crucial to scrutinise each resource to ensure that it provides safe, appropriate, and accessible services. Volunteers and community leaders should check that resources are verified, that staff are trained to work with refugees, and that the services align with the values of inclusivity and respect for cultural diversity.

Section 2 – Healthcare and social services navigation

Navigating healthcare and social services is often one of the most challenging aspects of integration for refugees due to unfamiliarity with systems, language barriers, and cultural differences. Volunteers and community leaders can ease this process by guiding refugees through healthcare and social service access.

Access to healthcare and social services through a network of supportive individuals leads to better health outcomes, reduced stress, and greater resilience. Assistance with social service access helps refugees build the stability needed to address other integration needs.

What should be considered?

- Volunteers and community leaders can provide an overview of the healthcare system, explaining primary care, emergency services, preventive care, and specialised mental health services. This can include guidance on finding local clinics, making appointments, understanding health insurance, and the importance of regular health check-ups.
- Social services, such as housing assistance, financial support, child welfare, and employment aid, are vital for stabilising refugees' lives. Volunteers and community leaders can guide refugees through application processes, eligibility criteria, and necessary documentation, ensuring that they are fully informed of their rights and options.
- Language and cultural understanding are often significant hurdles in service provision. Volunteers and community leaders can help bridge this gap by arranging interpretation services, providing translated materials, or acting as informal translators when appropriate. Furthermore, volunteers and community leaders can help orient refugees to cultural norms and expectations that may differ from those in their home countries, helping them navigate the system more effectively.

Section 3 – Practical integration support

Stable housing, education, and employment are fundamental for refugee integration, as they provide the basic structure around which other aspects of life can stabilise. Volunteers and community leaders can play an instrumental role in helping refugees find housing, enrol in educational programmes, and seek employment.

Access to stable housing, education, and employment promotes both social and psychological integration by providing security and purpose within the host community.

What should be considered?

- Finding stable, affordable housing is often one of the primary needs for refugees. Volunteers and community leaders can help by guiding refugees through rental applications, explaining tenant rights, and assisting with housing subsidy applications. For those in temporary accommodations, volunteers can provide information on finding longer-term solutions.

- Education is crucial for both young and adult refugees. For children, volunteers can assist with school enrolment, explaining processes, school expectations, and the role of parents in the education system. For adults, they can provide information on language courses, vocational training, and educational pathways that support career development.
- Employment is central to refugees' financial independence and integration. Volunteers and community leaders can provide guidance on job searches, resume building, skill development programmes, and interview preparation. Many refugees may need help understanding local labour laws, job application processes, and workplace norms, which are often significantly different from those in their home countries.

Section 4 – Community network development

Building a social network in the host community is essential for mental well-being and integration. By establishing a sense of community and belonging, refugees can better cope with the challenges of resettlement, reducing isolation and fostering resilience. Volunteers and community leaders can help by creating opportunities for refugees to connect with locals and with each other.

Building connections within a community fosters emotional support, decreases loneliness, and enhances coping abilities. Social networks provide access to information, reduce isolation, and encourage positive mental health outcomes for refugees adjusting to new environments.

What should be considered?

- Volunteers and community leaders can help establish support groups, mentorship programmes, or community centres that provide social and emotional support. These structures allow refugees to share experiences, gain practical knowledge, and build relationships with others facing similar challenges.
- Volunteers and community leaders can facilitate connections between refugees and locals. Programmes like buddy systems, language exchanges, and cultural orientation sessions encourage interaction between refugees and residents. These connections help refugees learn about local culture and customs, improve their language skills, and build friendships.
- Volunteers and community leaders can organise community events and integration activities. Social gatherings, workshops, and cultural events foster interaction and mutual understanding. These events help refugees develop a sense of belonging and encourage locals to gain a deeper appreciation of the refugees' cultures and experiences.



Learning from a case study

Arrival Aid is a German non-profit initiative that supports refugees in navigating complex processes related to asylum, integration, and mental well-being. Founded in 2015 and based in Munich, Arrival Aid operates in various cities across Germany and offers a volunteer-led programme focused on providing refugees with practical guidance and emotional support. Volunteers assist refugees in accessing essential services, securing housing, enrolling in educational programmes, and navigating employment opportunities. The programme addresses the need for clear information and support in navigating Germany's social and legal systems, while also helping refugees feel welcomed and integrated into their communities. Arrival Aid relies on a network of trained volunteers who are knowledgeable about local resources, housing systems, employment services, and cultural integration. Volunteers guide refugees through paperwork, provide interpretation support, and accompany them to important appointments. The programme has proven to be highly effective in reducing the stress and anxiety that refugees often experience due to language barriers and unfamiliar systems. Refugees who participate in the programme report feeling more confident navigating German systems and better equipped to handle bureaucratic processes. The companionship of a volunteer also alleviates isolation, which significantly contributes to improved mental health outcomes. Studies and participant feedback highlight that the practical, hands-on support provided by volunteers reduces anxiety and stress, helping refugees feel more at home in Germany.

