





Families in Cultural Transition

Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, Auburn and Carramar, Sydney, NSW

This project also relates to:

-  Education
-  Families

Many refugee families have suffered the effects of torture that is designed to interfere with the full functioning of families, or they have been separated from family members during the refugee journey. They are all experiencing resettlement in an unfamiliar environment where structures are unfamiliar and their experiences are difficult to translate. Survivors of war, rape and torture often experience post-traumatic symptoms. These symptoms can be intensified when dealing with the pressures of adapting to a new country and culture.

The *Families in Cultural Transition* program trains bilingual facilitators from refugee communities to assist and support refugee families to maintain a cohesive family unit. The facilitators run a series of workshops in a context where family members feel valued and supported, have fun, and gain access to information and assistance in an interactive and empowering way. *Families in Cultural Transition* is thus an alternative approach to counselling and is based on experiential learning rather than information provision.

When moving to a new country, many refugees can face a multitude of cultural obstacles that can trigger post-traumatic symptoms. Newly arrived refugees cope better in their new environment if they can anticipate the emotional and physical challenges that accompany migration. *Families in Cultural Transition* also aims to reduce social isolation and introduce refugee families to key conceptual frameworks underpinning Australian society, and help them identify challenges to family dynamics resulting from exile, migration and resettlement and develop appropriate coping strategies.

The program builds refugee communities' capacity to help themselves by training up members of the community and employing them as facilitators. Since the program began, members of many communities have been trained including Afghans, Assyrians, Bosnians, Burundians,

Congolese, Hazaras, Iranians, Iraqis, Karens, Kurds, Liberians, Mandaeans, Serbians, Sierra Leoneans, Sudanese and Tibetans.

Community feedback and identifying needs

In 1989 and 1990, two Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) psychologists, Jorge Aroche and Mariano Coello, conducted information sessions for newly arrived refugees from Central America living in Australia. As a result of these participatory sessions, the refugees themselves identified the need for training and emotional support as a strategy to cope with their new environment. STARTTS found that refugee families who could anticipate the challenges associated with their migration, coped better in their new environment. Thus, the need for a psycho-educational program was identified and *Families in Cultural Transition* was started in 1996.

Through ongoing dialogue with various refugee communities and service providers, STARTTS has found that some refugee communities find western-style counselling too confronting or too different from their traditional beliefs or customs. Members of these communities often consider *Families in Cultural Transition* a softer approach and a better option than formal counselling.

The resource kit

A comprehensive tool was developed for facilitators to use with groups of refugee families and immigrants to provide them with useful information and coping strategies in their new environment.

The kit begins with an introduction to the program and an explanation of the importance of understanding the new environment to live successfully in Australia. The other modules cover support systems, money, trauma and healing, families, children, gender, youth and enjoying their new environment.

The resource kit is now used across New South Wales and has been adapted for use in other states and territories across Australia.

Training the facilitators

The *Families in Cultural Transition* program trains facilitators to use the resource kit to deliver experientially based workshops and to provide refugees with practical skills to help them cope in their new environment and normalise their experience of trauma.

An intensive five day training program is provided to *Families in Cultural Transition* facilitators using the resource kit. The training includes:

- a one day introduction to working with refugees
- principles of adult learning
- concepts of facilitation and co-facilitation
- group work concepts
- basic explanation of all modules
- trauma and healing
- dealing with difficult scenarios
- self-care and vicarious trauma
- practice running program activities
- child protection
- ongoing supervision and access to professional development activities.

Families in Cultural Transition facilitators also receive general supervision and clinical supervision by an experienced counsellor from STARTTS. They attend at least two support sessions with the counsellor where they may talk about trauma that has emerged either for themselves or for the group, and how to cope with it. Extra sessions are available if needed.

There are more than 30 *Families in Cultural Transition* facilitators in New South Wales.

The program

The program for newly arrived refugee families runs for nine weeks. Two trained *Families in Cultural Transition* facilitators, using the resource kit, run the self-sufficient, flexible program as nine three-hour sessions. The facilitators running each workshop session are drawn from the same community as the refugees they are guiding, speak their language and understand both their culture and the Australian environment. Some communities prefer to have separate sessions organised for men and women and program organisers accommodate these requests.

The program aims to strengthen relationships by enhancing family members' communication, relationship and parenting skills. The methods used in program sessions include brainstorming, values clarification, small group discussions, mapping, paired discussions, interviews, role plays, games and guest speakers. Stronger refugee families and communities are formed through participation in the program.

An integral part of the *Families in Cultural Transition* program is to facilitate newly arrived refugees' contact with counsellors who can provide them with emotional support and help them normalise their responses to migration and trauma. A professional counsellor can attend the trauma and healing session to assist the facilitators and reduce the stigma associated with seeking professional help that is experienced in many communities.

Many participants have had good reason not to trust authority figures in their country of origin and need to be shown they do not need to fear similar authority figures in Australia. As part of this initiative, local police are invited as guest speakers to interact with refugees to build trust. The process of building trust helps to elevate refugees' sense of respect, dignity and self-esteem.

Participants undertake pre- and post-program evaluation to determine whether program objectives were met. The evaluations measure:

- how confident participants are at getting information and help
- changes in families, including the level of awareness of the changing family dynamics and of the effect of trauma and how to deal with its effects
- social connections and satisfaction levels.

Achievements

The program has a very powerful effect on participants. Torture and trauma survivors learn to talk about their problems in a safe environment. They learn that their reactions are normal and are shared by many others with similar experiences, and this knowledge helps them cope with their feelings.

