



International Centre for Migration,  
Health and Development

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**PRACTICAL  
GUIDELINES ON  
PSYCHOSOCIAL HEALTH AND  
WELLBEING: ELDERLY REFUGEES**



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## Introduction

The war in Ukraine is forcing millions of people, including elderly people to leave their country and seek refuge far from their homes. They are fleeing experiences that produce social and psychological wounds which, if not managed in a timely fashion, can go on to scar them for life and reduce their capacity to look after themselves and their loved ones.

The response to the crisis has been overwhelming and has been made possible by the decision of governments to open their frontiers to refugees with or without visas, and this is being facilitated everyday by the outpouring of help from thousands of volunteers, health and social workers and host families in these countries.

Because many of these helpers may have little experience dealing with situations of this kind, these PRACTICAL GUIDELINES have been produced to support them in their work. They build on a long body of experience dealing with the psychosocial impact of conflicts and natural disasters and the needs of the people caught up in them. This set of guidelines focuses on elderly people who, because of their age and associated health profiles, may be especially vulnerable to uprooting and forced displacement. They are also a population that is often forgotten and neglected in conflict and other humanitarian settings.

The guidelines are not meant to be prescriptive, but rather seek to provide ideas on how to respond to what are likely to be new circumstances, new questions and new demands.

## Elderly refugees

Elderly people constitute a significant proportion of the people being forced to flee the war in Ukraine. If the needs of elderly people are not met in a timely way, their physical and psychological health can quickly deteriorate, so

- give elderly people the priority they need
- reach out to elderly people who seem to be travelling alone
  - ✓ ask them if they are indeed alone
  - ✓ ask if they have family who have fled but who have been separated from
  - ✓ help them to find and be re-united with relatives as quickly as possible
- look out for elderly people who seem to be having difficulty walking
  - ✓ ask if they are injured or if they have other chronic difficulties
  - ✓ if possible, offer wheel chairs, walking canes or other aids
  - ✓ record and report any injuries or other chronic problems
- refer them to healthcare personnel and provide transport where appropriate

## Communicating

Being able to communicate with refugees, especially elderly refugees, in their own language will always be a source of comfort and support, and will help avoid misunderstandings, so

- check to see if there are official translators available
- look for younger people in the refugee group who can serve as translators
- remember that non-verbal communication can also be effective
  - ✓ use simple sign language and laugh with refugees at mistakes
  - ✓ be warm and touching, holding hands and smiling
  - ✓ let them understand you are caring for them
- ask if they have mobile phones and if they need help to use them
  - ✓ if they have phones ask if they are in contact with relatives and friends
  - ✓ help them to look up contacts and help them to call them
  - ✓ keep in mind that even phone contact is better than no contact

## Moving and transporting

Elderly refugees may be worried about what is going to happen to them, so if and when elderly people are being moved on buses and trains,

- try to keep them physically together with family, relatives and close friends
- try to explain to them where they are being taken, why and for how long
  - ✓ do not take them for granted because they are elderly
  - ✓ the more information you share with them, the better they will feel
  - ✓ the more they know, the more they will participate
- make sure they have whatever belongings they arrived with
  - ✓ remember this is all they have
  - ✓ remember these may be their link with the past and continuity

## Meeting daily requirements

Elderly people may have developed special needs before they were displaced, so

- ask if they had any pre-existing physical or mental health problems
  - ✓ ask if they were receiving treatment for these problems
  - ✓ ask if they have lost pills or other prescribed aids
- ask if they were using spectacles for reading and/or for long distance
  - ✓ ask if they have lost them, and if so, try to replace them as soon as possible
- ask if they were used to wearing dentures
  - ✓ ask if they have lost them, and if so, try to replace them as soon as possible
- ask if they were using walking canes or frames or other aids
  - ✓ ask if they have lost them, and if so, try to replace them as soon as possible
- bring these needs to the attention of local or NGO healthcare and social staff

## Warmth

Keeping elderly people warm is important, especially if they are not very mobile, so

- check to see what they are wearing
- make sure they have warm clothing
- ask if they are comfortable and estimate if they need more clothing
- easily changed clothing is likely to be preferable for reasons of hygiene
- while checking their warmth, look out for signs of physical/psychological distress

## Hydration

Keeping elderly people well hydrated is vital even if they claim not to be thirsty, so

- remind elderly refugees of the need to drink
- provide bottled water that can be easily untapped and tapped
- check regularly to ensure water is being consumed and in what amount
- checking on their drinking can be a source of reassurance and security for them

## Nutrition

Ensuring good nutrition of elderly people is imperative but can be complicated, so

