



# U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

## RAIO DIRECTORATE – OFFICER TRAINING

### *RAIO Combined Training Program*

# INTERVIEWING SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND OTHER SEVERE TRAUMA

## TRAINING MODULE

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RAIO Directorate – Officer Training / *RAIO Combined Training Program*

# **INTERVIEWING SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND OTHER SEVERE TRAUMA**

## **Training Module**

### **MODULE DESCRIPTION**

This lesson provides background information on torture, including what is meant by the term “torture,” the motives and methods of torturers, and the recovery of survivors. The lesson focuses primarily on the effects of torture and severe trauma and how these effects can affect the interview process. Through discussion and practical exercises, you will gain exposure to effective interviewing techniques and the effects of secondary trauma.

Note: This lesson plan was originally developed in 1995 for use in training new Asylum Officers, and has changed little since that time. It is based on the experiences of the authors in their work with refugees, and was reviewed by several experts in the field of working with survivors of torture and other severe trauma, and who have continued to conduct training for RAIO, including Dr. Allan Keller, Dr. Antonio Martinez, Dr. Andrea Northwood, and Dr. Pamela Elizabeth. In addition, two individuals who work with survivors, one a survivor herself, gave invaluable input into the development of this lesson plan; they requested that their names not be included, however. The mock interview practical exercise that is used during the training is based on mock interview exercises developed by the clinical staff of the Bellevue-NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. Our thanks also to the staff at the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis for their support of RAIO training efforts, and to all who have contributed to these training materials, to the day-long training that is conducted for new officers at RAIO, and to trainings on this topic that are conducted in the RAIO field offices.

### **TERMINAL PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVE(S)**

Given the field situation of interviewing an applicant for asylum (and witnesses, if any), the asylum officer will be able to elicit in a non-adversarial manner all relevant information necessary to adjudicate the asylum or refugee request and to issue documents initiating removal proceedings.

### **ENABLING PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES**

1. Explain how different factors can impede communication during an interview with a survivor of torture.
2. Identify symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other trauma-related conditions.
3. Explain how interview techniques may be used to help elicit testimony from a survivor of torture or other serious trauma.
4. Recognize secondary trauma as it may arise in RAIO adjudications.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS**

- Lecture/Presentation
- Discussion
- Practical exercise

## **METHOD(S) OF EVALUATION**

Written test

## **REQUIRED READING**

- 1.
- 2.

**[Required Reading – International and Refugee Adjudications](#)**

**[Required Reading – Asylum Adjudications](#)**

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. Aron, Adrienne; Corne, Shawn; Fursland, Anthea; Zelwer, Barbara. Committee for Health Rights in Central America (CHERICA). "The Gender-Specific Terror of El Salvador and Guatemala; Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Central American Refugee Women," *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 14, Nos. 1/2, 1991), p. 37-47.
2. Basoglu, Metin, M.D., PhD. "Prevention of Torture and Care of Survivors - an Integrated Approach," *JAMA* (Vol. 270, No. 5, August 1993), p. 606-608; 611.
3. Center for Victims of Torture. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Minneapolis, MN: December 1996), 1 p.

4. Eisenman, David P., M.D. *Identifying Survivors of Traumatic Human Rights Abuses*. Lecture (Hagerstown, MD: Public Health Service Annual Conference, 4 November 1996), p. 5-7.
5. Martín-Baró, Ignacio. *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.110-115.
6. Martinez, Antonio, Ph.D.; Fabri, Mary, Psy.D. "The Dilemma of Revictimization: Survivors of Torture Giving Testimony," (p. 3-4).
7. Physicians for Human Rights. *Examining Asylum Seekers*.
8. Randall, Glenn R. and Ellen L. Lutz. "Approach to the Patient," *Serving Survivors of Torture* (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1991), p. 58-68.
9. Rovner, Sandy. "The Torture of the Refugee, Why Judges Don't Believe," *Washington Post* (Washington, DC: 2 September 1996).
10. Salimovich, Sofia, Elizabeth Lira and Eugenia Weinstein. "Victims of Fear," *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), p. 77-79.
11. Swiss, Shana, M.D. and Joan E. Giller, MA, MB, MRCOG, "Rape as a Crime of War - A Medical Perspective," *JAMA* (Vol. 270, No. 5, 4 August 1993), p. 612-615.
12. United Nations. [\*Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment\*](#) (June 1987). (Included in lesson, International Human Rights Law)
13. Weschler, Lawrence. *A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers* (Penguin, 1990).

