
Action Plan

After empathic listening to the refugee's experience or current issues, a short action plan of 3-4 steps should be elaborated.

Such a plan includes questions like: What do you think you need right now? How would you like me to help you?

But the action plan could also be elaborated as a part of the listener's evaluation of the situation.

After establishing their current needs the refugees could be given addresses where to find more specific help or needed information. Establishing a contact to the staff, offices or persons, that should be approached next, can be extremely helpful.

The ability to provide helpful information will enable the university staff to manage the balance between empathy and professional distance. Refugees, who have experienced traumatic events, might have a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For persons affected by PTSD it might be very difficult or impossible to organize themselves without help or just to know what they could or might have to do. Thus, conducting an action plan together, and putting the refugee in contact with the right person to talk to at the next office, helps them a lot.



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What is a Trauma?

Generally, a trauma can be defined as an emotional, psychological response to a tragic, shocking, stressful experience or an event, that is beyond the usual human experience, that is deeply disturbing or distressing. The traumatic situation is characterized by the experience of threat, extermination, loss of control, terror, helplessness and fear of death. Through a trauma, the own perception, the trust in oneself are damaged. Whether after traumatic Experiences a post-traumatic stress disorder develops, depends heavily on the personality, the social background, the resilience and available resources of the refugee.

What are the symptoms of a trauma?

Often, shock and denial are typical reactions to a traumatic event. Over time, these emotional responses may fade, but a survivor may also experience reactions long-term. These can include:

Emotional Reactions :

- Anger
- Persistent feelings of sadness and despair
- Intense feelings of guilt, as if they are somehow responsible for the event
- An altered sense of shame
- Feelings of isolation and hopelessness
- Unpredictable emotions



Re-experiencing the Trauma :

- Flashbacks, Nightmares, Replaying the memory

Physical symptoms :

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Hyperventilation



Avoiding Things Related to the Trauma :

- Trying Not to Think About the Event
- Avoiding Things Related to the Event.

Changes in How You View the World and Yourself :

- Difficulty Trusting People
- Believing the World Is Extremely Dangerous
- Blaming Yourself for the Trauma
- Thinking You Should Have Handled the Trauma Differently
- Seeing Yourself as Weak or Inadequate
- Criticizing Yourself for Reactions to the Trauma



Hyperactive Nervous System :

- Feeling Constantly on Guard
- Seeing Danger Everywhere
- Being Easily Startled
- Difficulty Sleeping
- Loss of Interest in Sex



Which competencies are required for a positive interaction with traumatized persons?

- Being emotionally available
- Sincerity
- Self and stress regulation
- Self-reflection

The work with transmission and countertransference - Trauma-specific transmission patterns

Traumatized people transfer their expectations of relationships, emotions and role experiences from the background of their relationship experiences to the educators and evoke corresponding countertransference feelings. These feelings trigger action impulses which, if they are not reflected and secured, go back to the people as a backlash.

Important: Unconscious transmissions and corresponding countertransference after early experiences of violence, abuse and gross neglect often take the dynamic of a victim- perpetrator dynamic or a victim - rescuer dynamic. Traumatized persons show in their behavior parts of the victim- but also part of the perpetrator behavior. This could activate in the educator/other person in a non-reflected situation parts of a victim, rescuer or perpetrator behavior.

Relationship partners feel alternately powerless, hurtful, disinterested or have the need to intervene. This dynamic often shows itself in the form of cleavage tendencies in helper systems

Since own perpetrator, - and victim behavior feel very unpleasant and unprofessional, the affected person / educator may protect themselves by using denial, defense or arrogance. This dynamic often shows a strong intensity. It is important to become aware of them, to perceive them courageously and mindfully and to develop possibilities to distance oneself from feelings, to secure oneself and to stabilize oneself.



To be able to get out of these dynamics requires good self-reflection abilities, the awareness of possible trigger potential and self-regulatory skills in order to be able to take an empathic witness position outside the trauma area.

An empathic witness

What is an empathic witness?

This can be done by using empathic listening or active listening. This means that the interlocutor listens with their full attention to what the person is saying, without judging, without giving an advice, without showing pity, or without saying that this is not so bad compared to what person XY has experienced.

The listener could ask questions concerning the topic, reflect what the person has said, or being just present and silent.

Why is it important to be an empathic witness?

The feeling of being listened to and seen is one of the most important needs that humans have. Unfortunately, we have learned to communicate in a way that doesn't satisfy this need. Instead of finding together and giving each other attention, we get frustrated by each other due to our way of communication. The only way to avoid this, is to really listen, to leave spaces for silences, and to give the other person time to express their thoughts and feelings. Especially for traumatized people it is helpful to let them tell their story again and again until they have said everything they needed to say. Telling your story is one way of coping with traumatizing experiences.

These techniques help staff to take an empathic witness position, without becoming either the savior or persecutor. This is crucial in order to keep emotional distance while at the same time an empathic professional relation is established.