

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PSYCHOLO- GICAL **ASSESSMENT** AND **CARE**

of **survivors of hum_n trafficking** for
sexual exploitation



PHIT

Psychological Health
Impact of Trafficking
in Human Beings

Human trafficking for **sexual exploitation** has a great **impact** on the survivor's well-being and health both **physically** and **mentally**. This **grave violation of human rights** can trigger anxiety and depression, complex post-traumatic disorders, hostility, dissociative disorders, self-destructive behaviours, substance abuse, and problems with attention and memory.

However, there is little research on this subject and only few guidelines address the **psychological needs** of the survivors of Human Trafficking for sexual exploitation. This document aims to provide mental health professionals a list of basic **recommendations** to **evaluate** and **psychologically assist** these victims.

PSYCHOLOGICAL **CARE** RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Meet the victim’s basic needs.** Ensure the victim’s basic needs are met before starting the psychological intervention (for example, addressing the victim’s physiological needs or treating their physical symptoms to reduce pain). In this way, a safety framework can be established, and risk removed. The victim’s urgent health and welfare needs should be addressed to create an environment in which the victim can feel physically and emotionally safe.
- **Use a multidisciplinary intervention.** Coordinate the intervention with other professionals to adequately meet the different needs of the victims. This multidisciplinary approach enhances interactions between different professionals and enables them to offer better care and reduce the negative effects of a re-intervention.
- **Create a safe environment.** It is very important to make sure the victims feel safe as they are often very distrustful of strangers because of the multiplicity of traumatic events they have experienced. Also, as a consequence of these experiences, their belief system has changed and they perceive the world as an insecure, cruel, unfair and implacable place. As in the assessment phase, it is essential to create a space where the victim can feel comfortable, confident and safe. Speak in a low tone of voice, have a respectful and relaxed body posture, respect the victim’s personal space, avoid physical contact if the victim does not initiate or verbally request it, adopt a friendly and warm attitude and positive or neutral facial expressions, and maintain non-intimidating eye contact. Permanent monitoring of future risks will be necessary to promote a sense of security.
- **Provide all available useful resources to the victim.** Providing useful resources is important for the victim’s psychological healing due to the coercive isolation she has experienced. Try to connect the victim to all the resources, both personal and social, that could benefit her psychosocial readjustment, such as shelters, information centers, legal advice, organizations that offer the type of support the victim might need, or appropriate support networks that are not linked to trafficking or sexual exploitation, although these are usually inexistent. A service or a professional (referent) will be needed to coordinate all the resources, services and organizations supporting a particular person.

- **Focus based on human rights.** Victims should be offered psychological care based on their human rights (consider them as persons with rights such as non-discrimination, protection, etc.) and, irrespective of their capacity and/or willingness to participate in legal proceedings, as established by international and national treaties, as well as by the ethical and deontological codes of the professionals involved.
- **Use gender perspective.** Psychological care, in the same way as psychological evaluation, should take into account gender, as trafficking for sexual exploitation affects men and women differently. This is mainly based on gender inequality and is therefore closely related to discriminatory practices and unequal power relations between the genders. For this reason, any type of intervention with female victims must take into account all these differences (e.g., the sector in which exploitation occurs and those who suffer abuse and its consequences) to ensure that the specific needs of the victims are adequately met.
- **Consider a cross-cultural approach.** The importance of training and cultural approach while attending to victims. It is very important to know the cultural background of the victims when conducting interventions in order to understand and contextualize the reactions of the victims to their situation. This approach can manage cultural, ideological, religious and language barriers.
- **Focus on intersectionality.** People live with multiple identities derived from their social interactions, history and power structures. A person can belong to more than one community at a time and experience oppressions and privileges simultaneously. This implies that people can be subjected to various types of discrimination that can produce unique and qualitatively different experiences. For example, age, sexual orientation, race, and our socio-economic background can affect our experiences. Psychological interventions should be carried out from an intersectional perspective that tries to overcome all types of discrimination and offers the victims care that addresses their specific identities.
- **Use qualified interpreters.** Just like in the assessment phase, interpreters might be needed to effectively communicate with the victims during the psychological intervention. Interpreters should know the language and culture of the victims, have at least some basic knowledge of trafficking, have a respectful attitude and be psychologically prepared to listen to, interpret and translate emotionally-charged stories. Ensure that the interpreters do not have direct or indirect contact with criminal organizations.

