

# TOP TRAUMA TIPS FOR REFUGEE HOSTS

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# Refugee hosting: A trauma informed approach

Thousands across the UK have opened their homes to refugees and asylum seekers fleeing war, persecution or violence.

These refugees may have seen unimaginable horrors, and will no doubt be feeling the traumatic effects of having to leave their loved ones, homes, jobs and everything they held dear.

It is vital that hosts are trauma-informed when welcoming their guests. This will help them to create an environment that fosters a feeling of safety, independence and control.

Trauma Treatment International's expert team of clinical psychologists has put together some top tips for you as hosts to take a trauma-informed approach to your guests. These are not just ordinary house guests.

They have come to you because they have lost everything they know and own. Hence, we may have to learn to employ new techniques of empathy and compassion, which are different to those we use with each other.



# Do learn how to spot the signs of trauma

*The signs of trauma will vary from person to person.*

Just like active soldiers, some refugees may display an active response to trauma, like nightmares or flashbacks. Flashbacks are when a person acts as if traumatic events are happening in the here and now.

For example, they might suddenly hide under a table to protect themselves from a falling bomb. Others may look frozen, unable to speak or move.

You can help by telling your guest that they are safe, or that they are in the UK. Tell them to look around and describe what they see. That will help to ground them in reality.

Others may appear extremely irritable, which can look like being snappy or getting stressed easily. Try not to take this personally.

Your guest may also avoid or withdraw from relationships and activity, or appear zoned-out. This isn't rudeness. You can ask: "What do you need right now?"

You can invite and encourage guests to join you for meals or activities, but appreciate that it is okay if they would rather be alone.



# Do try to meet your guests' practical needs

*Helping your guests with their practical needs is an important step in the aftermath of trauma.*

Each guest will have a unique preference for what they need when they arrive. It is impossible to predict what this will be, so simply ask them what they need.

Their immediate needs may be to sleep, to be alone, or to eat. For others, it may be gaining immediate access to the internet to contact loved ones, whom they will be seriously worried about.

Don't insist they do the things YOU may have in mind. That leaves them feeling out of control. Trust that they know best what they need and want.

Help guests to fulfil these practical needs, perhaps by contacting local agencies that are providing support to refugees.

Help them get orientated with the local area. Walk them round the shops, pointing out price ranges, types of shop, parks, places of worship, healthcare services and so on.



# Do make life as predictable as possible

*Victims of trauma don't always recognise that they are safe, and remain on high alert waiting for the next terrible thing to happen.*

They have been through a lot. They have escaped a merciless war. They may have seen death and terrible scenes. They may have lost friends and family in awful circumstances.

Predictability restores a sense of safety.

Explain your home routines to your guests – what time your family gets up in the morning and goes to school or work, what time they come home, when you eat meals together and do other regular activities.

Be aware that something as innocuous as vacuuming suddenly could trigger flashbacks, so give them fair warning before making any loud noises.



# Do help your guests foster social relationships



*Connection is the number one factor in coping with psychological trauma.*

Support your guests to stay connected with their loved ones at home, and find opportunities to build new relationships in the local community.

Work on building your own relationship with your guest, too. If there is a language barrier, try learning a few words of their native tongue.

Use Google Translate - it's easy!

The accuracy or quality of your language skills is not what matters, but rather what you are communicating through your willingness to try.

Remember also that body language is universal, so use your facial expressions and gestures to connect.

However, it's important to give yourself space too; you don't have to be connected to your guest 24/7.

# Do help your guests to be who they were in their home country

*The label 'refugee' is a temporary one.*

Your guests are just like you – they are unique and complex adult individuals with a history, a family, a job, skills, passions and ambitions.

The act of fleeing can strip people of their identity, increasing the impact of trauma.

One very helpful tip for recovery and growth is to help them to be who they were before they left their home country.

Do they like to bake? Do they like to play football? Is there a way they can use their skills in the local community?



# Do listen more than you talk

*Don't dive into asking lots of questions about what happened to your guests in their home country.*

It's better to wait, and be ready to listen if and when they start to share. When they do want to talk, it can be tempting to say something to make them feel better, but avoid phrases like "It will be fine", or "At least you got out".

Responses like these invalidate, or stamp on, their traumatic

feelings. You're basically telling them that what they're feeling doesn't matter. Instead, be a listening ear, nod along, make them a cup of tea and agree with them about how awful the situation is. Say, "I'm so sorry" and "You are bound to feel terrible, of course you do".

Most refugees will go on to feel better in a few weeks. Simply listening and being a witness to their trauma is enough. Try to force yourself to sit with their pain rather than silence it.





# Don't expect gratitude

*Remember the reasons you wanted to welcome refugees into your home – it was to help them, not be praised for your actions.*

It can feel frustrating and irritating if your guest is not making more progress or seems ungrateful for your support.

You might feel this way because you are in a 'rescuer' role. You may want to feel that your kindness is recognised by your guest for all the adjustments your family has made for them, or

the trouble you went through to secure their arrival. It may be because helping them is your way of dealing with your distress at what has happened to them.

Take that responsibility off your guests. If you are expecting to be thanked, your guest will be more likely to feel dependent on you, and less in control of their lives.

This could prolong symptoms of PTSD and hinder their recovery.



# Do remember your mental health matters too



*Hearing traumatic stories or being exposed to other people's symptoms can be distressing.*


For most people this is unlikely to have a long-term impact, However, for some, repeated exposure to distressing stories or images can result in secondary trauma. In this instance they may be unable to stop thinking about what they've heard. They may also experience nightmares or feelings of despair.

If you feel like you have secondary trauma, it is important to take care of yourself. Talk to friends and family, stay connected to the things you enjoy, and get enough sleep.

This kind of secondary trauma, or feeling guilty for not having lived the experiences of your guests, can make you feel like you need to do more and more to help.

However, this urge can have a negative impact on you and your family.

It is important to know how much you are willing to give your guests, and stick to those limits. Know that these limits are okay.

The background of the page is a light beige color. It features several stylized illustrations of hands holding red hearts. In the top left, a hand holds two overlapping hearts. In the top right, a hand holds one heart. In the middle left, a hand holds one heart. In the bottom left, a hand holds one heart. In the bottom center, a hand holds one heart. In the bottom right, a hand holds one heart. The hands are rendered in a simple, flat style with various skin tones and sleeve patterns. The hearts are a solid, vibrant red color.

Ultimately, all your instinctive reactions as host are sure to come from a good, well-meaning place of love, compassion and generosity.

By using these tips, you can feel confident that you are responding to the needs of your guest in the best way to help them recover emotionally from the awful things they have been through.

At the same time, you will be protecting your mental health and that of your family, ensuring that life continues smoothly while your guests are with you.

You are also doing your best to ensure that harmony & stability prevails in your household – which is crucial to help refugees find happy months of peace in your home while they recover & begin to rebuild their lives.

# TRAUMA TREATMENT INTERNATIONAL

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