

Discussing the tragedy of the war

A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES HOSTING REFUGEES FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE



For several weeks now, images of war have been a daily presence in our homes and we have been overwhelmed by the news of the fighting in Ukraine. It is not only war journalists and diplomats who are involved, but everyone is now a participant in the war that is taking place in Europe and threatening us all. Up to a few weeks ago, for most of us this was unthinkable!

This war has generated a new influx of refugees and many of our fellow citizens are preparing to assist refugees and war victims once again and even take them into their homes.

Many questions arise as to how to discuss the war with children.

Set out below are ten practical tips on how to talk to people who have fled the war, left everything behind, and need to be accommodated in a foreign environment.

**"THE LOSS OF DIGNITY AND CONTROL OVER YOUR
LIFE IS SOMETIMES WORSE THAN THE LOSS OF
MATERIAL ITEMS"**

1. TALKING ABOUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU? WHEN THE SHOCK STARTS TO WEAR OFF...

It is often said, without considering the difficulty involved: "You need to be able to talk about what has happened to you"...

First and foremost, it is important to be aware, in taking in victims of war, that it often takes a long time for them to talk about their experiences. Many will have been in a state of shock since they suddenly and (often) unexpectedly had to flee from their familiar environment. The shock of the brutal reality also has a protective function. People seem stunned and are not immediately able to articulate what is happening to them. Children are also cocooned. It is very important that, despite everything, they can continue to be children and play.

Some are still in the hyperactive state needed to survive and flee from the threatening situation. They will display post-traumatic reactions of hypervigilance, increased activation, sleep problems and sometimes increased irritation and agitation.

It takes time to wind down from that heightened state. Some kind of recovery will often only take place after reaching a place of peace, security and safety, and giving way to mourning and remembering.

Make sure that you respect the rhythm of the refugees and that your hosting of them is based on the needs expressed by the refugees themselves: first, the physical safety and security of the children, adapting to the temporary reception environment, working to rebuild life prospects, and only then the expression of emotions.

"A STATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SHOCK CAN PROTECT AGAINST THE UNBEARABLE REALITY OF THE WAR"

2. WHO ARE WE AS BELGIANS? WHAT IS BELGIUM? FLANDERS? ETC.

It is important to focus on ordinary everyday things as the first topic of discussion. How do we live in Europe? What kind of people are we? What are our customs and habits and how do we view the war in Ukraine?

So if you take people from the war into your home, be careful about the rhythm with which you give them care, attention and comfort. Indeed, many are not accustomed to our carefully maintained living environment and rich standards of living and should only be exposed to it

gradually. Do not show off your wealth and, above all, stick to the basic needs for as long as possible.

It is therefore important to gradually expose the refugees to our lifestyle, follow their adaptation rhythm and avoid an excessive culture shock.

It may be advisable to get help from members of the Ukrainian communities in our country so that the refugees can learn first-hand about how they adapted.

**"BE INSPIRED BY EXPERIENCED EXPERTS WHO
HAVE SEEN IT ALL"**

3. AND THEN THE WAR CAN BE DISCUSSED...

When the war is being discussed, it is important to ensure that this does not happen in the presence of children. A separate approach is needed to talk to children about the war. Children are very sensitive, often overhearing words used by adults and giving them their own meaning. News and explanations about the war should be presented in a way that is child-friendly and adapted to the war; children can often pick things up wrongly, so that a certain story takes on a completely different life, hidden somewhere deep in their emotional and psychological world.

It will only be much later that parents and children will be able to discuss their war experiences together; once the environment around them has stabilised somewhat, the parents are on a more even keel and the children are back at school.

**"FOCUS ON THE BASIC NEEDS OF THE REFUGEES.
TALKING TAKES TIME"**

4. FOCUS FIRST ON FACTS AND TANGIBLE NEEDS, ONLY THEN ON EMOTIONS

There is often a tendency to immediately surround people fleeing war with psychosocial care providers. The value of empathy is very important, but it must first be directed to identifying the main needs and concerns of the refugees themselves. Refugees must be an active player in their own recovery story.