**[Additional Resources – International and Refugee Adjudications](#)**

**[Additional Resources – Asylum Adjudications](#)**

**CRITICAL TASKS**

<b>Task/ Skill #</b>	<b>Task Description</b>
ILR11	Knowledge of policies and procedures for processing claims from survivors of torture (3)
ITK5	Knowledge of strategies and techniques for communicating with survivors of torture and other severe trauma (4)
IR2	Skill in interacting with individuals who have suffered trauma (e.g., considerate, non-confrontational, empathetic) (4)
SMC2	Skill in recognizing and managing secondary trauma (4)

**SCHEDULE OF REVISIONS**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Section (Number and Name)</b>	<b>Brief Description of Changes</b>	<b>Made By</b>
1/31/2019	Footer	Removed “draft” designation	Karrie Gurbacki
12/20/2019	Entire Lesson Plan	Minor edits to reflect changes in organizational structure of RAIO; no substantive updates	RAIO Training

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Throughout this training module, you will come across references to adjudication-specific supplemental information located at the end of the module, as well as links to documents that contain adjudication-specific, detailed information. You are responsible for knowing the information in the referenced material that pertains to the adjudications you will be performing.

For easy reference, supplements for international and refugee adjudications are in pink and supplements for asylum adjudications are in yellow.

You may also encounter references to the legacy Refugee Affairs Division (RAD) and the legacy International Operations Division (IO). RAD has been renamed the International and Refugee Affairs Division (IRAD) and has assumed much of the workload of IO, which is no longer operating as a separate RAIIO division.

Officers in the RAIIO Directorate conduct interviews primarily to determine eligibility for immigration benefits or requests; to corroborate information provided by applicants, petitioners, and beneficiaries; and/or to establish whether a person understands the consequences of his or her actions.

The modules of the RAIIO Directorate – Officer Training Program and the adjudication-specific training courses constitute primary field guidance for all officers who conduct interviews for the RAIIO Directorate. The USCIS Adjudicator’s Field Manual (AFM) also provides guidance for officers when conducting interviews, particularly for officers serving in RAIIO’s international offices. There may be some instances where the guidance in the AFM conflicts with guidance provided by the RAIIO Directorate. If this is the case, you should follow the RAIIO guidance. Further guidance regarding interviews for specific applications will be discussed during adjudication-specific trainings.

In this module, the term “interviewee” is used to refer to an individual who is interviewed by an officer in the RAIIO Directorate for an official purpose.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson covers the definition of torture, the motives and methods of torturers, and the recovery of survivors. The lesson also discusses the effects of torture and severe trauma and how these effects can affect the interview process. The lesson offers interviewing techniques and discusses how you may be affected by secondary traumatization.

## **2 OVERVIEW**

### **2.1 The Global Situation**

Torture victims are male, female, adults, children. The practice of torturing individuals is not limited to a particular political ideology; it is an abuse of power that covers the entire range of the political spectrum. Torture of prisoners is routine in many countries. Torture may occur while individuals are serving sentences for having committed crimes, are incarcerated pending judicial hearings, are detained without being formally charged, or are in the informal custody of another person (or persons) who have control over them.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2 Common Experiences of Torture Survivors**

In many cases, the experiences of torture survivors are similar in that usually the victims have been abruptly taken away from their familiar "world," held in captivity where they were tortured, then escaped or were released. The specter of the tortured individual instills terror in the community. The victim is stigmatized, often ostracized.

In addition, torture survivors have all experienced a loss of control. Usually when faced with danger, an individual can fight or run; torture victims cannot do either of these and have no control over their lives and fate. This loss of control and helplessness often remain with the survivor long after the experience, as does the sense of estrangement and isolation.

### **2.3 Treatment Centers**

Because of the widespread use of torture and the problems encountered by survivors of torture, treatment centers for survivors have been increasing around the world in recent years, and the mental health field is learning more about the psychology of survivors of torture. There are several centers in the United States; a few of them are the "Center for Victims of Torture" in Minneapolis, the "Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture" in New York, "The Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture" in Chicago, and "Survivors International" in San Francisco.

### **2.4 Sensitivity to Torture Survivors**

RAIO officers are not expected to be psychologists, but you can be sensitive to persons who have experienced torture and understand how the experience of torture can potentially inhibit applicants from fully expressing their claim.

## **3 DEFINITIONS**

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the UN definition of torture, cited below, limits the definition to that which is performed by or with the consent of a public official.

Article 1, United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 27 June 1987, states:

“For the purposes of this Convention, the term 'torture' means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”<sup>2</sup>

(Adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution 39/46 of 10 December 1984; entry into force on 26 June 1987; ratified by the US Senate in 1990; US became a party in 1994.)

The World Medical Association, in its “Declaration of Tokyo,” (1975), defines torture in the following manner:

“For the purpose of this declaration, torture is defined as the deliberate, systematic or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the orders of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make a confession, or for any other reason.”

