Trauma-Informed Support for Afghan Children & Youth

By: Rosalind Ghafar Rogers, PhD, LMHC
AGENDA

Historical & Cultural Background

Mental Health of Resettled Afghans

Supporting Afghan Children & Youth

Questions
Historical & Cultural Background

- Brief History & Recent Events
- Languages
- Ethnic Groups
- Religion
- Educational Background & Outcomes
- Cultural Cornerstones
BRIEF HISTORY & RECENT EVENTS

• 40 years of war and conflict
  o 1979 – 1989 Russian invasion
  o Civil war
  o 1994 – 2001 Taliban control

• Recent Events
  • Feb 2020 U.S. and Taliban signed peace agreement
  • Escalation in violence
  • July 2021 Biden announced withdrawal of U.S. military by Aug 31
  • Aug 6, 2021 Taliban seized control of first key provinces; others fell successively
  • Aug 15, 2021 Taliban took control of Kabul; President Ghani fled and government collapsed
    • Chaos erupted at Kabul airport as desperate Afghans attempted to flee
  • Aug 30, 2021 End of U.S. military evacuation effort
LANGUAGES

• Over 30 different languages spoken in Afghanistan
• 2 official languages of Afghanistan: Dari and Pashto
  o 77% speak Dari
    ▪ Dari vs. Farsi
    ▪ Use a Dari interpreter for Afghans who speak Dari
  o 48% speak Pashto
  o About 75% of the population speak one or both languages
ETHNIC GROUPS

• Pashtuns – Largest ethnic and tribal group
• Tajiks – Second largest ethnic group & largest non-tribal group
• Hazara – Ethnic minority group historically persecuted through today
• Uzbeks
• Aimak
• Turkmen
• Baluch
RELIGION

- Islam
  1. Pledge to their faith and belief that “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.”
  2. Prayer five times a day facing Mecca
  3. Charity
  4. Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan
  5. Pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca

- 85 – 90% Sunni Muslims
- 10 – 15% Shi’a Muslims
- Main coping mechanism for Afghans
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

• Religious education (*madrassas or religious schools*) & public education

• National education system:
  o 2 3-year cycles of primary education
    ▪ Grades 1-3 Lower Primary
    ▪ Grades 4-6 Higher Primary
  o 2 3-year cycles of secondary education
    ▪ Grades 7-9 Lower Secondary
    ▪ Grades 10-12 Higher Secondary
  o Optional vocational education
    o Grades 1-9 compulsory

• Teacher-centered instruction and rote memorization
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

• In 2018, 10 million Afghan children attended school (UNESCO, 2021)
• In 2018, Afghanistan’s out-of-school population was 3.7 million – 60% were girls (UNICEF, n.d.)
• In 2021, adult literacy rate: 37% (World Bank, 2021)
• 48% of teachers have minimum academic qualifications (UNICEF, n.d.)
• Educational outcomes are poor
• Educational interruptions are common
CULTURAL CORNERSTONES

Family
• Extended family with 3-4 generations living together or in close proximity
• Hierarchical system of relationships
• Loyalty and filial piety
• Family matters are kept strictly private

Gender Norms
• Patriarchal, patrilineal, and paternalistic
• Clearly defined and strict gender norms
• Gender segregation

Shame & Honor
• Central to Afghan identity
CULTURAL CORNERSTONES (CONT.)

Education
Respect for Elders & Authority Figures
- Teachers, school administrators, healthcare professionals, etc.

Hospitality
Superstitions
- Jinn – supernatural or evil spirit
- Evil eye – misfortune caused by another’s envy

Communication
- High-context culture: indirect and implicit
- Less eye contact, particularly with elders & authority figures
Mental Health of Resettled Afghans

- General Statistics & Trends
- Child- & Youth-Specific Statistics
- Triple-Trauma Paradigm
- Manifestations of Trauma
- Risks & Resilience
GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH STATISTICS & TRENDS

**Trauma Exposure**
- 65% personally experienced at least one traumatic event
- 49% experienced 4 < traumatic events
- 47% Afghan women reported exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV)

(Kovess-Masfety et al., 2021)

**Mental Disorders**
- Prevalence of psychological distress 47%
- Substantial impairment due to mental health 39%
- Sadness 65% and anxiety 27%
- 12-month prevalence rate for Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) over 5%, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) 3%, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) 12%, suicidal thoughts over 2%, lifetime suicidal attempts 3.5%

(Kovess-Masfety et al., 2021)
CHILD- & YOUTH-SPECIFIC STATISTICS

Trauma Exposure

- 25% 11-16-year-old had close relative or friend wounded or killed; 17% directly witnessed bombardment or rocket explosion related to war; 14% homeless; 29% experienced 3 or more (Panter-Brick et al., 2014)
- 71% experienced physical violence (O’Leary et al., 2018)
- 63% victimized by peers (Zupancic, 2017)