- **Provide individualized care.** Psychological care should be adapted to each victim's particular needs. It is important to take into account cultural differences. Give the person time to open up emotionally and talk about their experiences, ask open-ended questions to avoid forcing the victim to talk about topics she does not want to discuss before she is ready, and analyze and work on her fears in a respectful way. In short, the needs of each specific case should be analyzed in depth and the type, process and objectives of the intervention should be adapted to the motivations and psychological limits of the victim at that particular moment.
- **Respect the victim's pace.** The pace and direction of the intervention should be determined by the victim. The victim should decide when they want to stop or continue and should not be pressed for information they do not want to share. Furthermore, the number and duration of the sessions should not be limited. Instead, the focus should always be on the victim's psychological recovery.
- **Empower the victims.** Encourage and help victims to take an active role, gradually participate and, if possible, make decisions and take responsibility for themselves to regain their own autonomy. Start by asking simple questions that will help them decide what they want. Never infer what they need by offering it directly, instead, ask, listen and respect their decisions. By allowing the victim to make decisions that may not seem important (e.g., deciding whether or not to drink water, what they want to eat, or where to sit), they will begin to regain a sense of control over their own lives, something they lost during the trafficking and exploitation situation.
- **Use active listening.** Show empathy, express interest and concern for what the victim is recounting, respect silences, validate emotions, demonstrate your understanding of what is being explained and its relevance to the victim, provide a summary or highlight the words that you consider relevant (paraphrase), do not judge, do not interrupt, and use positive reinforcement.
- **Apply therapeutic neutrality.** Do not make value judgments on the victim's feelings, emotions, thoughts, and fears. Accept them without judging or questioning them and without preventing a subsequent intervention addressing any erroneous feelings, emotions, thoughts or fears (always from therapeutic reformulation). Avoid skepticism and negative reactions to experiences that they might recount, use positive reinforcement, actively listen, show empathy, and do not infer or assume anything.

- **Help the victim elaborate and re-define their experience of trafficking and sexual exploitation.** In many cases, the victims have difficulties identifying or recognizing themselves as victims of this type of crime. In most cases, the victims are not familiar with the term human trafficking. Some victims believe that they have had bad luck or even that this is normal and necessary to have a better future. Therefore, it is important to reformulate their thinking of what happened to them and create a new meaning to facilitate their psychological healing.
- **Consider the victim’s traumatic experiences prior to trafficking and sexual exploitation.** It is common for the victims of this type of crime to have had other traumatic incidents before being trafficked and exploited that have increased their vulnerability. Many victims often say that being trafficked and sexually exploited are not the worst things to have happened to them and that they have experienced even more traumatic situations. Thus, it is necessary to explore and therapeutically address these experiences to give them a new psychological meaning.
- **Address the victim’s feelings of guilt and shame.** When re-defining the multiple traumatic experiences the victims have lived through, it is very important to help victims free themselves from feeling guilty and shame. They need to know that they are not to blame for anything that has happened to them and, therefore, should not be ashamed of it.
- **Use complementary therapy such as group participation and other activities.** Psychosocial interventions enhance the victims’ capacities and their social reintegration. Organizations dedicated to the care and support of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation usually organize workshops, activities and meetings that address various issues such as sexuality, gaining employment, learning a language, and improving social skills. Participating in these activities can be very beneficial for victims by helping them build a healthy social network.
- **Limit drug prescriptions.** The use of psychotropic drugs is not required in all cases. They must be cautiously prescribed and always by a psychiatrist only when they are absolutely necessary and could be beneficial. Bear in mind that the victim may have a history of (forced or induced) substance abuse.
- **Case management.** Case management is a model of a holistic intervention that aims to enhance personal autonomy and social participation by coordina-

ting access to several resources for people who require complex interventions. This type of intervention can also be prolonged. The care provided must be built on the specific needs of each victim and involve coordinated interventions that are tailored to the victims. It is important to confront and avoid the fragmentation of the actions carried out since the person is the same, her circumstances are changing and therefore all interventions must adapt to it.