To reflect...

- How does one-on-one guidance from volunteers influence refugees' mental well-being and sense of belonging in their new communities?
- What are some challenges volunteers might face when helping refugees navigate local resources, and how can they be trained to overcome these challenges effectively?
- How can local communities support programmes like Arrival Aid to ensure long-term sustainability and increased impact?

Want to know more?

<https://arrivalaid.org/en/>



Practical tips

- Create a simple, easy-to-navigate directory of essential local resources, including healthcare, legal aid, housing assistance, mental health services, and educational programmes. Familiarise yourself with these resources and be prepared to accompany refugees to appointments or explain processes, helping them feel supported and confident in accessing services.



- Use clear and simple communication as language and unfamiliar terminology can be significant barriers. When helping refugees navigate services, use clear, simple language, and verify understanding through brief summaries or visual aids. Consider using translation apps or arranging interpretation support to ensure they fully comprehend their options and rights.
- Arrange regular community events, such as cultural exchange workshops, language practice meetups, or shared meals, to help refugees connect with others. Building a social support network can reduce feelings of isolation, improve mental well-being, and foster a sense of belonging, as seen in the Arrival Aid programme.



Volunteers and community leaders do's and don'ts

■ Do prioritise clear, respectful communication by using simple language and confirming understanding, especially when explaining complex systems like healthcare and social services. ■ Do build trust by showing empathy, patience, and cultural sensitivity, recognising that refugees may have different experiences and perspectives shaped by their backgrounds. ■ Do encourage independence by guiding refugees on how to access resources themselves, empowering them to navigate local systems confidently over time.	■ Don't assume all refugees have the same needs or experiences. Avoid generalising and instead, listen actively to understand everyone's unique situation. ■ Don't overwhelm refugees with too much information at once. Focus on their immediate needs and provide additional guidance step-by-step to prevent confusion or stress. ■ Don't force social interactions or activities. Respect boundaries and allow refugees to engage at their own pace, creating a comfortable, supportive environment for connection.
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Further reading

- **Supporting healthcare access for refugees and migrants**
[www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(23\)00071-3/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(23)00071-3/fulltext)
- **Cultural competence in refugee service setting**
www.ritaresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Cultural-Competence-in-Refugee-Settings.pdf
- **Advancing inclusion and self-reliance through education for refugees**
www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/grf-2023-education-report.pdf



SELF-CARE AND SUSTAINABLE SUPPORT



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Self-care and sustainable support

In our complex world, supporting refugees demands sustainable and compassionate approaches. This module equips volunteers and community leaders with essential knowledge and skills to maintain their well-being while effectively supporting refugees. You will explore diverse self-care strategies, understand secondary trauma and burnout, and develop coping mechanisms. By addressing ethical considerations in supportive relationships, you will learn to navigate the balance between empathy and professional boundaries. This module provides practical tools tailored to refugee support work, empowering you to prioritise your mental health. Ultimately, your enhanced self-care skills will contribute to your personal well-being and significantly impact the quality of support you provide, fostering a more resilient and welcoming environment for refugees in your community.

Section 1 – Self-care fundamentals for volunteers and community leaders

Self-care is a cornerstone of effective and sustainable support for refugees. For volunteers and community leaders, it is essential to recognise the importance of maintaining their own well-being while assisting others.

Self-care in refugee support work

What self-care means to each person varies, as we are all different. However, there is a common aspect to these different activities. Taking time to assess our own condition and needs is not selfish. Focusing on ourselves is necessary - especially if we spend some of our time and energy focusing on others.

As a volunteer working with refugees, you can witness different situations, the ups and downs, and the often-changing circumstances they face. This can be extremely emotional and stressful for all concerned. Recognising one's needs and investing time in self-care practices ensures that volunteers and community leaders can maintain their wellbeing and continue their work effectively and long-term without compromising their well-being.

Diverse and adaptable self-care strategies

Balancing - also volunteer! - work, and personal life is essential to avoid burnout. Strategies for maintaining work-life balance may involve scheduling regular breaks, setting clear boundaries between work and personal time, and ensuring adequate rest and recreation.