A more descriptive definition of torture is offered by Elena O. Nightingale, M.D., Ph.D, in *The Problem of Torture and the Response of the Health Professional*, Health Services for the Treatment of Torture and Trauma Survivors, J. Gruschow & K. Hannibal, Eds., (Washington, DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1990), p. 8-9:

“Torture is the deliberate infliction of pain by one person on another--that is the unique feature of torture. It is very different from the trauma that is suffered from a natural event, such as an earthquake or flood... <sup>3</sup>

“There are at least four characteristics of torture that seem to be quite consistent. First, at least two persons are involved--a perpetrator and a victim, and often, though not always, they are face-to-face. Second, the torturer has complete physical control over the victim. This is important because the helplessness of the victim[s] remains with [them] long after the torture episode is over. Third, pain and suffering are an integral part of torture, but the main purpose is not really pain and suffering but rather humiliation and breaking of the will. Therefore, there are means of torture that do not involve physical pain and suffering, including

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<sup>2</sup> This definition of torture is for purposes of the Convention. Since only states are parties to the Convention, the focus is on severe harm inflicted by officials or individuals acting in official capacity.

<sup>3</sup> See also the article by Lira Salimovich noted above in the Additional Resources section of this lesson.

sensory deprivation, continuous noise, light, hunger, cold, and so on. Finally, torture is a purposeful, systematic activity. In addition to breaking the will of the victim, the intent is to obtain information or a confession, to punish the victim, or to intimidate the victim and others. That is, the purpose is not only to destroy the person who is being tortured, but to have that person be a lesson to others so they will not do whatever the government that sanctions torture feels is not in its interests. And that's a very important component. The torture we are speaking about is the systematic government-sanctioned use of torture that is for political purposes.”

## 4 MOTIVES OF TORTURERS

“[T]he body [is] abused to gain access to the mind.”<sup>4</sup>

Torturers attempt to destroy the political opposition in order to gain or maintain power. Although the immediate goal of torturers in some cases is to extract information, obtain a confession, or to destroy the person as a participant in or leader of a group that the torturers oppose, in most cases the goal is to give an example for others; it is a means of destroying the emotional, spiritual, social, and political well-being of a group or community.

Torturers attempt to:

- destroy the personality of the victim
- weaken the individual, the family, the community, and/or the society
- create a climate of fear or apathy

Torture leaves the survivor as well as the family and community of the survivor feeling afraid, vulnerable, humiliated, intimidated, and isolated. Distrust among community members may also develop, diminishing supportive community ties.

## 5 FORMS OF TORTURE

### 5.1 Overview

Against all professional ethics, medical personnel and psychologists have sometimes assisted in torture, devising methods of torture that maximize the long-term effects of torture and do not leave physical signs. Medical personnel are often present when victims are being tortured to assure that the victims do not die. Their presence makes them culpable of crimes against humanity; it does not legitimate the acts being performed.

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International. “Treatment of Survivors of Torture,” John Denford. *A Glimpse of Hell - Reports of Torture Worldwide* (London: 1996), p. 155.

Though some methods of torture leave no physical marks, they may have devastating physical, neurological, and psychological effects, disabling the person for life.

## **5.2 Methods**

Torture can take many forms including:

- Psychological torture (e.g., threatening to harm or kill the victim or relatives of the victim; mock executions; witnessing or hearing the torture of others; forced nudity); most victims are subjected to some form of psychological torture
- Sensory deprivation (e.g., depriving the victim of food, sleep, light, and protection from the elements) or sensory overload (e.g. loud noises, glaring lights)
- Sexual violence (men, women, and children are all victims of sexual violence)<sup>5</sup>
- Electric shocks to all parts of the body (most frequently to the genitalia)
- Beatings / Physical assault (the majority of torture victims are subjected to beatings)
- Burning the victim
- Forcing the body into contorted positions or forcibly stretching it beyond normal capacity
- Non-therapeutic administration of drugs

The most common forms of torture are beatings and psychological torture.

## **6 THE EFFECTS OF TORTURE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEVERE TRAUMA**

### **6.1 Overview**

Torture can have lasting physical and psychological effects. The most debilitating long-term effects of torture, however, tend to be psychological rather than physical. Symptoms affect a high percentage of survivors. This is also true of other forms of traumatic abuse, such as witnessing the assault, mutilation, or murder of others; experiencing the burning or bombing of communities; forced separation from loved ones; and other exposure to horrific sights or events.

### **6.2 Physical Effects**

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<sup>5</sup> Sexual violence other than rape can also have lasting psychological effects.