- remember elderly people may have special nutritional needs and dietary habits
- enquire whether elderly people have any special food requirements
  - ✓ religious-related and if necessary, try to discuss dispensation
  - ✓ health and digestion related, and what exactly
  - ✓ mastication related, teeth and denture problems
- provide soups and other foods that are easy to consume
- ensure regular eating times that can provide psychosocial structure
- get expert nutritional advice where necessary and possible
- encourage snacking if and when this is feasible and if it helps to comfort people

## Hygiene

Maintaining good hygiene is imperative for both physical and mental health, so

- look out for elderly who cannot wash themselves or care for personal hygiene
- look out for people with disabilities that could impact on hygiene
- make sure the most immediate hygiene needs (hands and face washing) can be met
- determine if they can be responsible for body washing etc. and if not arrange help
  - ✓ make sure they have good and easy access to toilet and washing facilities
  - ✓ always ensure privacy
  - ✓ provide (where possible) warm water, soap and disinfection
  - ✓ provide the means for oral health
- remember that poor hygiene can lead to serious skin problems, so check for these
- remember that poor hygiene can lead to other physical and psychological problems

## Ensuring privacy

Privacy in refugee situations, especially in the first few days when there tends to be more people than space, and when conditions can be chaotic, can be very difficult but it is essential for elderly people, so

- ensure discrete access to toilets and bathing facilities
- avoid stigmatizing or criticizing people who cannot keep themselves clean
- while keeping elderly people close to relatives and friends still try to respect privacy

## Physical health

In any population of elderly people, it is important to assume that there will be some with physical health problems associated with age, and also what they have been through, so

- ask elderly refugees how they feel, keeping in mind that reported wellness or lack of wellness can be a good indicator of real health status
- ask elderly refugees or family member with them, about their medical histories
  - ✓ make a record of whatever they say they have or previously had
  - ✓ share the report with any health professionals working with refugees
- if people say they are not well, ask why and ask about
  - ✓ what treatments they were taking and if they have lost medicines
  - ✓ try to replace previous medication they were taking, use frequency etc.
  - ✓ try to replace any medical assistance instruments they were using
  - ✓ get relatives and younger refugees to engage in helping them
- engaging elderly people in discussions about their health and how they feel can be a source of comfort for them, but always be sure to follow up where there is a need
- if possible, give elderly people or relatives, a record sheet they can keep with them and which states name, age, reported health problems, when first seen and any action taken for them
- refer elderly people who have difficult problems and needs, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, to relevant healthcare staff
  - ✓ keep family, relatives and friends in the refugee group informed
  - ✓ allow a relative or friend to accompany the person if being referred
- be careful not to disregard or give the impression of not believing a person simply because the condition they complain of is not easy to diagnose

- ✓ allow elderly people to talk freely about their complaints/problems
- ✓ show empathy for what they are feeling and talking about
- ✓ if possible, discuss this with close relatives and healthcare staff

## COVID-19

Elderly people are at special risk of acquiring COVID-19 and developing complications, so

- ask if they have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and if so, how many times
  - ✓ ask if they or close relative had a COVID-19 illness, and if so, when
  - ✓ try to arrange COVID-19 tests and vaccination, where appropriate
- provide masks and hand disinfection, keeping in mind elderly hygiene needs

## Psychosocial health and wellbeing

In any population of refugees, it is important to start out by assuming there will be elderly people who will have psychosocial health and wellbeing problems associated with age and experiences such as

- loss of place, including
  - ✓ close relatives and friends
  - ✓ home, belongings, personal memories linked to them
  - ✓ status in terms of independence, seniority and personal decision-making
  - ✓ the sense of security that comes with continuity of community
- always provide sympathetic care and counselling
  - ✓ ask if there are relatives or close friends with them
  - ✓ ask relatives and other people in the refugee group to help
  - ✓ look for younger people who wish to volunteer
- try not to over-medicalise psychosocial problems
  - ✓ remember people may be reacting normally to abnormal conditions
  - ✓ try to mitigate the conditions by being warm with them
  - ✓ making them as physically comfortable as possible
- try to encourage people to talk openly about their what they see as their needs
  - ✓ if possible, organize chat groups among elderly refugees
  - ✓ encourage them to advise and help each other
  - ✓ always be willing to listen
- **depression** is a common problem in refugee situations, and it can also be serious in terms of what it does to the ability of people to look after themselves and take decisions, so look out for:
  - ✓ loss of interest in everything, including eating and drinking
  - ✓ inability to smile and be able to take pleasure in things
  - ✓ loss of appetite and loss of weight
  - ✓ loss of energy and not wanting to get up and do things
  - ✓ lack of interest in personal hygiene
  - ✓ poor sleep or too much sleep
  - ✓ chronic fatigue
  - ✓ irritability and lack of concentration
  - ✓ loss of self-esteem and thoughts of worthlessness
  - ✓ thoughts or mention of self-harm and suicide