Explore various self-care activities, ranging from simple daily practices to more structured routines, providing practical examples to ensure comprehensive self-care:

Activities	Simple	Moderate	Complex
Physical activities: help maintain physical health, release stress, and improve overall well-being	taking a short walk in a park	participating in a fitness class (e.g., aerobics, Zumba)	practicing yoga regularly
	doing light stretching exercises	engaging in outdoor sports (e.g., cycling, swimming)	joining a gym and following a structured workout routine

Mindfulness practices: aid in reducing stress and increasing mental clarity and focus	deep breathing exercises spending a few quiet moments alone	practicing guided meditation engaging in mindful walking	attending mindfulness retreats or workshops incorporating daily meditation sessions into your routine
Hobbies and creative arts: engaging in hobbies and creative activities foster relaxation and emotional expression	watching your favourite TV series with a hot beverage listening to music	reading a book or engaging in creative writing drawing or painting	participating in art classes or workshops engaging in more involved hobbies like playing a musical instrument
Social connections: maintaining social connections provides emotional support and reduces feelings of isolation	meeting a friend for coffee. calling a family member	joining social groups or clubs with similar interests (excepting the field of volunteer work) hosting small gatherings or dinners	engaging in community service or volunteer groups. organising events or meetups for larger groups
Professional mental health support: accessing professional mental health support ensures comprehensive care for mental well-being.	talking to a trusted friend or mentor utilising online mental health resources	attending support group meetings engaging in brief counselling sessions	regular therapy or counselling sessions with a licensed professional participating in specialised mental health programmes or workshops
Relaxation and leisure: incorporating relaxation and leisure activities helps recharge and rejuvenate	taking a warm bath enjoying a quiet evening with a favourite hobby	spending a day at a spa going on a short weekend getaway	planning regular wellness activities like massages or holistic treatments incorporating regular leisure travel into your schedule
Self-reflection and journaling: self-reflection and journaling help process thoughts and emotions	writing down three things you are grateful for each day reflecting on daily experiences	keeping a daily journal to track emotions and thoughts writing about personal goals and aspirations	engaging in guided journaling exercises participating in self-reflection workshops or courses

Guidelines to adapt and apply self-care strategies

Access to mental health resources, such as counselling services, support groups, and online resources, is vital for ongoing self-care. Examples of resources include online counselling platforms, local mental health organisations, and self-help books focused on stress management and resilience.

What to consider?

- **Assess personal needs:** regularly evaluate your physical, mental, and emotional needs to determine which self-care strategies will be most beneficial.
- **Be flexible:** adapt your self-care routine as needed. What works one week may need to be adjusted the next based on your circumstances and energy levels.
- **Set realistic goals:** start with small, achievable self-care activities and gradually build up to more complex practices.
- **Prioritise consistency:** make self-care a regular part of your routine. Consistent practice is more beneficial than sporadic engagement.
- **Listen to your body and mind:** pay attention to how you feel before, during, and after self-care activities. Adjust your practices to ensure they continue to serve you well.
- **Balance and variety:** incorporate a mix of physical, mental, social, and creative activities to create a well-rounded self-care routine.

Section 2 – Recognising and managing secondary trauma and burnout

Secondary trauma, also known as vicarious trauma, occurs when volunteers and community leaders are indirectly exposed to the traumatic experiences of the refugees they support. This indirect exposure can lead to symptoms like those experienced by the individuals directly affected by the trauma, such as emotional distress, anxiety, and intrusive thoughts.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged and intense involvement in demanding situations. In the context of refugee support, burnout can develop when volunteers and community leaders consistently face high levels of stress and emotional strain without adequate self-care and support. Burnout can manifest through symptoms like fatigue, cynicism, reduced performance, and a sense of helplessness.

Recognising the signs of secondary trauma and burnout is crucial for timely intervention and maintaining the well-being of volunteers. Addressing these issues promptly can prevent long-term negative impacts on both the individuals providing support and the quality of support given to refugees. They are as follows:

Signs of secondary trauma and burnout		
EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL SIGNS	emotional distress	persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, or emotional numbness
	intrusive thoughts	recurring and distressing thoughts related to the trauma experienced by refugees
	emotional exhaustion	feeling drained and unable to cope with emotional demands
	cynicism	developing a negative or indifferent attitude towards volunteer work
	loss of motivation	decrease in enthusiasm and commitment to volunteer work
COGNITIVE SIGNS	difficulty concentrating	trouble focusing on tasks and maintaining attention
	depersonalisation	viewing refugees as mere cases rather than individuals
	hypervigilance	heightened alertness and sensitivity to potential threats
PHYSICAL SIGNS	chronic fatigue	persistent tiredness and lack of energy
	physical symptoms	headaches, digestive issues, and other stress-related ailments
	sleep disturbances	insomnia, nightmares, or disrupted sleep patterns
BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS	emotional withdrawal	distancing oneself emotionally from refugees and colleagues
	increased irritability	becoming easily frustrated or angered by minor issues
	reduced professional efficacy	a decline in work performance and effectiveness

