



Supporting Survivors of Torture: A Guide for Professionals



“Treat me like a human being; you could be in my shoes one day.”



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Guide purpose and methodology

Lasting effects of torture and the impact of a trauma-informed approach

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Torture is recognised internationally as one of the most severe human rights violations.

It aims to break down a person's autonomy, identity, and sense of safety. It erodes trust and can have profound psychological, physical, and social consequences. Survivors often show remarkable resilience, yet the nature of torture means they may experience a persistent sense of threat and associated fear.

People may develop psychological conditions including **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** or **complex PTSD (C-PTSD)**. These are characterised by:

- **re-experiencing** (nightmares, intrusive memories)
- **avoidance** (avoiding reminders of the torture, emotional numbing, withdrawal)
- **hypervigilance** (being unable to relax, sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties)

Survivors may also suffer medical conditions, such as chronic pain, or somatic issues such as headaches and digestive problems.

Cultural norms also shape how someone experiences and expresses their distress; language and reactions vary in different cultural settings.

If those working with survivors adopt a trauma-informed approach to their work, it can improve engagement and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation.

This approach is also likely to enable survivors to narrate their experiences more accurately.

In turn, this can improve outcomes such as more tailored support and better legal representation.

Given the prevalence of torture globally, it is likely that services will be in contact with people who have survived torture - even if it is not documented.

Therefore, adopting a trauma-informed approach is likely to have a positive effect on those who have been tortured, and to mitigate harm for those working with them.



Acknowledgements: Thanks go to the individuals with lived experience of torture who courageously and generously shared their stories in order to create this Guide for professionals. Thank you also to the frontline workers who co-produced this best practice Guide and related training, based on their shared learning, with the hope it will be used to improve outcomes for survivors.

Co-production methodology

The aftermath of torture has a great cost. It disrupts individuals' lives, their relationships, family roles, and sense of community belonging. It can silence survivors due to feelings of shame, stigma, fear, or systemic barriers. Its effects ripple outward, influencing entire communities. Together, this can prevent us all from hearing directly what survivors require to thrive.

In response, we adopted a co-production model to centre survivors' views on what professionals should prioritise when working with them. Co-production shifts power, restores agency and seeks to prevent people and systems replicating oppression.

Survivors of torture and professionals working with them from [Care4Calais](#), [Women for Refugee Women](#) and [Refugee Legal Support](#) shared their thoughts in focus groups facilitated by [Trauma Treatment International](#).

Drawing from their own experiences, participants expressed what is important to know or do in order to create a trauma-informed approach to working with survivors of torture.

Psychologists from Trauma Treatment International then identified common themes in the feedback and incorporated published, peer-reviewed research and existing protocols on working with survivors of torture into a [training package](#) and this summary Guide.

The training was trialled with professionals, and feedback was used to refine the training and develop this Guide. The Guide was also reviewed by professionals and survivors involved in the co-production process.



Co-production partners

**TRAUMA TREATMENT
INTERNATIONAL**

Treats trauma caused by violence and human rights abuses, and supports organisations working with survivors.

**CARE 4
CALAIS**

A volunteer-run charity which delivers essential aid and support to refugees living in the United Kingdom and Northern France.



Promotes and protects the rights of migrants through legal support, casework, engagement, training and partnerships.

**WOMEN
FOR
REFUGEE
WOMEN**

Supports refugee and asylum-seeking women to rebuild their lives on their own terms, and campaigns for a fairer asylum system.

The Guide

Working collectively to promote a trauma-informed and safe interaction is fundamental to redressing the impact of torture. Survivors highlighted how difficult it can be to speak to a professional, describing barriers to engagement including:

- **Worries about the person or organisation** (e.g. lack of clarity on the purpose of meeting, “am I going to be safe?”, “what will they ask?”)
- **Lasting impact of trauma** (e.g. difficulties remembering details, being easily overwhelmed, poor concentration, lack of trust “they won’t believe me”)
- **Emotions as barriers** (e.g. shame “they will judge me”, anxiety and sadness)

The guidance in the following pages shares the learning from survivors of torture, and professionals working with them, on what can help overcome these barriers and create a trauma-informed approach. If a degree of safety can be established it can enable more effective engagement. In turn, this may lead to better contextual understanding and being able to obtain more accurate information.

This guide adds to existing recommendations on trauma-informed principles ([SAMHSA, 2014](#)) and guidance on working with survivors of torture (e.g. [Freedom from Torture, 2020](#); [Mendez et al., 2021](#), [OHCHR, 2022](#), [Pajon, 2026](#)). Below each heading is advice from a survivor.

