

## CARING FOR THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF GUESTS FROM UKRAINE

This paper is an individual interpretation based on a presentation specific to the Ukraine situation by psychologist Jennifer Mahon PhD in May 2022. The diagrams and most of the text is taken from slides provided by Dr Mahon.

People displaced from Ukraine are now arriving in greater numbers in local communities. On top of experiencing the trauma that comes with very suddenly having to quit home, friends, family and much more, Ukrainian guests are also experiencing the endless anxiety about those they have left behind. Some have complex trauma, for example having moved away from more than one location in Ukraine.

While Ukrainian guests will be greatly relieved that their lives are no longer in danger, they will likely *not* be properly happy again – however supportive host families are towards them -- until the war is over and they can return home. It is unrealistic to expect that guests can be fully happy. Sensations of grief abound, as well as feelings of (temporary) rootlessness, a creeping realisation that the war may not end any time soon, doubts about adapting to a new culture, mourning what's been left behind – and more.

Children and teenagers may well express their reactions to trauma in unusual ways. Younger children can and will detect their parents' anxieties. Children may become more clingy, needy and upset. They may not have the emotional maturity to express how they feel.

This paper does not differentiate by age, but hosts will need to be aware that young peoples' behaviour may well entail a need for great patience. In addition, parenting styles in Ukraine may differ from those typical in the UK. (The good news is that UKR children seen so far seem to be possibly better-behaved than UK counterparts!).

Those who have chosen to host displaced Ukrainian families are, by definition, kind and caring people. As with any guest, hosts tend to be concerned about the emotional well-being of those they have invited. With their guests from Ukraine, hosts are keen to understand the impact of trauma, so that they can as much as possible to help those from Ukraine to come to terms with their situation and eventually, in some degree at least, to move on from it

Typical impacts of trauma are covered as well as their likely evolution. The paper aims to assist host families where they have doubts about what to say, what not to say, and when to say nothing and just listen. It also offers some guidance that may be useful to ensure harmonious relationships in the hosting household.

Recent experience from host families is reflected in this paper, but it is neither prescriptive nor comprehensive: every case is different and the compassion that accompanies simple humanity goes a long way in these difficult situations. Typical behavioural pathways that are common to many experiencing trauma are explored, also with a view to helping towards eventual recovery.

# Dealing with trauma

## 1. What is trauma?

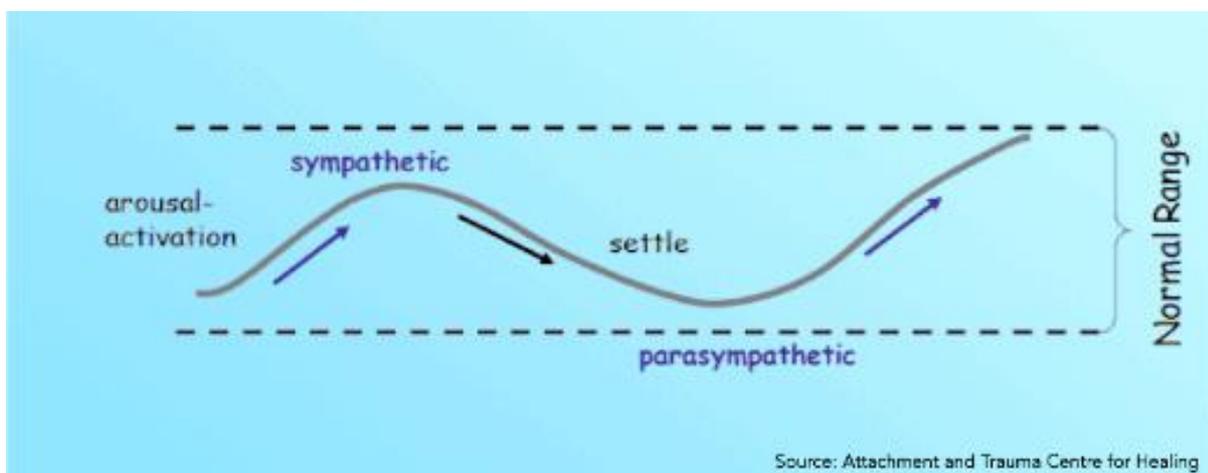
Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event(s), which the person experiencing the trauma could not control. It is not (necessarily) permanently damaging. This paper focuses on the growth that can come from recovery from trauma. (It avoids the label 'PTSD', mainly because it is not helpful to see these current Ukraine-related situations as a 'disorder').