There are many possible physical effects of torture. Physical effects include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Musculoskeletal pain
- Loss of use of body mobility (due to nerve damage, muscle damage, etc.)
- Loss of complete use of certain body functioning
- Loss of vision
- Hearing loss
- Headaches
- Pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Scars (most forms of torture, however, do not leave lasting scars)

### **6.3 Psychological Effects**

The psychological effects (and corresponding symptoms) of torture and other forms of severe trauma can include the following.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Emotional**

- blunted affect, or restricted affect (psychic numbing, showing no emotion or inappropriate emotion)
- depression
- panic disorders / panic attacks
- phobias
- anxiety
- suspiciousness; distrust
- detachment
- feelings of isolation / alienation
- feelings of guilt, shame, humiliation, worthlessness, or helplessness
- loss of confidence
- lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- anger (at those who perpetrated the trauma or those who were exempted)
- thoughts of death or suicide

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<sup>6</sup> The following list is one of several ways of categorizing the effects of trauma on survivors.

### **Psychosomatic**

- headaches
- pains for which there is no medical explanation
- nervousness
- insomnia or hypersomnia
- gastrointestinal complaints; diarrhea
- fainting
- sweating
- weakness; fatigue
- loss of appetite; weight loss or gain
- nightmares
- flashbacks
- reliving the physical pain of what happened

### **Behavioral**

- substance abuse
- aggressive behavior
- irritability
- withdrawal
- sexual dysfunction

### **Mental**

- confusion
- loss of concentration
- loss of memory
- mental dullness
- attention blocking
- recurring thoughts of the traumatic event(s)

It is important to note that although most psychological effects of torture are universal, some may vary somewhat across cultures, and some may be culture specific. For example, to a Tibetan Buddhist, body fluids are considered to have a spiritual energy and

are not replenishable.<sup>7</sup> A form of torture which has been used against Tibetans is drawing blood and discarding it in an inappropriate manner. This can have severe psychological effects on the individual; his or her energy and spirit is irreversibly depleted.

Many of these psychological effects (as well as certain physical effects) can lead to a deterioration of the family structure and community ties. Social functioning of the individual is often impaired; this affects parenting skills, the ability to interact as a family member or part of a community, and the ability to hold a job and support oneself and one's family. The socioeconomic functioning of the entire community may suffer, as the effects of torture and other forms of severe trauma have a far-reaching impact on the community as well as the individual.

#### 6.4 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Although reactions to torture and other forms of severe trauma differ among individuals and cultures, the most common conditions are depression and "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD). According to "The Dilemma of Revictimization: Survivors of Torture Giving Testimony" by Antonio Martinez, Ph.D., and Mary Fabri, Psy.D.,

"The dynamics of the disorder are best understood by the interaction between two factors: the painful intrusive memories of the trauma, and the defenses used to ward off these memories. **The questioning during investigations, hearings, etc. is an extremely emotional event for the survivor. The story is rarely recounted without an actual sensory reliving of the experience (physical pain, tastes, sounds, and smells). It is not simply a recollection of events.**" (emphasis added)

#### 6.5 Other Factors

There are other issues which may compound the effects of torture and other forms of severe trauma on survivors.

1. The survivor may be overwhelmed by grief or bereavement due to separation from and/or loss of loved ones that has occurred as a secondary consequence of his or her torture.
2. The survivor may experience an overwhelming sense of guilt, especially if he or she survived while others continued to be tortured or were killed after the survivor was freed, or if their torture was due to their association with the survivor. Survivors may feel that they were somehow to blame for their own torture or for the torture of others.

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<sup>7</sup> Eisenman, Dr. David. Associate Medical Director, Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. Interview, 17 December 1997.

3. Survivors who have resettled in a country other than their own face difficulties adjusting to unfamiliar customs and a new language. They may also feel that they do not fit into the new environment. Their established position in their family and society may have been greatly altered by their resettlement, and they may feel a loss of purpose in their lives, especially if it is difficult for them to get and keep a job, and if economic survival is problematic for them.
4. Uncertain immigration status in the country of refuge can be very stressful for a survivor and can add greatly to his or her feeling of instability and uncertainty. The survivor may fear being deported and returned to the country where the abuse occurred. Waiting for a decision on a request for asylum or refugee status can be very stressful; being denied can have profound negative effect on a survivor.
5. The survivor may have a physical disability as a result of the torture / trauma that he or she experienced. He or she may also, as noted above, be especially susceptible to illness.

## **7 TRIGGERS**

As noted above, torture and other severe trauma can leave lasting psychological effects on survivors. Often, symptoms appear after a latency period and do not usually subside merely with the passing of time. A survivor may appear to be adjusting fairly well, only to have symptoms triggered without warning.

There are many possible triggers: an event may trigger painful memories or an individual may remind the survivor of the torturer. Even sounds and smells can trigger symptoms.

