

# Cultural Determinants of Refugee Mental Health: Congruence, Integration, and Understanding

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# Presentation Outline

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- Refugee facts and statistics
- Discussion of culture and mental health as it relates to refugees
- The role of mental health in the cultural adaptation process, and what can be helpful and hurtful in this process
- Agencies and refugees working together

# The World's Refugees

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- 21.3 million refugees worldwide
- 51% are 18 years old or younger
- About 42,500 people are forcibly displaced every day
- In 2016, the U.S. will admit 85,000 refugees from around the world

\*Statistics from the U.N. Refugee Agency and the U.S. Department of State

What is  
culture?

# Some definitions of culture

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- UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): “That complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society.”
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary: “The beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time.”

# What is mental health?

# Some Definitions of Mental Health

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- WHO: “A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary: “The condition of being sound mentally and emotionally that is characterized by the absence of mental illness and by adequate adjustment especially as reflected in feeling comfortable about oneself, having positive feelings about others, and being able to meet the demands of daily life.”

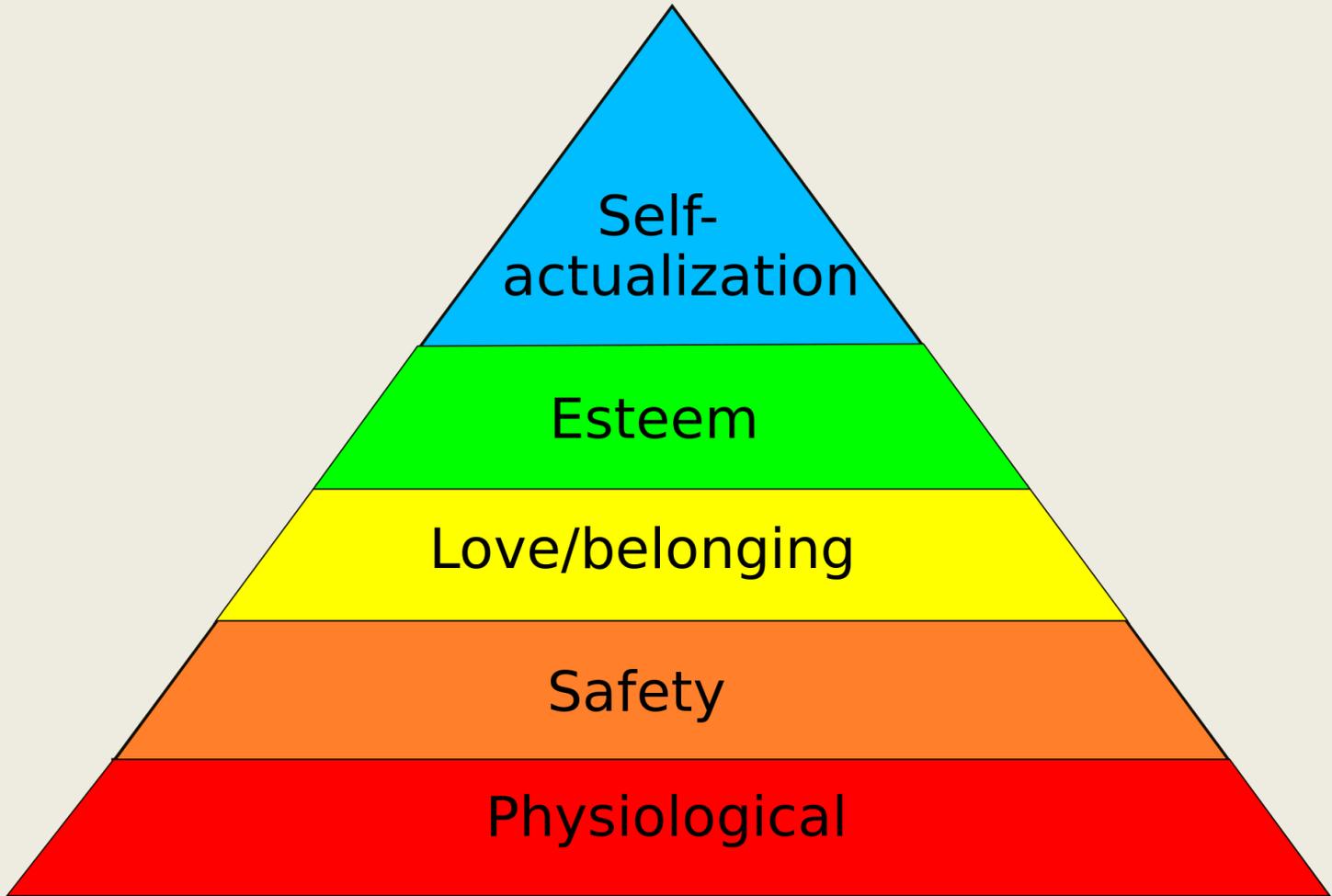
# Other Factors Relating to Mental Health

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- Feeling relatively happy
- Feeling stable and balanced
- Feeling content without being complacent
- Having hope and having a plan for the future
- Having a sense of purpose and usefulness
- Being able to manage in one's environment without feeling overwhelmed or shutting down
- Being helpful rather than hurtful, to self, environment and others
- Feeling comfortable and confident, and having confidence in one's decisions

# Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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# What are common needs of refugees?

