



## Tool 8.6 Psychological assistance

### Overview

*This tool examines the common psychological reactions of victims to the experience of trafficking and outlines the type of psychological assistance that they are likely to require.*

## Symptoms

The common psychological reactions of victims of trafficking are likely to include:

- Fear of being alone, of being found and punished by the trafficker, of their family being punished and of the consequences of being an “illegal immigrant”
- Guilt that they have made such a mistake, become “criminals”, brought trouble to their families or broken mores of traditional culture
- Anger that they have allowed this to happen and that their lives are so destroyed
- Feelings of betrayal by the traffickers, their own families and society
- Lack of trust in themselves and those around them
- Helplessness and lack of control over their lives

The trafficking experience may create a systematic disruption of basic and core attachments to family, friends and religious and cultural systems, the destruction of central values relating to human existence, and shame. Post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of brutal acts, including torture and rape, that the victims have experienced can also frequently be observed. A victim’s way of relating to others, the general community or even authority figures may have changed drastically, leading to a general sense of distrust of others and a fear of forming new relationships. The victim’s capacity for intimacy may be altered, grief may be pronounced and depression may become overwhelming.

Intervention strategies and assistance programmes for victims of trafficking must be based upon an understanding of the psychologically painful experience of the victims and must focus on assisting the victims’ full recovery and re-establishment of a normal life. A number of basic elements for the process of recovery can be identified. They include:

- **Restoring safety.** Unless a sense of safety is guaranteed nothing much can be achieved.
- **Enhancing control.** The trafficker has sought to take control away from his victim. In order for victims to move forward, strategies must be sought that give them as much control over the recovery process as possible.
- **Restoring attachment and connections to others.** The fundamental challenge for assistance workers is to act in a way that is caring, giving and kind, so that connections can be re-established and victims can begin to realize that there are others in the community who will care for them.

- **Restoring meaning and a sense of purpose, as well as personal dignity and self-respect.**

Models such as the one presented in the chart below provide guidance to therapists on the most appropriate and useful ways to address the psychological needs of victims of trafficking. Immediate crisis counselling should be followed by a longer-term therapeutic intervention to address the needs of the victims as they progress towards recovery. In the case of children, psychological assessment and therapeutic interventions should be provided by specialists in childcare and should involve family members whenever possible.

<b>Supportive responses to common reactions to trafficking in a service setting</b>		
<i>Common reactions to trafficking</i>	<i>How reactions may manifest themselves in a service setting</i>	<i>Supportive responses to negative reactions</i>
Fear, insecurity, anxiety	Reluctance to meet people, go outside or be alone; trembling, shaking or heart racing; difficulty sitting still or concentrating	Implementation of security measures; description and reassurance of security measures; confidentiality, and security of physical venue; accompaniment to outside appointments or errands
Mistrust of others	Wariness of service provider and of offers of assistance; reluctance to disclose information; giving false information; difficulties in relationships with support persons, co-residents, others in programme, family etc.	Patience and persistence in developing relationships; unconditional provision of practical assistance and moral support; regular inquiries into needs and well-being
Mistrust of self, low self-esteem	Passivity, difficulty making decisions or trusting one's decisions; difficulty planning for the future; hyper-sensitivity or hyper-responsiveness to others and outside influences	Creating small tasks, setting short-term goals, fostering short-term accomplishments, validating achievements
Self-blame, guilt, shame	Difficulty making eye contact, difficulty in expressing oneself; difficulty in disclosing details of events and feelings; reluctance to undergo physical examinations, to participate in group or other forms of therapy	Reassurance that what happened was not her or his fault, reminder that trafficking is a crime that victimizes many people and that they are not alone; reminder of her or his courage and resourcefulness under extreme conditions

Anger towards self or others	Hostility or violence towards support persons or others (e.g. co-residents, family); self-inflicted physical harm; sabotaging her or his own process of recovery; over-reacting; unwillingness to participate; blaming or accusatory towards others; uncooperative or ungrateful responses	Patience; remaining calm in the face of hostility, not reacting with anger, hostility or showing frustration; implementation of reasonable and proportional measures to ensure the person's safety; implementation of reasonable and proportional measures to ensure the safety of others
Memory lapses, dissociation	Inability to recall details or entire passages of the past; altering accounts of past events; seeming unwillingness to respond or to answer questions	Not judging or condemning the person; not pressuring or harassing the person; understanding the importance of forgetting for some people
Isolation, loneliness	Sadness, depression, disengagement from others and activities, lethargy; seeming self-absorbed or self-centred; believing no one can understand	Offering phone contact (or other contact) with family, friends etc.; opportunities to participate in one-to-one or group activities; planned tasks or events
Dependence, subservience or defensiveness	Inability or reluctance to make decisions; desire to please; easily influenced; inability to assert self or personal preferences; regular complaining; refusal or reluctance to accept assistance, advice	Assigning small tasks; setting limited goals; reassuring the persons of their abilities and capacity, not fostering dependence by assuming all responsibility for the person's welfare (allowing persons to choose when, how or if they wish to be assisted)

Source: C. Zimmerman, 2004, "Trafficking in women: conceptualizing and measuring health risks and consequences", PhD dissertation, Health Policy Unit, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London.

## Recommended resource

Chapter 5, section 5.7 of *The IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking*, published in 2007, addresses mental health considerations.



The IOM Handbook is available at:  
[www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/1674?entryId=13452](http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/1674?entryId=13452)