The implications for the interview are great. Recollections of the traumatic events, such as are required in the interview, can be expected to trigger symptoms. If the survivor was interrogated, the mere experience of the interview can remind the survivor of being interrogated where his or her life was dependent upon the whim of the interrogator. Uniformed security guards, a particular manner of questioning or particular questions, certain objects in the interview room or office environment, etc., can trigger memories of the trauma and cause “flashbacks” for the survivor. A survivor may be very fearful of symptoms being triggered during the interview.

## **8 RECOVERY FOR SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND OTHER FORMS OF SEVERE TRAUMA**

### **8.1 Overview**

Individuals heal in a variety of ways and at different rates. Individuals never fully recover from an experience of torture; rather, it is a question of healing as much as possible from the pain and trying to regain stability and normalcy in life.

## 8.2 Factors Affecting Recovery

It is difficult to predict how a particular individual might heal from a torture experience. Psychologists have found, however, that the situations listed below may help in recovery.

### **Certain situations can help in recovery**

- the survivor was an activist and was abused due to his or her activism
  - Such individuals tend to recover more easily than someone who was tortured merely to serve as an example or to get at others in the community.
- the survivor holds strong religious beliefs
- the survivor is able to seek legal redress for the past abuse (for himself or herself, or to help others)
- the survivor has access to rehabilitation
- the survivor is in a supportive environment where he or she can be productive
  - Being in an environment that is permanently safe where there is no threat of future harm is important in recovery. Having regularized his or her immigration status in the country of resettlement can add greatly to the feelings of safety and security of a survivor.
  - Being able to continue with normal family, social, and work-related functions without being viewed by others as having been somehow diminished by the past experiences can help in recovery.
  - In some instances, peers/the community may view the survivor as having been strong to have survived.
  - Having someone who is easily accessible with whom the survivor feels comfortable talking about the experience can also help in recovery.
  - The survivor has family with him or her in exile and/or is assured that his or her family is safe.
- certain cultural values can have a positive impact<sup>8</sup>
  - A survivor's belief in "karma" may help him or her to release feelings of revenge or anger toward the perpetrator: suffering is part of one's fate that one must accept; the perpetrator cannot escape his or her own fate because of his or her actions so justice will eventually prevail.

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<sup>8</sup> Cultural factors can also have a negative impact; see the section immediately below.

### **Certain situations can have a negative impact on recovery**

- certain cultural values can adversely affect recovery
  - For example, women who have been sexually abused in cultures which view such women as responsible for their own abuse have an especially difficult time accepting what happened to them and overcoming their shame.
- culture differences or “culture shock” – difficulty living in a culture that is different from one's own – can have a negative impact on recovery
- lack of economic resources can also have a negative impact on recovery
- bias and discrimination (such as anti-immigrant bias) can have an adverse impact on the recovery of those survivors who resettle in a country other than their own, or in an area that is culturally different from their own
- uncertain future can negatively impact recovery
  - An uncertain future can negatively affect a survivor's rate of recovery. Survivors who are under the surveillance of their torturers may not know if or when they may be forced to again undergo torture. Even if survivors have resettled in another country and are out of immediate harm's way, their future may still be uncertain if they have no legal status in the country of resettlement or if their immigration status is pending.

## **9 HOW TRAUMA-RELATED CONDITIONS CAN INTERFERE WITH THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

### **9.1 Overview**

If an applicant is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other trauma-related conditions, your ability to gather information on which to base a decision may be affected.<sup>9</sup>

An interview - even a job interview - can be a stressful experience for any individual. An interview as crucial to an individual's future as a refugee or asylum interview, by its very nature, is very stress-producing. Symptoms of trauma-related conditions are often exacerbated in stressful situations. Therefore, the interview can be extremely difficult for a survivor of torture or other severe trauma.

Undergoing questioning about the events that occurred can be very emotional for the survivor. The survivor can actually relive sensory experiences, such as sounds, smells,

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<sup>9</sup> See also Section 7 *Triggers*.

and physical pain. Various factors such as contact with persons in uniform (e.g. immigration inspectors, border patrol agents) or being questioned in a particular manner may trigger symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because this can remind the survivor of the individuals who harmed him or her. The survivor may feel robbed of power, vulnerable, and defenseless, as he or she felt during the torture experience. The survivor may react in a variety of ways during the interview.

## **9.2 Effect on Interview Process**

Often, the symptoms of PTSD that may be triggered in the survivor during the interview are experienced internally and he or she will not discuss this with those present. These symptoms, however will have an impact on the survivor's ability to portray his or her claim.

### **Survivor may avoid discussing events**

A survivor may use avoidance as a means of coping. He or she may do whatever necessary to avoid thinking about the events due to the humiliation and the emotional pain evoked. He or she may not wish to discuss the details of the experience with others, may not sleep to avoid having nightmares, or may isolate himself or herself from others to avoid talking about past events. A survivor may also avoid contact with others from his or her country who may remind him or her of the experience. A survivor also may avoid such contact because they are fearful that "spies" associated in some way with their abusers may have "infiltrated" their community. (This is not an unrealistic fear, as there have been cases in which government agents from countries have developed ties to communities in resettlement countries in order to report information back to their governments on the activities of certain individuals.)