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- Physical Needs
  - Housing
  - Employment
  - Healthcare
  - Food
- Mental/emotional needs
  - Addressing trauma
  - Sense of security and community
  - Understanding of local language and culture
  - Understanding how to have appropriate interactions with others, especially in times of stress or conflict
  - Ability to celebrate the culture of one's home country
  - Realistic expectations of life in the host country

How can mental  
health and culture  
relate to the  
experiences of  
refugees?

# DSM-5 Definition of the “Generalized Personality Disorder”

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- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
- “Enduring patterns of inner experience and behavior that significantly deviate from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, originates in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to clinically significant distress or impairment in one or more important areas of functioning (i.e. social, academic, or occupational).”
- Is it possible to define “culture” for a refugee? What is right or wrong, and who gets to decide?

\*Source: Dr. Albert E. Lyngzeitson, “DSM-5 Overview”

# Tomas Szasz

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- An American academic, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst.
- Mental illness is a metaphor for human problems in living.
- People may behave and think in certain ways, and those ways may resemble a disease process, but is not necessarily indicative of actually having a disease.

# Carl Rogers

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- “Father of client-centered therapy”
- Person centered approach
- Congruence
- Believed that for a person to achieve self-actualization, they must be in a state of congruence.
  - Therefore, self-actualization occurs when a person's ideal self (i.e. who they would like to be) is congruent with their actual behavior, and who they actually are.

# Viktor Frankl

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- Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor, and a founder of the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy
- Identify a purpose in life to feel positively about, and then find ways to imagine that outcome
- Stay motivated and energized
- Have positive coping mechanisms
- “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

How can agencies and refugees work together to bring about successful outcomes?

# Common Reactions to Trauma That Can Go Wrong

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- Not seeking appropriate help when needed
  - Potential sources of help: oneself, one's own community, host country community/resources
- Over/under identifying with either the new culture or culture of origin
  - Standing in judgment to gain or avoid losing status
- After trauma, it's common to adopt the role of an aggressor or victim.

# Common Reactions to Trauma That Can Go Wrong

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- Unhealthy coping mechanisms
  - Alcohol/drugs/gambling, which can become addictive
  - Blaming others/victimizing
  - Violence – Physical, sexual, emotional
- When you spend your time and energy trying to manage your coping mechanism rather than managing your life, that's a sign that your coping mechanism isn't working as it is meant to work – ie not helpful

# Helpful Coping Strategies

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- Exercise
- Spirituality
  - Prayer, meditation, yoga
- Hobbies
- Healthy social life / positive relationships
- Healthy eating and sleeping habits
- Education when useful

# Successful Interventions – Kaz de Jong & Rolf Kleber

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- Intervene early
- Ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive without infringing on human rights of any kind
- Allow interventions to be locally driven
- Address potential reactions to stress
  - PTSD
  - Depression
  - Substance abuse
- Help refugees develop resilience and gain a sense of control over their lives
- The ultimate goal is not always “healing” or “curing”
  - Process rather than a product

# The Four Stages of Adaptation

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- Stage One – Survival
  - Includes coping and reacting
- Stage Two – Searching
  - Beginning to get a sense of control
  - Inner and outer searching
- Stage Three – Settling In
  - Establishing a sense of stability and harmony
  - “A new normal”
- Stage Four – Separating
  - Gaining independence
  - Focus on growth, understanding, and learning to meet challenges

\*Source: Parent Companion

# Refugees at Each Stage of Adaptation

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- **Stage One – Survival**
  - Obtain key resources (food, healthcare, housing, etc.)
  - Ask for help
- **Stage Two – Searching**
  - Set goals
  - Identify and begin utilizing community resources
- **Stage Three – Settling In**
  - Begin merging culture of home and host countries
- **Stage Four – Separating**
  - Live life in host country independently and with a plan
  - Understand when to do something on their own and when to ask for help
  - Understand when to ask for community support and when to ask for agency support

# Agencies at Each Stage of Adaptation

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- **Stage One – Survival**
  - Address physical or mental trauma – can the refugee function?
  - Assist with immediate needs (food, shelter, etc.)
- **Stage Two – Searching**
  - Help refugees become established and give them choices
  - Locate job, language training, cultural education, etc.
  - Help refugee establish realistic expectations
- **Stage Three – Settling In**
  - Help refugees connect with their own community
  - Help merge existing culture with host country culture
  - Phase out agency support
- **Stage Four – Separating**
  - Be available if additional support or guidance is needed

# Refugees and Agencies – Working Together

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- Both parties should remember that refugees may face distress, but it's a distress that is challenging rather than overpowering.
- Identify ways for the refugee to adapt to and thrive in the host country culture while still being able to celebrate the culture of their home country, if desired.
- Self-determination

# Refugees and Agencies – Working Together

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- Aim for refugees to want to play a role in finding their own solutions as much as is possible.
- Having experienced trauma and seeking help for it does not label a person as “crazy.” Seeking help is better than managing with negative coping mechanisms, which can cause serious problems to develop.