Safety

“Take your time to really introduce yourself. Check if I’m comfortable and in a good place.”

Promoting physical and psychological safety will reduce a sense of perceived threat and enable survivors to concentrate and engage more. When people feel calm and safe they are more able to recall their experiences accurately.



- **A non-coercive, non-threatening environment** (e.g. In person: soft lighting, seating survivors near the door so they feel in control of leaving. Online: establish private space, non-offensive online backgrounds, back-up plan for broken connection, adjust light exposure for clear view of facial expressions)
- **Attention to human needs** (e.g. choice in frequency of breaks, adjustments for pain management)
- **Clear explanations of consent and information-sharing** (e.g. use simple language, ask someone to explain their understanding back to you)
- **Avoidance of perceived threats** (e.g. avoiding uniforms, matching gender if requested, adopting a relaxed posture, uncrossed arms)
- **Offer a series of contacts** to promote engagement (e.g. start with a phone call or informal interaction (if appropriate) and build up to full appointments. For online engagement, send an email with your photo and brief introduction prior to meeting)
- **Access to further support** where needed (signpost to services available for specific concerns e.g. housing, emotional wellbeing, legal etc.)

Predictability



“Give space and time. Don’t rush people; trying to get an understanding of processes can take time.”

Predictability is a direct counter to the unpredictability of torture which can lead to hypervigilance and difficulties in emotionally regulating. It also enables survivors to more actively engage in the required task or information requests. Professionals should:

- **Clarify the purpose** of the interaction
- **Identify concerns and needs early** (e.g. ask for communication preferences ahead of meeting, ask if they have concerns at the start of the meeting)
- **Prepare the person** for what will happen (e.g. explain your role, purpose of meeting, actions and next steps)
- **Be punctual** and consistent in your communication
- **Practice good timekeeping** and give a warning when the interaction will be ending; allow time for questions
- **Provide visual or written guidance** in addition to verbal instructions
- Recognise that **trauma impacts memory**, and can lead to varying accounts; give opportunities to review information and do not make assumptions about inconsistencies

Trust & connection

“Relationship and trust is key - more than the actions.”

Torture is commonly an interpersonal violation of trust. As a professional, it is important to be sensitive and intentional in rebuilding trust, by promoting trust in them. This may allow a survivor to better trust in the process they are required to engage with.

- **Build trust and rapport** (e.g. consistent and reliable contact, create opportunities for more than one contact to build trust over time)
- Adopt a **warm and respectful approach**
- Be **attentive** and show **genuine interest**
- Demonstrate **consistency in your behaviour and actions**
- Be **honest** about what you can and cannot do; **don’t overpromise**



Choice and voice

“Listen and try to connect with my whole experience.”

Survivors accessing services can often feel dehumanised and disempowered. This is both due to the lasting impact of torture and the position they find themselves in within services and systems.

Optimising their agency through choice and voice can help redress this power imbalance. Professionals should:

- **Address power imbalance** (be clear on your professional role, empower survivors to express their views; this may mean providing them time to think and answer)
- **Offer choices**, even small ones (e.g. “Where would you prefer to sit?”)
- **Avoid assumptions** about the survivor’s needs or priorities - ask them
- Respect the **survivor’s pace and timing**; this may mean having to adapt your plan
- Allow them **control over what they share**
- Recognise and reinforce strengths (e.g. note someone’s compassion or courage)



Cultural awareness

“Do your research! Educate yourself on the different experiences people may have. Be curious and get out of your comfort zone to learn.”



Cultural norms shape how trauma is understood, expressed, and disclosed (or hidden). These norms will affect the way in which someone makes sense of what they’ve experienced and how they tell their story. Trying to be culturally attuned conveys interest and respect, and may promote connection.