Typically, trauma creates feelings of:

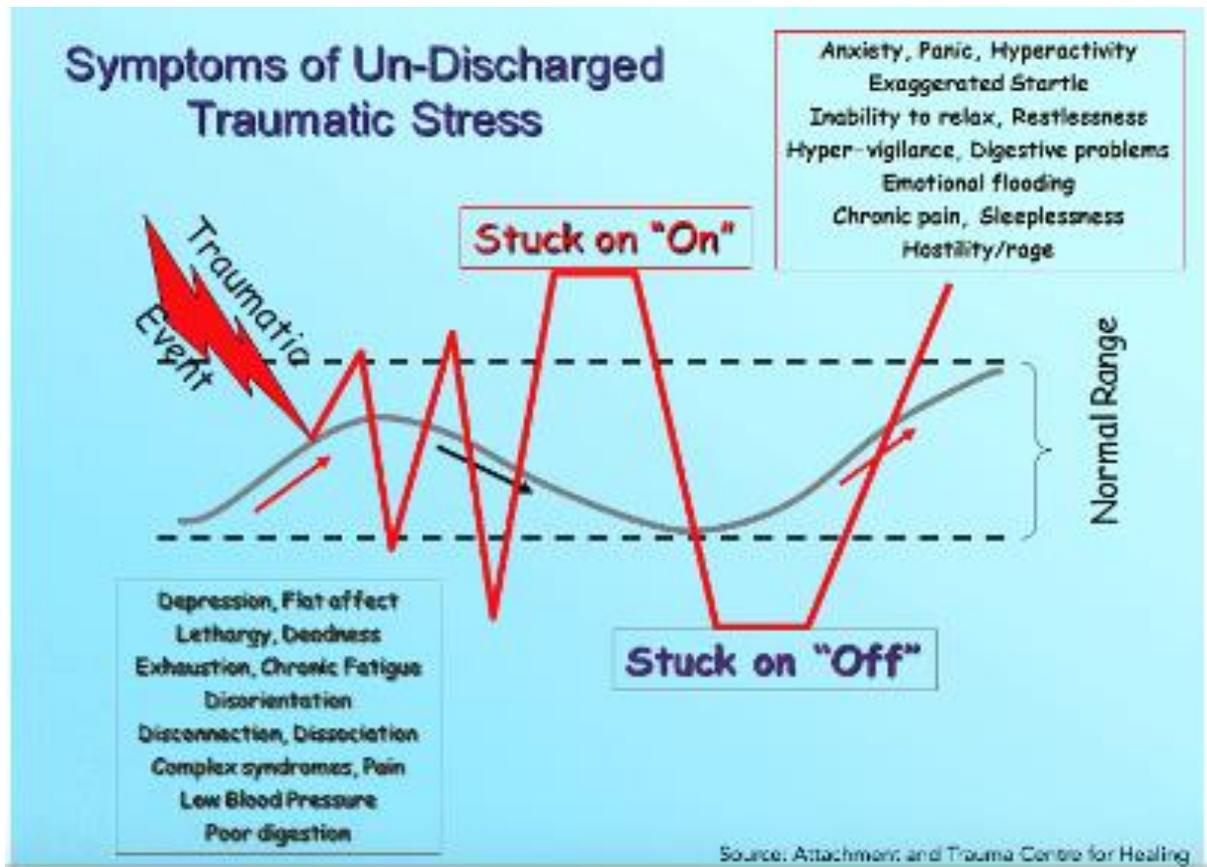
- Helplessness, because of the perceived overwhelming power of the event;
- Hopelessness, because there does not seem to be any way to come to terms with what has happened;
- Humiliation, because one feels belittled and outwitted by the event.