First and foremost, the focus needs to be on facts and concerns; only later can emotions and feelings, possibly post-traumatic reactions, be addressed. It is not the case that everyone is traumatised at this point. People are often very resilient and it is that capacity, along with self-reliance, that needs to be promoted.

**"LET THE REFUGEE BE MASTER OF THEIR OWN
STORY. DEALING WITH THE TRAUMA WILL
FOLLOW LONG AFTER THE OFFER OF SAFETY"**

**5. TREAT REFUGEES AS SURVIVORS, WHO HAVE BRAVELY MANAGED TO
FLEE A LIFE-THREATENING WAR, RATHER THAN AS DEFENCELESS
VICTIMS**

By seeing refugees as successful survivors of a war that was life-threatening, you emphasise their resilience. They will also need this for as long as the war lasts. Indeed, many have left behind their husband, brother(s), father, etc., and thus their resilience and mental toughness will still be needed in the time ahead. If they are seen only as defenceless victims, this will undermine some of their strength.

**"REFER TO THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEES AS STRONG
SURVIVORS, RATHER THAN AS DEFENCELESS
VICTIMS"**

6. BE PREPARED FOR DIFFERENT EMOTIONS AND ACCEPT THEM!

It is important to be prepared for the very different reactions of people who have fled from a harmful and potentially traumatic environment. Anger and outrage towards the perpetrator(s) of this conflict, and even towards the lack of (military) intervention by Europe or the US, can be followed by moments of desperation, despair and emotional breakdown. One moment refugees can be engaging in intense debate and the next they can completely crumble and lose all hope.

A listening and non-judgemental approach is very important in this respect.

**"EMOTIONAL VOLATILITY IS NORMAL FOR WAR
REFUGEES"**

7. YOU CAN NEVER UNDERSTAND...

As a refugee host family, you can express your concern, empathy, regret and disbelief about the fact that a new war has broken out in Europe, but you cannot say "I understand" or "I know what you must be going through". It is ok to say that you don't know what to do or say, but that you want to make sure they don't have to face things alone. However, don't make trite statements such as "everything will be fine" or "Putin is going to lose anyway" as this is not helpful.

**"YOU CAN ONLY UNDERSTAND IF YOU HAVE
GONE THROUGH THE SAME THING..."**

8. WORKING-THROUGH IS A PROCESS OF RELIVING AND AVOIDING...

It is important that refugees are accommodated in an environment where there is also room for relaxation and humour. There need to be times when the focus is not on the war. This also means that the TV does not have to be on showing the news all day. Turning on the news should be a choice that is made. Permanent exposure to war reports disrupts the normal process of working-through.

**"REGULARLY TURN OFF THE TV AND PUT THE
SMARTPHONE ASIDE FOR A WHILE..."**

9. A TROUBLE SHARED IS A TROUBLE HALVED...

If you host refugees from Ukraine, it is important to maintain ongoing contact with other families and structures that are hosting refugees, but also that you help them stay in touch with their families and friends in their home country. The hosting of war refugees is, of course, a community effort in which a community of "hosts" takes care of a community of "people in need". The strength of the hosting will come from the pooling of many efforts and the sharing of experience in which, in the long term, the deployment of specialised care providers will become important.

**"PEOPLE'S STRENGTH LIES IN THE STRENGTH OF
THEIR COMMUNITY"**

10. DON'T FORGET YOURSELF...

It is important that, together with the people you host, you get into a new kind of routine. It is not an easy thing to suddenly take people you don't know into your home. There is an adaptation process on both sides, which requires ongoing dialogue in order to achieve a mutual frequency of communication over time.

Try not to get bogged down in compassion or sympathy; be kind and compassionate, but do not underestimate the impact of sympathy while maintaining hope and optimism for the future.

And just because you have refugees in your home does not mean that you can no longer do anything alone with your own family. You need these moments as a buffer and an opportunity to recuperate in between the time you devote to caring for the refugees suffering from shock that you have in your home or with whom you work.

**"THINK ABOUT YOURSELF DESPITE EVERYTHING
THAT IS GOING ON..."**

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