
SURVIVE OR THRIVE?

Our brothers and sisters have been brought to Australia, away from torture and danger at every turn, in fear for their lives because of their faith. We have saved lives at great expense, both financial and in our time and energies. We have a wonderful program to teach English, collect money, administration and legal work, resettlement committees to help these immigrant families. We are entertaining strangers and giving generously, showing hospitality without grudging and loving our neighbour.

But are we meeting their needs here? What might they be struggling with?

- Inexpressible trauma
- Loss experienced by leaving country of birth, loss of family
- Experiences as a refugee, with immigration
- Mental and physical health impacts
- Stereotypes – being a refugee, being non-English speaking, being non-white
- Strangers in a strange land
- Financial difficulties
- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Different healthcare system
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Some have little or no education, some may have a good education they are unable to use in this country

We want our new brethren and sisters to thrive here in Australia, not just survive.

So how do we help them?

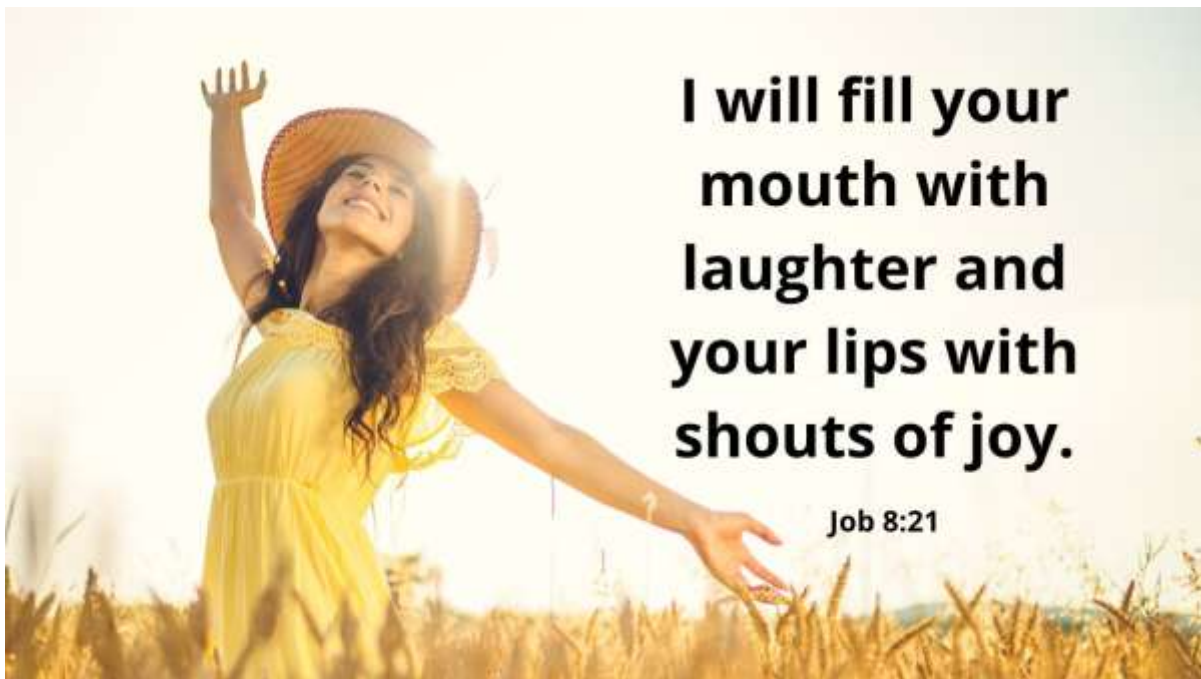
How do we support them spiritually when language is a barrier?

How do we **support them emotionally** and their mental health when the trauma they have lived through and/or witnessed is beyond anything we can imagine?

“In order to empathize with someone’s experience, you must be willing to believe them as they see it, and not how you imagine their experience to be.” (B.Brown)

“In the middle of Job’s darkest hour, when he was the most discouraged and didn’t think it would ever work out, God said to him (Job 8:21) *‘I will fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy.’*

Can we help them **feel** safe here in Australia, and heal to be able to handle joy and accept happiness back into their lives?