- **Post-case follow up.** It is important not to end the intervention rapidly or immediately. Instead, follow up on cases and always “leave the door open” so that victims can contact the professionals whenever they need to even if the intervention has already ended. This will prevent the victims from feeling abandoned and will allow them to feel that they can still ask for support if they require it.

PSYCHOLOGICAL **ASSESSMENT** RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Psychological assessments and care should only be carried out by qualified professionals.** Survivors of human trafficking for sexual exploitation should be assessed only by mental health professionals with the appropriate expertise, e.g., psychologists and/or psychiatrists, based on the specificity of the assessment and/or intervention being carried out. These professionals must have previously acquired knowledge on trafficking, its main causes and consequences, how criminal networks operate, the indicators that can be used to identify victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, and cultural influences. It would also be useful for the professionals to have specific knowledge on crisis intervention as well as sexual and gender violence. This knowledge should be regularly updated since criminals constantly change their behaviors and strategies. Professionals should have the training and experience necessary to evaluate and assist victims. In addition to knowing how to complete the intervention, health professionals should also have the qualifications to do so.
- **Establish the victim's basic needs.** Before starting a psychological evaluation and any type of mental health treatment, the victim's needs should be evaluated and their basic needs met, for example, by addressing their physiological needs or treating physical symptoms to reduce pain in order to establish a safety framework and to remove risks. First and foremost, it is important to attend to the urgent health needs of the victim so that they can feel physically and emotionally safe.
- **Take into account individualization.** Every victim experiences trafficking and sexual exploitation differently based on different factors including psychological characteristics, cultural influences, the context of violence, and/or the length of coercion. Victims of the same crimes will not necessarily experience the situation in the same way. Health professionals should take this into consideration when evaluating a victim and remember that each case is unique. It is important to analyze in depth each specific case, taking into account its own particularities and characteristics, always using a victim-centered approach.
- **Use an approach focusing on human rights.** The psychological assessment of human trafficking victims should be carried out based on a human rights approach: by considering victims as active actors with rights, regardless of their capacity and/or willingness to participate in legal proceedings, as established by international and national treaties, as well as by the ethical and deontological codes of the professionals involved.

- **Use gender perspective.** Human trafficking for sexual exploitation does not affect women and men the same way. Trafficking in human beings (THB) for sexual exploitation is based on gender inequality and, therefore, is closely related to discriminatory practices and unequal power relationships. The assessment process must take into account all these differences (e.g., sectors in which the exploitation occurs and those who suffer abuse and its consequences) to offer adequate care and support and address the specific needs of the victims. For example, the victim could choose the gender of the professional who assesses her to make it easier for her to share her experiences. The intervention by the professional should take into account all the topics that may be addressed (e.g., sexual coercion, handling of affections, use of coercive power and gender discrimination) in order to promote social readjustment based on a gender perspective.
- **Consider a cross-cultural approach.** The importance of training and cultural approach while attending to victims. It is essential to know the cultural background of the victims and take this into account when undertaking the assessment, as certain cultural practices can lead to trafficking and exploitation and, therefore, particular needs.
- **Prevent re-victimization.** The assessment as well as subsequent treatment must be carried out respectfully, constantly assessing the victim's needs and avoiding unnecessary harm that might be caused by asking questions without knowing the victim's internal processes. The terms used and the way in which questions are structured should be considered carefully: avoid unnecessary emotionally-charged questions, prepare the victim before asking questions that may induce intense affective reactions, do not force the disclosure of unnecessary traumatic details, positively assess the person without asking questions that involve negative value judgments, and consider them a victim and not a patient. Professionals performing the evaluation (as well as those conducting the intervention later) should inform themselves as much as possible on the victim's previous interventions and read all the available reports on them. In this way, the victim will not have to re-explain information that has already been told to another professional, which in many cases can cause re-victimization.
- **Use informed consent.** Survivors must be offered clear, adequate and complete information regarding their evaluation and the intervention so that they can make their own decisions and give their consent voluntarily and consciously. Professionals should ensure that she completely understands all the information provided (using interpreters if necessary) and consents to the

evaluation and/or psychological care. Victims should be informed that they can revoke their consent at any time and, as a consequence, they should never be forced or pressured into attending sessions. Similarly, victims have the right not to answer some questions if they do not want to, as well as the right to place restrictions on the use of the information provided.