## 2. What are the impacts of trauma?

Trauma impacts the nervous system, upsetting its usual equilibrium which tends to provide us with protection from unexpected events. A healthy nervous system will flow between being aroused and settling itself, but with trauma, the normal flow can be disrupted. The Fight / Flight / Freeze mechanism is activated, but with trauma, it can remain activated for too long, or switch on/off in an uncontrollable way.



Trauma can also affect the Rest/Digest part of the nervous system, and people might need to rest or sleep for far longer than usual, feeling constantly exhausted. Or being unable to eat: the digestive system is affected and the desire to eat is lower.



### 3. What emotions does trauma generate?

Emotions typically attached to trauma are:

- Fear – ‘It happened once, it might happen again, it might be worse next time, will I ever be able to cope, will I ever be able to go home, what’s going to happen to my children, my family’; enduring anxiety about the well-being of family in the military ...’.
- Anger – At the life lost in Ukraine; or ‘They had no right to do that to me; how dare they act in that way, endangering my family...’. Or, anger at one’s self for being unable to cope.
- Dissociation – Involuntarily stepping away from one’s usual self, because the emotional state of that ‘usual self’ is too painful to bear. (May present as apparent absent-mindedness).
- Inability to concentrate – because constant anxiety and hyper-vigilance makes it very difficult to maintain one’s train of thought.

- 'Ultra-mothering' where the guest has children, incl. e.g. over-concern about their child's health (cocooning).

#### 4. How can people move on from trauma?

Healing begins when a sense of control returns. Impacts of trauma on the nervous system are not in control at first, but an increasing awareness of the reactions to trauma can be an important step in regaining control over unhelpful emotions.

Humans are 'story-tellers'. People need a coherent and convincing 'life story'. Building a story about what has happened is an important step: it helps to bring back calm to the nervous system. Feeling in control of one's life is the goal, but regaining that control takes time. It can take up to a year for the recovery to begin to take hold, sometimes longer.



In the diagram above, those from Ukraine having suffered trauma will likely be in the post-impact 'Heroic' phase when they arrive in the UK. After some days / weeks, most will have moved into the 'Community cohesion' phase. Having found other compatriots here, shared experiences and stories with them, gathered some modest self-supporting (social media) encirclement of 'friends', the initial shock of the trauma may *seem* to have abated.

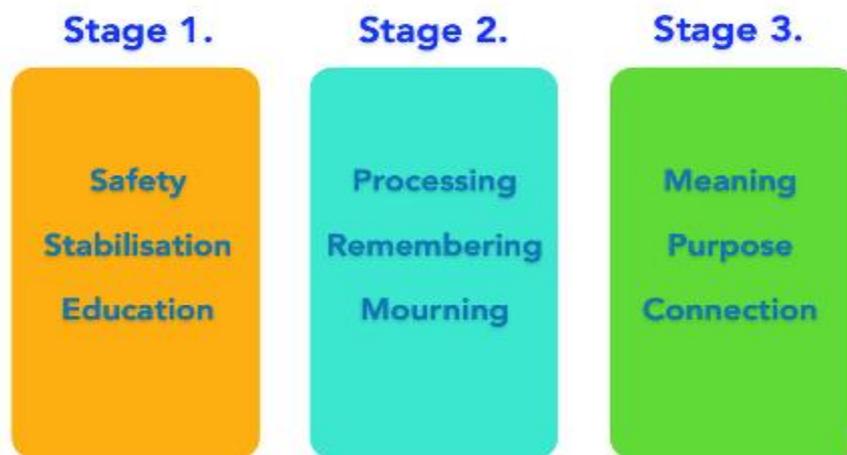
This is the beginning of the recovery process. As the diagram shows, the probably next phase is the onset of disillusionment, which arrives when the full scale of the situation and outlook is realised. Successive trigger events may well deepen the disillusionment.

Especially in this disillusionment phase, patient listening without trying to minimize or fix the problem is helpful. This phase may set in sooner or later than the initial 6 months of hosting: every case is different.

## 5. What are the typical stages of recovery from trauma and how can host families help?

Although three stages of recovery from trauma can be identified, this paper will focus mainly on Stage 1.