- ask for professional help if you feel there is a problem of depression, and
  - ✓ remember to be supportive and non-judgmental
  - ✓ remember to be warm
- **anxiety** is a common problem among refugees and has a capacity to become severe and debilitating, so look out for signs of:
  - ✓ being constantly nervous and tense
  - ✓ not being able to engage with others
  - ✓ constantly saying/believing that things are going to get worse
  - ✓ occasional panic and breathing rapidly (hyperventilating)
  - ✓ sweating, even when immobile
  - ✓ difficult-to-explain trembling and not being able to control trembling
  - ✓ difficulty concentrating, even on simple tasks and things
  - ✓ avoiding people and withdrawing from social situations
- ask for professional help if you feel there is a problem of anxiety, and
  - ✓ remember to be supportive and non-judgmental
  - ✓ remember to be warm
- **anger and fear** are common reactions to war and refugee flight, but can become chronic and exaggerated if not responded to quickly, so look out for
  - ✓ unusual irritability
  - ✓ unusual anger and/or fear
  - ✓ signs or mention of violence towards others
  - ✓ signs of self-harm or talk of self-harm
  - ✓ mention of suicide
- engage with elderly people who express a lot of anger
  - ✓ talk to them and try to assess how serious these feelings are
  - ✓ try to assess if their anger is likely to be a threat to those around them
  - ✓ try to assess if it is likely to interfere with their own self-care
  - ✓ discuss the need to look forward to survival and a better life
- **referral of refugees** to your GP or other healthcare personnel may be required, but
  - ✓ discuss with refugee guests if they agree to be referred
  - ✓ discuss with mental health professionals to discuss the problem
  - ✓ try to involve relatives in taking decisions
  - ✓ keep cultural and linguistic differences in mind
  - ✓ always listen, be warm and understanding
  - ✓ do not take on the role of a psychologist if you do not have training

## Managing guilt

Survivor guilt is common in all wars and natural disasters and refers to the tendency for survivors to feel guilty because they have survived while others have not. It can be a very erosive feeling that prevents people looking forward and enjoying life. Elderly people are no exception to this, especially if they have left sons and daughters behind, so look out for

- elderly people who speak a lot about others who died, or were lost
- elderly people who constantly question why they survived and not others
  - ✓ try to talk about the randomness of death, injury and loss in wars
  - ✓ explain that “being spared” is also an equally random event
  - ✓ allow people to talk about their feelings
  - ✓ show empathy for what they are feeling
  - ✓ explain they still have a lot to contribute to family, friends and themselves
  - ✓ discuss with close relatives and encourage them to “listen” and be patient

## Avoiding painful subjects

It will be impossible for refugees not to remember, and in many cases, want to talk about what happened to them, who they lost, what they lost, what they saw or heard. This can be important for them, and helpers should try to be understanding and patient listeners, but

- too much “recalling” and re-living traumatic events can be bad for refugees
- it can also be bad for the helpers who have to listen and engage on the subject
- try not to ask direct questions about what happened to them
- try to estimate when too much discussion about the past is too much
- if a refugee is too focused of the past, talk about positive aspects of the present

## Providing hope

Elderly refugees have been through a terrible process and experienced situations that may have made them lose hope in the future

- try to talk about the future in positive ways
  - ✓ talk about any good news there might be
  - ✓ talk about eventually being re-unified with relatives
- try to involve them in social gatherings such as meals
  - ✓ show them that they are seen as equal and welcome
- organize for them to be taken on walks in the town or in the country
  - ✓ take them to parks and open spaces

## Use of space

Space is important for all refugees and must be respected as much as possible, so

- try to ensure elderly refugees have privacy
  - ✓ ensure elderly refugees have privacy of washing and toilet facilities
  - ✓ try to ensure elderly refugees have space to “withdraw”
- try to provide space for informal getting together and provide drinks and snacks
  - ✓ encourage people to comfort and help each other
  - ✓ help generate discussions about other things than the war

## Experience and resilience

Elderly refugees, like elderly people everywhere, bring with them a body of experience that can help to make them more resilient, so

- do not hesitate to ask advice of elderly refugees, and show appreciation for it
    - ✓ encourage younger refugees to seek their advice
    - ✓ where appropriate get elderly refugees to help with early child care
    - ✓ include elderly refugees in discussions with younger people
    - ✓ make a point of NOT excluding them from public debate
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