- Research relevant **cultural, political, and social contexts** (e.g. gain some understanding of important cultural or religious norms, or the political context the person is from)
- Remain open to **learning new information** from the person
- Use **qualified interpreters** (i.e. not family or friends) and brief them on this approach
- **Explain the interpreter’s role and confidentiality**
- Avoid **relying on partially shared language** or ‘making do’ with unreliable translation tools for key information
- Recognise **collective trauma and systemic oppression** (e.g. history of racial oppression) and remain **sensitive** about what institutions may represent to a survivor

Managing and responding to distress

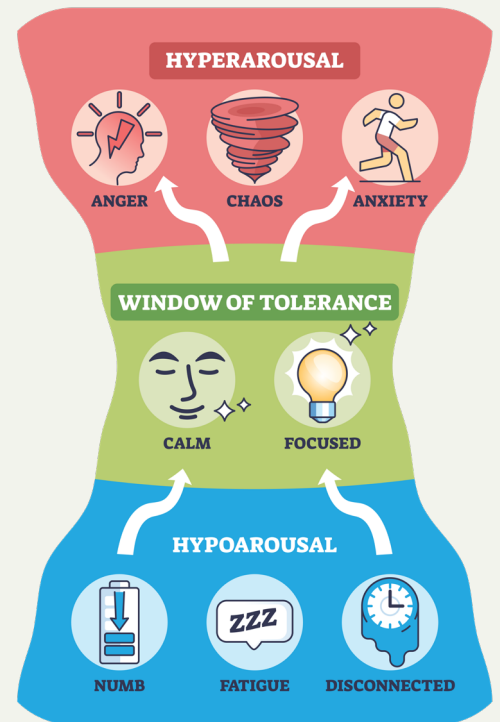
Staying physically and emotionally balanced is important when working with people exhibiting high levels of distress.

The 'window of tolerance' (Siegal, 1999) can be a helpful way of thinking about this. Every person has a unique window of tolerance and the amount of adversity they have experienced can reduce their window.

When people are functioning optimally within their 'window of tolerance', they are calm, able to process information, remember clearly and communicate sensitively.

If there is a lack of safety or a perceived threat, it can lead to someone moving out of their 'window of tolerance' and into either hyper-arousal (e.g. feeling overwhelmed, anxious racing thoughts, unable to concentrate, becoming aggressive) or hypo-arousal (e.g. being cut off and frozen, distant, unable to remember).

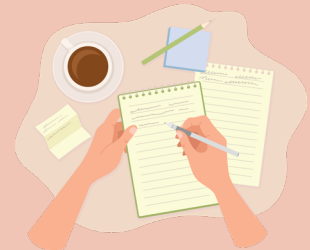
Professionals are encouraged to monitor their own balance when communicating with survivors to promote safety and maximise their engagement. Managing balance is also vital to sustaining oneself to work effectively.



Responding to survivors' distress

"It helps when people listen."

Torture is distressing, and navigating institutional and professional systems can add to that distress. Some professionals require survivors to provide detailed accounts of traumatic events as part of their work.



This may lead to survivors becoming distressed, but this is not always a sign that the experience is retraumatizing them. Responding sensitively can enable someone to express themselves when they may not have been able to before. Professionals should:

- Reflect on what information is **strictly necessary** to ask
- Indicate **what you will ask** at the start of meeting and discuss ways of **managing the conversation** (e.g. taking movement breaks, providing distraction such as fidget objects)
- Be aware that **distress in itself does not mean someone does not want to speak** (e.g. check if someone would like to continue and offer to switch communication mode)
- Give **time and validation and allow for silences** (e.g. say "take your time, there is no rush", "you're doing well" and "I'm sorry this happened to you")
- If someone appears to be increasingly distressed, **suggest a break** or do something different to help distract from distressing feelings

Sustaining yourself

“Take time to notice the impact of your work.”

Working with survivors can be emotive. In addition to the demands of your professional role, you are being asked to engage human-to-human.

Many professionals spoke about the inspiration they feel from interacting with survivors. However, the stories of human rights abuses and adversity can negatively affect their wellbeing.

- Take time to **prepare yourself and reset** after distressing meetings (e.g. create space in your calendar after such meetings or mark the end of a difficult meeting with a few deep breaths)
- Maintain the things that **support your emotional and physical health**; you can view some useful tips [here](#)
- **Connect with others** working in this area
- **Limit exposure to news or social media** related to work (e.g. schedule time to review this information, try to only read what is necessary)



In summary

Working with survivors of torture requires preparation, humility and patience. Even small adjustments such as slowing down, explaining your role and offering choices can profoundly affect a survivor’s sense of safety and dignity.

A trauma-informed, sensitive approach is not an optional enhancement. It is an ethical obligation and a cornerstone of effective professional work.

We at Trauma Treatment International, Refugee Legal Service, Women for Refugee Women and Care 4 Calais believe that this approach can contribute to safer and more just services and greater community cohesion.



Visit the Trauma Treatment International website for more about [trauma-informed approaches](#) and [trauma training](#).

This Guide forms a summary of the full co-developed training for professionals on working psychologically safely and sensitively with survivors of torture.



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