**“When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don’t take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. I am Yahweh, your God.”
(Leviticus 19:34)**

Understanding

If we understand a little of the impact of loss, grief, trauma and immigration we are better placed to help our brethren and sisters. Adjusting to a new country while coping with terrible memories of the past can be overwhelming and can leave people feeling sad and confused. It can impact on their health and everyday living. Challenges with settling and integrating can also cause trauma. If we are real here, our new family members will struggle to assimilate into the Australian host culture, will struggle with racism, exclusion, isolation and discrimination.

“Refugees will be experiencing loss and grief, even survivor’s guilt, and the normality of the new environment can be a painful reminder of what has been lost.” (AMNA)

Some of the symptoms they may experience on arrival in Australia could be:

- Sleep problems and bad dreams
- Persistent worrying thoughts and memories leading to severe anxiety and stress
- Getting angry or scared easily
- Not wanting to be around other people
- Poor appetite
- Little interest in doing things
- Headaches and body aches
- Feeling you can’t trust other people
- Problems with thinking and concentration
- Difficulties with learning or remembering
- Personal family problems arising from prolonged stress/immigration

Children:

- May have some of the problems listed above
- May be withdrawn, sad, nervous or aggressive
- May act out their bad experiences during play
- May become very distressed when they are separated from their parents

Preparing ourselves to help, first and foremost, we pray for God's guidance and help. Then, we need sensitive and effective communication. Trauma can damage a person's sense of safety and trust and can adversely affect relationships, so we need to be very gentle and kind in all our dealings – as we should be. Col 3: 12 is very apt here: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Create space for healing, connection and belonging.

Listen attentively. The new phrase is Deep Listening which is very applicable in these situations: Active listening is suspending judgment and being fully present with another person to understand his or her experience or point of view. Deep listening involves hearing more than just the words spoken. It taps into the deeper meaning, unspoken needs, and feelings conveyed.

To identify cultural and spiritual needs you could ask:

- What do I need to know about the things that are important to you to give you the best care possible?
- What gives you joy, meaning and connection?
- What/who helps you through when things are tough?
- Is your ecclesial family giving you the support you need? How can we do better?

Actively address loneliness and promote a sense of security, connection and belonging for everyone by nurturing relationships. To provide Jesus-like care, centred on the individual, we are to be compassionate, empathetic and responsive to their needs and expressed preferences.

Be calm Your ability to stay calm and grounded when caring for others who have experienced trauma is emotionally regulating them and can make your visits more productive and healing.

Contain the interaction You do not need to ask for a detailed trauma history to be able to be compassionate and offer help. Providing information, resources, and referrals for help allows them to retain their independence, dignity and choice. It is important to recognise that we don't have the professional skills to treat trauma and any consequent mental health problems. We can love them, refer to appropriate clinicians and pray earnestly that God will heal them according to His will, or use us as He sees fit in the healing process.

Care for them and yourself Again, it is important to ensure good self-care and compassion for both parties. Guilt and shame are very common feelings for survivors of interpersonal violence. A nonjudgmental attitude is extremely helpful. Try to understand the adverse consequences of trauma such as possible substance abuse, overeating, or depression.

Focus on coping Try to emphasize the resilience and strength they have shown thus far and for them to use the skills and strategies they have tried in the past to overcome difficulties.

Above all, love each other deeply (1 Pet 4:8)

Ernest Hemingway once said: “In our darkest moments, we don’t need solutions or advice. What we yearn for is simply human connection—a quiet presence, a gentle touch. These small gestures are the anchors that hold us steady when life feels like too much.

“Please don’t try to fix me. Don’t take on my pain or push away my shadows. Just sit beside me as I work through my own inner storms. Be the steady hand I can reach for as I find my way.

“My pain is mine to carry, my battles mine to face. But your presence reminds me I’m not alone in this vast, sometimes frightening world. It’s a quiet reminder that I am worthy of love, even when I feel broken.

“So, in those dark hours when I lose my way, will you just be here? Not as a rescuer, but as a companion. Hold my hand until the dawn arrives, helping me remember my strength.

“Your silent support is the most precious gift you can give. It’s a love that helps me remember who I am, even when I forget.”

Cathy Strachan



Australian Resources:

1. A GP can provide a Mental Health Support Plan for Medicare to pay for a psychologist
2. Survivors of Torture and Trauma Assistance and Rehabilitation Service (STTARS).
<https://www.sttars.org.au/about/about-sttars>

References: AMNA – Refugee Trauma Initiative; World Health Organization