A torture survivor may be more willing to discuss the physical symptoms resulting from the experience(s) than the psychological symptoms.

### **Survivor may have difficulty remembering events**

A survivor may have suffered brain damage as a result of abuse such as blows to the head and other forms of trauma. This may lead to cognitive problems and an inability to remember certain things.

Additionally, a survivor may have an emotional remembrance of what happened but may not remember the details. He or she may experience intense fears and anticipation of going through the experience but may not be able to remember what it was that happened. This may be due to:

- defensive techniques to avoid reliving the events, which include
  - denial that events occurred
  - minimizing the events

- blocking memory of the events
- dissociation (temporarily forgetting that the event occurred; this may be manifested by blank looks or stares, as well as losing track of questions or forgetting what one was about to say)
- overstimulation of the brain during the occurrence of the traumatic events so that the brain did not store all of the information
- confusion or distortion of memory due to anxiety (e.g., mixing up names and/or dates)

**Survivor may respond in unpredictable ways**

- He or she may lose composure. The question and answer format of the interview conducted by a stranger may remind the survivor of being interrogated and questioned for the “truth,” and then punished for telling the truth or for lying. The survivor may see the interview as determining whether he or she will live or die. Even waiting to be interviewed may remind the survivor of waiting to be taken to be tortured.
- A torture survivor may manifest a wide variety of emotions when recounting past events. He or she may laugh at what appears to be inappropriate moments or may cry hysterically. The survivor may remember the details of the event(s) but be emotionally detached and recount events as if merely reciting a memorized story without any emotion at all.
- A torture survivor may avoid answering questions or may change the subject because he or she may be afraid of having an emotional outburst or a dissociation experience.
- A torture survivor may have difficulty following or tracking your questions or difficulty answering questions coherently. This can be due to severe concentration difficulties as a result of the memory problems listed previously.
- A torture survivor may avoid eye contact. Eye contact may be difficult for a torture survivor due to the experience of having been constantly watched while being detained and undergoing torture.
- A torture survivor may be unresponsive to questions you pose, even if he or she knows the answers and could speak extensively on the topic.

**Survivor may distrust the interviewing officer and may therefore avoid revealing certain information**

A torture survivor may have a distrust of others, particularly persons in positions of power or authority (e.g., USCIS officers). (Survivors may also distrust even family members and friends.) The survivor may be fearful of what you will do with the

information obtained at the interview, and so may not fully disclose to the officer the experiences he or she had.

Often, a distrust of others helped survivors escape further abuse and survive in their countries. Therefore, survivors may attempt to protect themselves by distrusting others in other situations as well.

The effects listed above can also have an impact on interactions other than at the interview.<sup>10</sup> Individuals who work with survivors in a counseling capacity are often not able to elicit all that happened to the survivor during the first few counseling sessions. In addition, a survivor may not have explained everything about the claim to his or her representative prior to the interview.

## **10 INTERVIEWING SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND OTHER SEVERE TRAUMA**

### **10.1 Interview Techniques**

At every interview there is a potential for retraumatizing an applicant who may be a survivor of torture or other severe trauma. You must be aware of the effects of trauma on certain applicants and use this awareness in formulating interview strategies. You may have to modify your interview techniques to adapt to certain situations. Unfortunately, you will not always know who is a survivor and who is not a survivor. As noted above, some applicants will not fully disclose all information about their past to you. You should therefore treat each applicant as a possible survivor and attempt to be as sensitive as possible during all interviews.

Interview techniques that may be helpful include the following.

#### **Treat the applicant with humanity**

The manner in which you approach the applicant and the interview can greatly affect the way in which the applicant will respond and be able to express his or her claim at the interview.

You should attempt to build rapport as soon as he or she meet the applicant and should find some way to connect with the applicant about issues not related to the torture experience. Setting the tone at the beginning of the interview can assist you in eliciting the necessary information throughout the interview and can assist the applicant in relating his or her claim.

#### **Try to help the person feel safe and in control**

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<sup>10</sup> Consider the implications for the interview.