The program helps them understand Australian society and institutions and teaches them how to detect difficulties and solve problems that may arise as a result of cultural differences.

Participants develop support networks that help them overcome the social isolation they experience as new arrivals. *Families in Cultural Transition* Coordinator, Jeannie O'Carroll, said:

In this job, you are seeing adults having to reconstruct their lives. It always surprises me how the program reaches people. One female participant said: 'This is the first time in ten years that I have sat in a room with my own people and talked about the problems that we are facing in our community'. This feedback was given with a lot of emotion.

A particular strength of the program is that the facilitators come from the communities themselves, they are trained by STARTTS and they gain significant work experience and are empowered by the experience. For a lot of people, it is the first time they have applied for a job in Australia and the first time they have been paid. That in itself is a big achievement. Jeannie O'Carroll said:

Watching their confidence grow, and being asked to give reference letters reflects another success of the program.

Challenges

To help the program run smoothly a number of challenges need to be met, namely:

- the difficulty of retaining trained facilitators when it is not possible to offer them long term employment, but only short term contracts for the length of the program
- resolving transport difficulties for some members of communities who are not able to get to the venue for the workshops
- overcoming some difficulties for facilitators using the resource kit because it is not culturally specific
- inconsistent participant attendance at the workshops due to family commitments on the weekend, weekend work or attendance at community events.

Key factors in the program's success

It is important to consider the community and consult widely when building a tool to address the needs of newly arrived refugee families.

It is often necessary to build trust within a group because some community members can be quite critical and suspicious of the facilitator's motives.

The program works best when workshops are conducted at venues that are accessible by public transport and at times when groups are able to meet (usually on weekends).

It is important for facilitators to keep an open mind when presenting information and facilitating discussion to ensure the right messages and concepts are conveyed.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar program

Conduct community consultations to assess the needs of specific communities.

Ensure that a fair, open and transparent process is followed when recruiting facilitators from target communities.

Have appropriate administrative mechanisms in place to manage time effectively, keep track of paperwork and organise a system for payments.

Seek early assistance from counsellors and meet with facilitators every two to three weeks.

To help ensure training is rolled out smoothly, work out the logistics early, prepare resources, develop partnerships, involve other staff in the organisation and promote the training effectively.

Overall, the program would benefit from having an additional support person to assist facilitators during the early stages of training.

Families in Cultural Transition is delivered in the context of other STARTTS community development and counselling work with particular communities. It is one of a number of interventions within a systemic model. It is also delivered in the context of an ongoing relationship with the particular community.

Facts and figures

The New South Wales Department of Health established STARTTS in 1988 in response to an identified need for specialised services for refugees in Australia.

Currently STARTTS' main funding source is the Department of Health, with additional funding from the Australian Government departments of Health and Ageing, Immigration and Citizenship, and Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as well as other sources for specific projects.

Families in Cultural Transition groups run in 2006–07 included those for Sudanese, Sierra Leonean, Tibetan, Karen and Hazara people. Planned groups for 2007–08 include people from West and Central Africa, Iraq and other Arabic-speaking communities.

There are more than 30 program-trained facilitators in New South Wales. They are currently located within STARTTS, among various refugee communities that STARTTS pays to run the program, and in the New South Wales Department of Education and Training.

The Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma is a national network of eight specialist rehabilitation services that work with survivors of torture and trauma. Members of the forum in the Northern Territory, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania have taken up *Families in Cultural Transition* and modified the program to suit local conditions and specific needs.

STARTTS has assisted other forum agencies implement *Families in Cultural Transition* in various ways including by training program teams in Darwin, Brisbane and Canberra and delivering the program training in Tasmania for counsellors and facilitators.

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photo > Rajabu Rashid, Families in Cultural Transitions facilitator

'The most positive thing about Families in Cultural Transition is that people have information now about things like educating their children on family issues...They can ask anything in their own language and there's no fear anymore.'

Profile > Rajabu

Rajabu is from Burundi and arrived in Australia in 2004 with his parents and seven younger brothers and sisters. His youngest brother was born in Australia. Rajabu and his family spent eight years in a refugee camp in Tanzania before being resettled by the Australian Government. He knew little about Australia, only that Australia was a wool producing country and that it hosted the 2000 Olympic Games.

Rajabu attended high school in Burundi and completed the final two years in Tanzania. He completed a teaching course, and taught high school students in the refugee camp for three years. He is now taking Foundation Studies by distance education at the University of Newcastle and eventually wants to study chemical engineering.

Rajabu completed the *Families in Cultural Transition* training in 2004. At the time he was one of few Burundian community members in the Fairfield area with good English skills.

Rajabu noticed that a major issue regularly emerging was that of dealing with family issues around disciplining children. The children's behavioural problems were often compounded by cultural transition and their traumatic experiences. Many parents wanted to find out how to educate children their own way. Rajabu heard parents say:

Back in Africa they used to respect us and there was no problem.
In Australia if we punish the child, the child can call the police.

The *Families in Cultural Transition* program teaches parents how to discipline the child in a way that is appropriate in Australia. Rajabu continued:

The most positive thing about Families in Cultural Transition is that people have information now about things like educating their children on family issues. We say this is how Australia works, this is what the law says and they're very happy to know what laws to follow. They can ask anything in their own language and there's no fear anymore.

For Rajabu, being a *Families in Cultural Transition* facilitator has been an interesting and important experience and has helped him to adapt more easily to living in Australia.