Section 3 – Burnout prevention, developing coping strategies and building resilience

Preventing burnout and building resilience in **volunteer work** involves adopting effective strategies and coping mechanisms. To prevent burnout, it is essential to regularly take breaks, prioritise tasks, and delegate responsibilities to avoid overworking. Incorporate relaxation methods and mindfulness practices into your routine, such as:

- Set a timer to remind yourself to take a 5-minute break every hour.
- Use a task management tool to organise and prioritise daily activities.
- Practice deep breathing for a few minutes each day to calm the mind.

Therefore, coping strategies for stress management help manage stress and maintain well-being. These can be as follows:

- Physical activity: regular exercises, such as walking, yoga, or sports to release endorphins and reduce stress. Join a local yoga class or go for a 30-minute walk daily.
- Mindfulness meditation: practice mindfulness meditation to improve mental clarity and focus. Use a meditation app to guide you through daily mindfulness sessions.



- Time management: plan and prioritise tasks to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Break down large tasks into smaller, manageable steps and set achievable goals.

Resilience Building Strategies for coping with the demands of volunteer work

Cultivating resilience is crucial for volunteers and community leaders supporting refugees, as it enables them to maintain their well-being and effectiveness in the face of challenging work. Here are some practical strategies to build and sustain that resilience:

- Visualise positive outcomes and scenarios to foster a positive mind-set. Spend a few minutes each day imagining successful and fulfilling experiences in your volunteer work.
- Set realistic and achievable goals, breaking down larger tasks into smaller steps. Celebrate small milestones to boost confidence and motivation.
- Engage in regular meetings with peers to share experiences and provide mutual support. Join or form a peer support group where volunteers can discuss challenges and offer encouragement.
- Regularly seek guidance from supervisors and access professional mental health services. Schedule regular check-ins with a supervisor or mentor for feedback and support and consider counselling sessions as needed.

Section 4 – Ethical consideration and boundaries in supportive relationships

Maintaining clear boundaries is essential to prevent emotional burnout and ensure effective support. Volunteers and community leaders should thus define the scope of their support and communicate these limits to refugees. Setting specific hours for support and not sharing personal contact information helps maintain professional distance.

Confidentiality is crucial to build trust and protect the privacy of refugees. Volunteers and community leaders must obtain explicit consent before sharing personal information. Practical steps include conducting conversations in private settings and securely storing sensitive data. Therefore, always ensure that discussions about personal issues are held in a private room.

Being culturally sensitive involves understanding and respecting the cultural backgrounds of refugees. Volunteers and community leaders should educate themselves about the customs and values of the communities they support. This means acknowledging communication styles or dress codes, to create a respectful and inclusive environment.

Balancing empathy with professional distance ensures volunteers provide compassionate support without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Practical considerations include active listening, setting emotional boundaries, and seeking supervision when needed. Thus, you should practice active listening while maintaining a focus on empowering refugees rather than becoming emotionally enmeshed.



Learning from a case study

Volunteer Centre Salzburg (Freiwilligenzentrum Salzburg) is a key organisation in Austria dedicated to supporting and promoting volunteer work across various sectors, including refugee support. The organisation provides resources, training, and networking opportunities to ensure volunteers are well-prepared, supported, and motivated in their roles. By focusing on self-care and sustainable support, Freiwilligenzentrum Salzburg helps volunteers maintain their well-being and effectiveness, which is crucial for long-term engagement and impact in their volunteer activities. More concretely, the 'Find the balance: Self-care as a source of strength for my volunteer work' (Die Balance finden: Selbstfürsorge als Kraftquelle für meine Freiwilligenarbeit) workshop focuses on self-care practices for volunteers, emphasizing the importance of maintaining personal well-being to sustain their volunteer efforts. Participants learn practical techniques for stress management, burnout prevention, and building resilience. The workshop provides a supportive environment where volunteers can share experiences, reflect on their challenges, and develop personalized self-care strategies. Additionally, the 'Vol on Air Podcast' features authentic stories and experiences from volunteers, providing insights into their motivations, challenges, and the impact of their work. It serves as a platform for volunteers to share their journeys, learn from each other, and find inspiration. The podcast covers various topics, including self-care, stress management, and balancing empathy with professional distance. By highlighting real-life examples, the podcast helps volunteers understand the importance of self-care and sustainable support.