- **Ensure confidentiality.** The identity of the survivors must be kept confidential to ensure their safety. The survivors should be made aware of the limits of such confidentiality, such as the judicial demand for information. In such cases, the victim should be informed that only the necessary information requested by the judicial demand will be provided. In addition, any information that is made public should not be misinterpreted or used to promote prejudices and stereotypes or to discredit survivors.
- **Provide detailed information on the upcoming process.** It is very important to provide clear and detailed information about the victim's assessment and/or care, including information about the professionals and the institutions/organizations involved, the approximate duration of the assessment and/or care, and any additional assistance that will be provided. Providing information about the process is crucial as victims are generally mistrustful of strangers because of what they have experienced.
- **Use qualified language interpreters.** To effectively communicate with the survivor, language interpreters should have at least some basic knowledge about human trafficking. They must also be able to fully recount the victim's testimony within the sociocultural context from where they come from and be psychologically prepared to hear, interpret and translate emotionally-charged stories.
- **Respect the victim's own pace.** Allow the victim to set their own interview pace and let them decide if they want to stop or continue, according to her needs, and the progress of her psychological recovery. Do not push her if she does not want to share certain information. Moreover, the number of sessions and their duration during the first assessment should not be limited.
- **Create a safe and confidential environment.** Create a private space, both physically and psychologically, where the victim can feel comfortable, confident and safe. Speak in a low tone of voice, have a respectful and relaxed body posture, respect the victim's personal space, avoid physical contact if the victim does not initiate or verbally request it, adopt a friendly and warm attitude and a positive or neutral facial expression, do not make value judgments, and maintain non-intimidating eye contact.

- **Use active listening.** Show empathy, express interest and concern for what the victim is telling you, respect her silences, give emotional validation, demonstrate that you have understood what she has explained and how important it is for her by summarizing or highlighting the words that have caught your attention (paraphrase), do not judge, do not interrupt her, and positively reinforce her statements.
- **Explore the victim’s background.** Most victims have experienced other traumatic events before being trafficked and sexually exploited. They have often suffered multiple adverse events during early childhood that can have serious implications and could have caused underlying traumas. That is why it is important to explore the victim’s background and investigate any aspects that may be relevant for subsequent psychological care. If these previous victimizations are not properly explored and treated, the victim can easily fall into another situation of trafficking or sexual exploitation.
- **Carefully apply and interpret psychological tests.** Use screening tests or assessments with multiple choice questions. If other psychological tests are applied, they must be carefully interpreted as they are not designed for this specific group. The results must be analyzed with extreme caution, bearing in mind cultural factors, cognitive development, verbal capacities, capacity for comprehension, history of substance abuse, and language differences.
- **If you have to write a report, only elaborate when absolutely necessary.** Only report the information that is strictly necessary and omit dispensable details such as any information that could identify the victim. Always bear in mind that these reports can be accessed by another service provider and the victims themselves or be used in a legal case. Also bear in mind that if a professional is needed judicially, they will have to act as a qualified witness.
- **Prevent risk of violence.** Permanent monitoring of the risk of future violence can be used to manage it. It is very important to assess the victim’s risk of suffering violence and evaluate changes over time to adapt risk management strategies, such as through frequent contacts with the victim (in person or by phone), field visits and electronic monitoring.
- **Continuous assessment.** Psychological assessment must be carried out prior to the intervention to assess the needs of the victim. However, it is also essential to constantly reassess the victim throughout the therapeutic or psychosocial process over a period of 6 to 9 months. This will enable the assessment of the victim’s progress and to redirect treatment if necessary.

NOTES

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