- You should recognize the power differential that exists between the applicant and yourself and take care not to exploit it.
- You should explain the purpose and process of the interview, including the fact that you will be taking notes and the reason for taking notes. In this way, a survivor will know what he or she can expect during the interview, thus relieving some of the anxiety of the unknown.
- If the claim involves sexual abuse and you are not the same sex as the applicant, you can give the applicant an opportunity to be interviewed by an officer of the same sex, if one is available.<sup>11</sup>
- You should start with easy topics in order to establish rapport.
- You can ask open-ended questions that give the applicant some control over the information he or she must give.
- You can acknowledge how difficult it may be for the applicant to answer certain questions; he or she can give the applicant permission to let you know when something is too difficult.
- You can acknowledge that an event may have been particularly traumatic for an applicant (e.g., “That must have been very difficult for you.”)
- You can elicit sufficient detail to establish credibility and gain an understanding of the basis of the claim without probing too deeply into all the details of a painful experience.
- Questions such as “Was your life different after your experience? ...How?” can also give you further insight into the nature of the event as well as an understanding of the long-term effects of the experience on the applicant.
- If the applicant does not speak English, and it is necessary for you to discuss issues with the interpreter, attorney or legal representative, dependents on the applicant's file, or anyone else at the interview, you should have translated to the applicant what he or she is discussing. This keeps the applicant informed of what is going on and can diminish the loss of control the applicant may feel.<sup>12</sup>
- You should respect a survivor's need to protect himself or herself during the interview and should respect the survivor's need to have a sense of control during the interview.

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<sup>11</sup> Sometimes just giving the applicant the opportunity to be interviewed by someone else can relieve some of the applicant's stress about the interview as it indicates that the asylum officer is sensitive to and understanding of the applicant's situation.

<sup>12</sup> For additional information, see RAI0 Training module, *Interviewing – Working with an Interpreter*.

This is a major issue for survivors, as their control has been completely stripped from them in many situations; thus lack of control can be very unnerving.

### **Be thorough but sensitive**

- You should explain to the applicant the process and roles of the individuals at the interview to reduce the feeling of anxiety.
- You can ask broader, open-ended questions in the beginning of the interview to give the applicant a feeling of control, then go back for details.
- You should not speak in a loud voice, should avoid changes in mood or attitude toward the applicant, should avoid reacting with disbelief, and should avoid being confrontational or argumentative with the applicant.
  - It is important to remember that there is a range of behavior that a survivor may exhibit when confronted with discrepancies in his or her story. Some survivors may be able to explain in a rational manner the discrepancy, while others may become more confused. This may have very little to do with an attempt to fabricate a claim.
- You should approach the interview as a means of gathering information rather than an interrogation, and should convey that message to the applicant by your manner.
- You should allow the applicant to ask questions or ask for clarification; the officer should rephrase questions that appear to be confusing or not understood by the applicant.

### **Remember the purpose of the interview**

- You should be knowledgeable in human rights conditions in the applicant's country so that he or she can ask relevant questions and avoid unnecessary questions.
- You should give the applicant time to recompose himself or herself if necessary during the interview, and to relate the account of his or her experiences in a manner that is the most comfortable for the applicant.
  - At times after asking a question, it may be appropriate to allow the applicant several seconds of silence to organize his or her thoughts and determine how to answer a particularly difficult question. Although you may feel a need to fill in the silence by asking additional questions, it may be more beneficial to allow for some silence at particular times during interview.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For additional information, see RAIO Training module, *Eliciting Testimony*.

- If an interview with a survivor of torture is particularly long or difficult, you can give the applicant an opportunity to take a break, get water, etc.
- You can emphasize mutual goals you and the applicant have.
- You should respond non-defensively if an applicant exhibits suspiciousness or distrust.

It is important to keep in mind that you will not be aware of what the applicant is going through during the interview and that you cannot change the manner in which the applicant presents himself or herself. Rather, you must be aware of how you are conducting the interview, and adapt your own behavior whenever necessary to be able to effectively elicit the applicant's claim.

## **10.2 Documentation**

Documentation of a survivor's experience from his or her country is usually not available; persons who practice torture usually do not leave written accounts of their actions, and physicians and psychologists who might provide treatment and/or documentation may themselves be harmed if caught.<sup>14</sup> In addition, many in the medical profession may not be trained in recognizing the signs of torture. Furthermore, a survivor may be afraid to go to a doctor if a doctor was present during and involved in the torture. Although survivors are often not able to seek medical or psychological attention, some are able to obtain care and documentation of their abuse.

Documentation of physical symptoms and conditions, however, may not necessarily be able to verify the cause of the symptoms or conditions.

## **11 EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE CLOSE TO OR WHO WORK WITH SURVIVORS**

### **11.1 Secondary Trauma**

The term “secondary trauma” (also called “vicarious trauma”) is used to refer to the psychological and physiological effects experienced by individuals who work with or are close to trauma survivors. Symptoms of secondary trauma mimic the symptoms of PTSD. Secondary trauma is a normal reaction and is experienced in varying degrees by most individuals who are in constant contact with survivors of trauma.