To reflect...

- How can the importance of self-care be communicated to volunteers and community leaders to ensure a supportive and sustainable volunteer environment? Do you know examples in your volunteer community?
- How can the experiences shared by volunteers and community leaders (like in the 'Vol on Air' podcasts) inspire others to balance empathy and professional distance in their roles?
- Do you know similar podcasts, videos, articles from volunteers and community leaders? What self-care techniques are they applying to their daily routines to improve well-being?

Want to know more?

www.freiwilligenzentrum-salzburg.at/veranstaltungen/die-balance-finden-selbstfuersorge-als-kraftquelle-fuer-meine-freiwilligenarbeit/ [only available in German]



Practical tips

- Ensure you take regular breaks to recharge and prevent burnout. Incorporate short mindfulness exercises or brief walks during these breaks to maximise their rejuvenating effect.
- Engage with peer support networks to share experiences and gain emotional support. Consider organising regular group debriefing sessions to collectively process challenging experiences and celebrate successes.
- Establish and maintain clear boundaries to balance empathy and professional distance. Communicate these boundaries respectfully to both colleagues and refugees, explaining how they contribute to sustainable and effective support.



Volunteers and community leaders do's and don'ts

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Do prioritise self-care, making it a regular part of your routine. Engage in activities that rejuvenate your mind and body daily.■ Do seek professional support, utilising available mental health resources. Schedule regular check-ins with a counsellor or therapist to process your experiences.■ Do maintain boundaries to avoid burning out. Clearly communicate your limits to colleagues and those you support. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Don't neglect personal time. Avoid overworking and ensure you have time for yourself. Schedule regular activities that bring you joy and relaxation outside of volunteer work.■ Don't ignore signs of burnout to prevent escalation. Learn to recognise warning signs like exhaustion, cynicism, or decreased productivity in yourself.■ Don't isolate yourself. Stay connected with peers and seek support when needed. Regularly participate in team activities or support groups to maintain a sense of community. |
|--|--|

Further reading

- **Self-care for volunteers: balancing care for others and yourself**
www.helpherdobetter.com/self-care-for-volunteers
- **Self-care and volunteering: a guide to maintaining mental health**
<https://discoverymood.com/blog/self-care-and-charity-volunteering>
- **A practical guide to self-care for helping professionals**
www.cmhnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/New_Practical-Guide-to-Self-Care-for-Wraparound-Professionals-1.pdf



Conclusion

Recap of key points

As we reach the end of this Guide for volunteers and community leaders supporting refugee mental well-being, let us reflect on the crucial insights and strategies explored.

In understanding refugee experiences and cultural competence, we have recognised the complex challenges refugees face across pre-migration, displacement, and post-migration phases. We have emphasized the importance of developing cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills to provide effective support, while embracing cultural humility and ongoing learning in cross-cultural interactions.

We have dived into trauma-informed approaches and communication skills, highlighting the implementation of trauma-informed care principles in refugee support. This includes mastering effective communication techniques, such as active listening and empathy, and building trust and rapport while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Practical support and resource navigation have also been key focus areas. We have discussed the importance of identifying and accessing local resources for refugees, assisting with healthcare, social services, housing, education, and employment, as well as facilitating community connections and integration activities.

Lastly, we have highlighted the importance of self-care and sustainable support, which involves prioritising self-care and recognising signs of secondary trauma and burnout, developing coping strategies and building personal resilience, and maintaining ethical considerations and boundaries in supportive relationships. These elements collectively form the foundations for effective and compassionate support for refugee mental well-being.

Ongoing learning and development

The journey of supporting refugee mental well-being is ongoing and ever evolving. We encourage you to continue your learning and development beyond this Guide. Seek out additional training opportunities, engage in peer support networks, and stay informed about the latest research and best practices in refugee mental health support.

Call to action for creating welcoming and supportive communities

Remember, your role as volunteer or community leader is invaluable in creating welcoming and supportive communities for refugees. By applying the knowledge and skills you have gained in this Guide, you can make a significant difference in the lives of those who have experienced displacement and trauma.

Therefore, we call upon you to foster inclusive environments that celebrate cultural diversity, advocate for policies and practices that support refugee mental health,



collaborate with local organisations and institutions to expand support networks, share your experiences and insights to raise awareness about refugee mental health needs, and empower refugees to become active participants in their own healing and integration process.

Together we can build resilient, compassionate communities that provide a strong foundation for refugees to rebuild their lives and thrive in their new homes. Your commitment to this vital work contributes to a more inclusive and understanding world for all.





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Guide for volunteers and community leaders



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