### Stages of Trauma Recovery



Adapted from Herman, Judith, 1992. Trauma and Recovery

Those experiencing trauma may be alarmed or distressed by certain 'triggers', which can be highly variable and sometimes very specific. Triggers may include:

- Noises – similar to those last encountered at the time of the traumatic event, such as sudden loud bangs, the sound of low-flying aircraft, engine noise from certain vehicles, people shouting, certain passages of music....
- Smells – similar to the above, smells that connect to a trauma such as burning, unusual chemical odours, wood or brick dust; perhaps also smells that remind of home, such as detergents or perfume....

- Visual – may include intolerance of confined spaces, or of crowded areas, certain combinations of colours, perhaps a sudden (frightening) fear of the dark ....
- Tactile – guests may inadvertently recoil from being touched, for a range of reasons.

Some situations likely to be triggers can be avoided with a little planning, but it will not be possible to foresee very such situation. But simply being aware of why sudden tearfulness or strange silence happens can be useful.

Expressing strong emotions is to be expected following a trauma, as the sufferer struggles to match trauma with the new reality. As the relationship of trust builds between the guest(s) and the host family, the guests may gradually move towards saying more about their experiences, but this must never be forced.

Listening is essential. Ideally the listening should take place where there is calm and time to listen. Listening should be active – pay attention to what is being said, do not interrupt – and understand that the guest is NOT asking for your advice, but greatly values the concern and care you are conveying by being there to listen.

On those occasions when deeper conversation happens, by way of encouragement, you can ask open questions such as:

- What happened then?
- How did you cope?
- Would you like to tell me more about that?
- How will that situation develop
- What are your biggest worries right now?

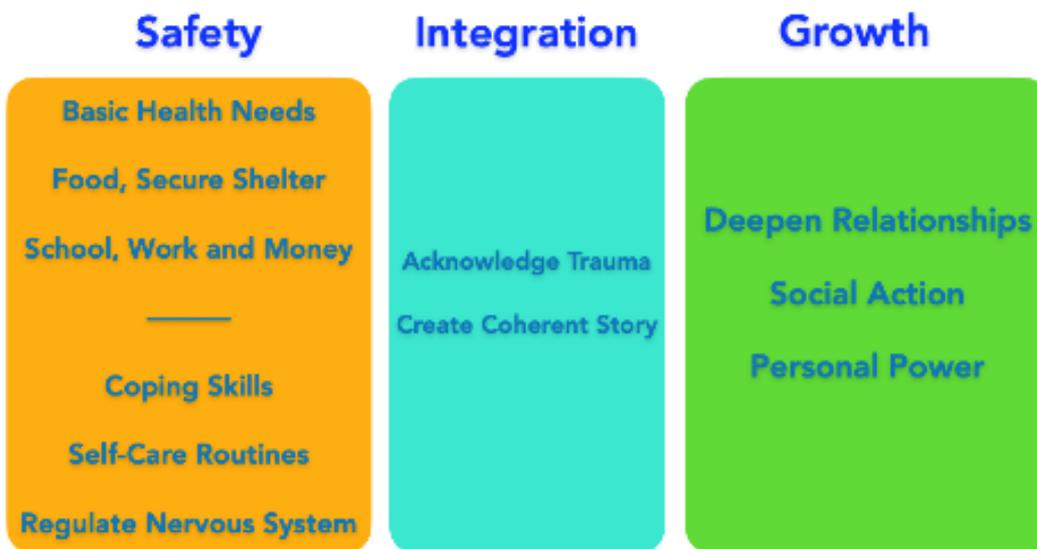
Building a routine can be helpful: it may well be the routine that is usual anyway in the host household. Routines provide a basic set of foreseeable and predictable bases from which to build a more secure outlook. For example, regular mealtimes, regular times for school-runs, perhaps a regular day for shopping, or coffee mornings, or other regular events. Maybe regular times for the day to come to an end and people either go to bed or maintain quietness in the home.

The news we see on most news media tend to be sanitised. National news channels invariably skew news messages to reflect the national outlook. Be aware that the news about Ukraine on the BBC, for example, may not tally with the news Ukrainian guests gather via their own news channels. If it is possible to limit the news about the war being seen by Ukrainian guests, that may be helpful, at least for the time being.