Mental Health

- 28% substantial risk for psychiatric problems
- 42 – 52% PTSD, 49% depression, 45% anxiety (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Qamar et al., 2022)
- 53% high total difficulties (SDQ), 39% emotional difficulties, 52% conduct challenges, 15% hyperactivity/inattention, 83% peer problems, 12% problems impacted daily life (Kovess-Masfety et al., 2023)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRE-FLIGHT</th>
<th>FLIGHT</th>
<th>POST-FLIGHT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harassment/intimidation/threats</td>
<td>Fear of being caught or returned</td>
<td>Low social and economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of unexpected arrest</td>
<td>Living in hiding/underground</td>
<td>Lack of legal status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of job/livelihood</td>
<td>Detention at checkpoints, borders</td>
<td>Language barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of home and possessions</td>
<td>Loss of home, possessions</td>
<td>Transportation, service barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruption of studies, life dreams</td>
<td>Loss of job/schooling</td>
<td>Loss of identity, roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated relocation</td>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>Bad news from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in hiding/underground</td>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>Unmet expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal chaos/breakdown</td>
<td>Exploitation: bribes, falsification</td>
<td>Unemployment/underemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition of traditional practices</td>
<td>Physical assault, rape, or injury</td>
<td>Racial/ethnic discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of medical care</td>
<td>Witnessing violence</td>
<td>Inadequate, dangerous housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation, isolation of family</td>
<td>Lack of medical care</td>
<td>Repeated relocation/migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>Separation, isolation of family</td>
<td>Social and cultural isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for secrecy, silence, distrust</td>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>Family separation/reunification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief arrests</td>
<td>Crowded, unsanitary conditions</td>
<td>Unresolved losses/disappearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being followed or monitored</td>
<td>Long waits in refugee camps</td>
<td>Conflict: internal, marital, generational, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisonment</td>
<td>Great uncertainty about future</td>
<td>Unrealistic expectations from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shock of new climate, geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other forms of violence</td>
<td></td>
<td>Symptoms often worsen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnessing violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappearances/deaths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(CVT, 2005)
MANIFESTATIONS OF TRAUMA

Preschool – Young School-Age
- Sleep disturbances – nightmares, difficulty or fear of falling asleep, night terrors
- Difficulty separating from caregiver
- Somatic complaints
- Disinterest in previously pleasurable activities
- Extreme neediness/clinginess
- Regressive behaviors (bed wetting, thumb sucking, etc.)
- Engage in traumatic play
- Excessive crying or tantrums
- Aggressive behavior (hitting, kicking, biting, etc.)

School-Age
- Changes in behavior (agression, anger, irritability, withdrawal, or sadness)
- Trouble at school
- Refuse to attend school
- Difficulties with peers
- Fear of separating from caregivers
- Somatic complaints
- Constant retelling of trauma
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulties concentrating and learning
- Reckless behaviors
- Excessive crying or tantrums

Adolescents
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Sense of responsibility or guilt for bad things that happened
- Feelings of helplessness
- Changes in worldview
- Relationship problems with peers, teachers, & family
- Reckless, self-destructive, or aggressive behaviors
- Self-harm
- Poor academic performance
- Rule-breaking/defiance
- Obsessive behaviors
- Excessive caretaking
- Mistrust
RISKS & RESILIENCE

**Risk Factors**
- Living in a single parent household
- Family separation
- Parental mental health problems & exposure to trauma
- Family economic hardship
- Perceived discrimination
- Intergenerational conflict
- Sensitive developmental periods
- Visa uncertainty
- Lack of language proficiency
- Poor support system and/or hostile and unsupportive community environment
- Lack of access to services

**Resilience**
- Afghan cultural values fundamental to upbringing, psychosocial well-being, and resilience:
  1. Faith in Islam (*Iman*)
  2. Family unity and harmony (*Wahdat and itti-faq*)
  3. Service (*Khidmat*)
  4. Perseverance and effort (*Koshesh*)
  5. Morals (*Akhlaq*)
  6. Social prominence, respectability and honor (*Izzat*; Ventevogel et al., 2013)
- Positive, adaptive coping
- Hope for the future
- Family, social, & school support
- Sense of belonging & ethnic identity
- Language proficiency
Supporting Afghan Children & Youth

Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Support

Individual Considerations
Family Considerations
School & Classroom Considerations
Being Culturally & Trauma-Informed While Assisting Displaced Afghan Families