### **11.2 Family Members of Survivors**

Secondary trauma may affect family members of the survivor as well as individuals who were closely associated with the survivor, such as a friend or colleague who escaped

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<sup>14</sup> See the articles by Adrienne Aron and Sandy Rovner, noted in the Additional Resources section of this module. See also the sample letters from medical personnel referred to in the Additional Resources section of this module.

being tortured. (This is important to note when interviewing an applicant who is related to or closely associated with someone who was a victim of torture or other severe trauma.)

### **11.3 Care-Givers and Others**

Secondary trauma can affect individuals who work intensely or frequently with survivors, including service providers such as doctors, nurses, social workers, and mental health care providers.

Although officers in RAIO do not have the same in-depth contact with torture survivors that certain service providers have, you may still be affected by the stress from continually interviewing applicants who have undergone hardships and may be survivors of torture or other forms of trauma. You must recognize how this stress may be affecting you, and should address problems that may arise as a result.

### **11.4 Interactions with Others**

Secondary trauma can have an effect on your interactions with others and your work performance, decreasing objectivity, tolerance, patience, and the ability to listen dispassionately to others. You may overreact or react with disbelief and sarcasm to stories of torture or other forms of abuse and may develop a decreased sense of personal accomplishment.

### **11.5 Prevention**

There are various ways you can prevent or treat secondary trauma, including getting regular physical exercise, adequate sleep, and proper nutrition. Taking breaks and being assigned to different types of tasks can also help. It is also important to have a supportive environment of family and friends with whom to discuss feelings. In addition, a service provider who is suffering from secondary trauma can share his or her experiences with co-workers who are likely to understand what he or she is going through.

## **12 SUMMARY**

Torture is practiced in many countries. It affects persons of all ages, including children.

### **Motive of Torturers**

- To give an example to others
- A means of destroying the emotional, spiritual, social, and political well-being of a group or community
- Torturers attempt to:
  - destroy the personality of the victim

- weaken the individual, the family, the community, and/or the society

### **Forms of Torture**

Torturers use a variety of methods of torture that leave long-lasting psychological damage but that do not usually leave lasting physical evidence.

- Psychological torture
- Sensory deprivation / Sensory overload
- Sexual violence
- Electric shocks
- Beatings
- Burns
- Forcing the body into contorted positions or forcibly stretching it beyond normal capacity
- Non-therapeutic administration of drugs

### **Effects of Torture and Other Trauma**

Symptoms affect a high percentage of survivors. Symptoms exhibited by applicants suffering from trauma-related conditions may be physical or psychological and include:

- Emotional
- Psychosomatic
- Behavioral
- Mental

Such symptoms can affect the asylum officer's ability to elicit necessary information.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression are the most common long-term reactions to torture and other forms of severe trauma.

Often, symptoms appear after a latency period and they do not usually subside merely with time. Symptoms may be “triggered” without warning at any time. The rate of recovery for survivors varies from individual to individual and a variety of factors can influence the rate of recovery. However, survivors never fully recover from a torture experience.

An applicant suffering from PTSD or other trauma-related condition may

- avoid discussing events
- have difficulty remembering events

- respond in unpredictable ways
- avoid revealing certain information

### **Interviewing Survivors of Torture**

Officers need to be aware of the possible symptoms of trauma-related conditions and elicit information in the most effective and sensitive way possible.

- Treat the applicant with humanity
- Try to help the applicant feel safe / in control
- Be thorough but sensitive
- Remember the purpose of the interview

### **Effects on Individuals who are Close to or Who Work with Survivors**

Individuals who work with trauma survivors, as well as family members and others who are close to trauma survivors may experience secondary trauma, the symptoms of which are similar to those of PTSD.

**PRACTICAL EXERCISES**

**Materials for Practical Exercises will be handed out at the training.**

**Practical Exercise # 1**

- **Title:**
- **Student Materials:**

**OTHER MATERIALS**

**There are no Other Materials for this module.  
Any additional materials will be handed out at the training.**

**SUPPLEMENT A – INTERNATIONAL AND REFUGEE ADJUDICATIONS**

The following information is specific to international and refugee adjudications. Information in each text box contains adjudication-specific procedures and guidelines related to the section from the Training Module referenced in the subheading of the supplement text box.

**REQUIRED READING**

- 1.
- 2.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- 1.
- 2.

**SUPPLEMENTS**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>International and Refugee Adjudications Supplement</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Module Section Subheading</b></p>
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**SUPPLEMENT B – ASYLUM ADJUDICATIONS**

The following information is specific to asylum adjudications. Information in each text box contains adjudication-specific procedures and guidelines related to the section from the Training Module referenced in the subheading of the supplement text box.

**REQUIRED READING**

- 1.
- 2.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- 1.
- 2.

**SUPPLEMENTS**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Asylum Adjudications Supplement</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Module Section Subheading</b></p>
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