## 6. How can host families help with 'Stage 1 recovery'?

The key areas of trauma recovery can be summarised as:

- Safety – assurance of food, shelter and clothing and an outlook not fraught with danger.
- Integration – gradually coming to understand how the trauma impacted the individual and accommodating that new post-trauma reality into the 'life story'.
- Growth – moving back into normal relationships and social life, regaining power over one's destiny



Adapted from Herman, Judith, 1992. Trauma and Recovery

**Feeling in control is the goal.** As the host (family) you can, if you so choose, play quite an important role in helping towards that goal.

Don't be 'nice' (all the time). Being continually nice can become simply irritating and can lead to resentment. Being nice leaves people feeling beholden, not empowered. It does not help towards regaining control.

Rather than trying to do everything for the guest, if the guest is capable of, e.g. getting the bus to Redhill to visit the Job Centre by themselves, encourage them do so rather than giving a lift. You can walk through the process with them, showing them how it's done so they can do it themselves. Travelling alone by bus in a foreign country is surprisingly empowering and also conducive to building personal independence.

Don't try to mind-read – Mind-reading is when people try to guess what the other person is thinking or wanting. It is based on assumptions. Instead, check out what you want to know from the other person by asking them directly. See giving information below.

Give or ask for information, such that you help the guest(s) to become gradually more independent of you, the host. This will likely enhance mutual respect and reduce any resentment over having less time than before to do the things you – the host – prefer to do (alone!).

Don't be 'needy'! As a host family, you have had the kindness of heart and the generosity of spirit to help people fleeing another European country riven by war. It can be easy to slip into rescue fantasy mode, but that would not be conducive to guests' sense of well-being. Neither are you hosting an 'angel guest' – these are displaced people who one day will probably return home, back to some semblance of the life they had before (or better, preferably). As a host, there is little or nothing you can magically 'fix'.

Avoid expressing pity. Pity makes the person on the receiving end feel pathetic.

By far the best is to ground the hosting situation in reality. Your hosting will almost certainly change you and your family both now and later. Focus on making the daily realities good for both yourselves and your guests. In that way, the experience will almost certainly substantially enrich both your lives.

Aim to problem-solve, so you strengthen your relationship, rather than risk damaging it. Ask to have a talk with your guest and be clear and specific about the problem you (fore)see. Of course avoid any suggestion of blame, but rather, focus on needs – yours and theirs. Then work with your guest to come up with multiple solutions, a process which avoids the impression that you have a pre-cooked solution and nothing else will do.

## **7. Vicarious trauma -- looking after your own well-being as the host**

Spending time with sad people invariably impacts also on the person who is not sad. It is possible to become complacent about the sadness or – when the sadness is deep and wide – to become partly consumed by it.

As a host, you may notice that you – or members of your family – may experience:

- A feeling of lingering anger – “why are both the guests and you in this situation in the first place?”.
- Sadness – other people’s serious unhappiness generates a sympathetic response, maybe empathic too. Such sadness can have an impact on your other usual activities. It may affect your relationships with friends, perhaps even altering their reaction to you.
- ‘Bystander guilt’ – ‘it seems so unfair that my guest is suffering emotional upset, while I am not. Should I feel differently?’.
- Numbness – somehow, not having a firm grip of exactly how you are feeling about the situation.
- Substance use – beware a few more G&Ts than normal...

In these situations, it may be useful to seek inspiration from what others are doing; perhaps inspiration from a book or a story or a situation where adversity has been overcome. It’s also important to keep your own problems in perspective. You will be impacted by your guest’s behaviour and emotional state, which may well be immensely sad. However, your own situation does not mirror theirs: it is impacted by it, but that is not the same as experiencing their trauma and anxiety first-hand.

Times will arise when – in that moment – you have just about had enough. When that happens, make the connections with others with similar experiences and talk to trusted friends and helpers about how you’re feeling. There are hosting groups springing up around the district and hopefully, more will follow. There is also a local scheme under development to align hosts with individuals who have offered to help out in whatever ways suit individual families.



With many thanks to Jennifer Mahon, PhD, for her analysis of the current host/Ukrainian guest situation and for the insights so willingly shared.

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