Build Connection & Trust
Use cultural ways to show respect:
- Stand up during hellos and goodbyes
- Put your hand over your heart and lower your gaze when thanking a person
- Use "jaan" (a term of respect) when addressing or acknowledging someone of the same gender
- Ask what name they would like to be called (elders don’t use first names)
- Be open to giving them a familiar name (like auntie or uncle-jaan)
- When speaking to a family, acknowledge all family members
- Do not use children as translators

Maintain & Strengthen Family Relationships
- Make sure parents are supported in making decisions about their children’s needs
- When talking to a family, respect the role of the parents
- Help parents develop knowledge and skills on how to help children in the new environment
- Normalize challenges (i.e., I know things are different here and there are many new things to learn so let me know how I can support you or support your children)
- Respect cultural parenting practices unless they are harmful
- Always center the parent as the authority in making decisions about their children’s future
- Help families develop a shared understanding of family/parent/child goals and needs

Align with Child/Family Goals & Use A Strength-Based Approach
- Use strength-based framing by asking children/families what strategies they used before to deal with an issue
- Ask about their understanding of an issue and their ideas about dealing with it before making suggestions
- Frame action as being a step towards a life goal (e.g., education, housing, employment) rather than because something is wrong with them
- Frame support as being grounded in supporting the child/family as they try to achieve their goals
- Formulate important tasks to be addressed based on what the child/family identifies as being important to them and link all activities to the achievement of that goal

Good to Know
- Be calm and compassionate
- Respect culture and diversity
- Actively listen without going into task mode too quickly
- Voice modulation is culturally bound; reflect on your biases
- Don’t assume that nonverbal communication gestures (e.g., thumbs up) have the same meaning across cultures
- Let them share stories of their home country or their previous experiences but do not probe them for more details
- Help them adjust to the new community; they will be resettling into (practical matters such as how to make appointments, connect with resources, learn English)
- Provide strategies for helping cope with current stress and trauma
- For additional trauma-informed strategies, review PFA for Displaced Children and Families

(Baha et al., 2022)
INDIVIDUAL CONSIDERATIONS

• What you say and how you say it matters
• Identify Afghan students with trauma and/or mental health issues and refer to school counselor
• Regular collaboration between teachers and school counselors
• Teach emotion regulation and grounding and relaxation techniques and utilize them when needed
• Interventions for traumatized refugee children and youth:
  o Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
  o Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)
  o School-based expressive therapies and interventions
FAMILY CONSIDERATIONS

• Partner with Afghan families and facilitate family activities to foster engagement and relationship building between families and teachers/staff

• Provide cultural orientation for Afghan students and families

• Provide home-visits, if possible

• Facilitate (or partner with organization) psychoeducational groups to support and improve parent-child relationships
SCHOOL & CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS

**Schools**
- Provide training to school staff to improve cultural proficiency
- Provide interpreters and/or cultural brokers
- Assign a teacher or advisor as a trusted point of contact
- Assign peer mentors
- Identify and coordinate with community partners for multi-tiered system of supports

**Classrooms**
- Teach through a trauma-informed lens
  - Increase predictability and consistency
  - Remove triggering content
  - Create healing classrooms
- Strengthen positive ethnic and bicultural identity
- Incorporate Afghan culture and values in curriculum so students can relate
RESOURCES

- Afghan Health Initiative [https://afghanhealth.org/]
- Afghan American Cultural Association [https://www.aaca-wa.org/]
- Afghan-American Foundation: [https://www.afghanamericans.org]
- Bloom Library. Afghan Children Read provides 330 books in Dari and Pashto for early grades. [www.bloomlibrary.org/Afghan-Children-Read/]
- Colorin Colorado: How Schools Can Partner with Afghan Refugee Families. [www.colorincolorado.org/refugees/afghan]
- English-Dari and English-Pashto Flashcards: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gv11eHC2sHE5si6rVtnLV5pz9AjmtKKt]
- Good Thinking Trauma Workbook in English, Dari, and Pashto
- IRC’s E-Learning Course: Toxic Stress & Well-Being Among Students Affected by Forced Migration.
- Storyweaver offers hundreds of stories for children in Dari/Farsi and Pashto
- Switchboard’s Toolkit: Supporting Afghan Students in Schools & Youth Programs in the United States.
RESOURCES: Afghan Books

- Four Feet, Two Sandals by Karen Lynn Williams, Khadra Mohammad, Illustrated by Doug Chayka. Age level: 6-9
- Nasreen’s Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan by Jeanette Winter. Age level: 6-9
- One Half from the East by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: 9-14
- Saving Kabul Corner (Kabul Chronicles) by N. H. Senzai. Age level: 9-14
- The Sky at Our Feet by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: 9-14
- Sparks Like Stars: A Novel by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: Adults
- The Pearl That Broke Its Shell: A Novel. Age level: Adults


