

CHAPTER 5

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

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This chapter may be very different from the other chapters in this book, but I make no apology for that. The reason I have written this differently to how I would usually write an academic paper or book chapter is because I feel that the issue itself transcends academic argument and research and must be viewed in a holistic manner. This involves statistics, research studies and theory but also the ability to consider the issues from a philosophical perspective and to internalise those issues; if there were ever a global “what if it were me?” issue in society it is that of enforced migration.

Migration is one of the biggest issues in the world at the present time, and it will undoubtedly continue to grow ever larger over the next few years.

For context, when I first wrote about this issue in 2020 the figures for the year 2019 were 70 million people displaced, with 40 million of these within their own countries and 30 million who had fled their countries (UNDESA, 2019). The same figures for 2025 are 117.8 million people forcibly displaced, 68.7 million of whom are displaced within their own country and 35.6 million displaced across borders, having fled their countries as either refugees or asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2026). The reasons for these displacements can be varied; people may be forcibly displaced from where they live due to war, or fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, or membership of a political or social group. Whilst the majority of these 35.6 million are refugees and will someday wish to return to their homeland from what they hope is a temporary forced migration (e.g., Ukraine), over nine million are asylum seekers who do not see their future as being in their home country. Of the 117.8 million forced migrants 38%

are children and over 300,000 are born into refugee status every year (UNHCR, 2026).

For those of us in affluent, politically stable countries this can be quite difficult to understand. We see the news stories every now and again of bombed cities and towns, and a person crying over a loved one who has died. We see reports coming from places like the Mediterranean Sea of boatloads of people clambering ashore seeking asylum in Europe, and occasionally a dead body or two to highlight the dangers of such a journey. We see images of migrant camps and hear news reports of illegal immigrants getting into countries via lorries, boats, or walking for many miles. These images and stories may result in us having many different emotions; sadness at people living in such an awful situation; fear of numbers of people from a different culture coming into our society; anger at people breaking the rules. However, we rarely stop to really think about the individuals, their reasons for making these journeys or, importantly, the psychological health consequences from all that they have experienced. The terms we use – migrant, refugee, asylum seeker – make it easy for us to forget that the statistic of nearly 118 million people forcibly displaced, such an easy number to write down, disguises 118 million individual lives and experiences and that there is a person, a human just like you and me, behind every unit of that grand total. The psychological impacts of enforced displacement can be profound; not simply due to the trauma that has forced the displacement initially, but also from the journey that must be undertaken to relocate, the arrival in a new location, and the diaspora from one's own cultural homeland and heritage. This chapter will consider each of these.

Home

Most of us are pretty happy living in the country that we were born in. Yes, we may move around a little for work or relationships, but even if your circumstances aren't ideal – you don't earn as much as you would like, your day-to-day life is a bit monotonous – the thought of just packing up and moving on to a country, culture, or society that you know nothing about would be daunting. That is because life is about so much more than money or experiences – the family and friendships that we have, understanding how things work in your own culture, the feeling of “comfortableness” in being surrounded by the familiar, these are all things that bind many of us to our countries of origin. And that is no different across the world. Given the choice, most refugees would not be refugees.

When meeting those who have migrated to a host country it can be easy to forget that they have an identity beyond that label of ‘refugee’ or ‘asylum seeker’ which is now attached to them. If we consider a city such as Aleppo in Syria it was a beautiful, historic city and home to over two million people with a thriving tourist industry, nightlife, and surrounded by stunning countryside. The people who lived there had occupations, a sense of community and a good quality of life. From a psychological perspective we know the importance of our social groups to our identity, our sense of belonging, and our senses of self-worth and self-esteem (Social Identity Theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). Our family, our links to community, our role in society, occupationally and outside of the workplace, define us as individuals. Similarly, our understanding of the culture we live in and our ability to navigate the complexities of our society provide a sense of comfort and belongingness.

In the civil war and the fighting that ravaged the city of Aleppo between 2012–16 thousands died, and many neighbourhoods were destroyed. Necessities such as food and water became difficult to come by. All semblance of a normal life disappeared. Whilst fear for their own life or grief at losing loved ones in such a situation are the most prominent psychological threats to the individual, they are by no means the only ones. Loss of routine as day-to-day activities are curtailed, loss of income as work is affected, loss of the familiar and the disintegration of a society and culture that provided the framework for daily life; all of these, and many more, will affect upon a person’s psychological well-being.

At this point it is worth stopping and thinking – what would you do if this were your hometown? If you feared that the neighbourhood you live in could be bombed, or overrun with armed forces from one of the factions fighting? If your family or friends had been killed or had left, leaving you with feelings of grief or loneliness? It seems to me that getting out of there would be a logical thought for any rational person. Of course, the big question is, where to? Under such circumstances prior planning often isn’t possible, and so you gather what you can and leave. For the vast majority, this means moving out of harm’s way into another area of the country (internal displacement). Even in the cases of those who seek refuge outside of their country of origin, most people go to neighbouring countries (UNDESA, 2019; UNHCR, 2026). None of this is surprising; beyond the ability to finance escape, which will play a significant role in people’s choices, the ability to stay with family within a country or in neighbouring countries maintains bonds, whilst the familiarity of shared culture and

experiences within neighbouring countries, even in temporary accommodation, may at least provide some comfort in harsh conditions.

The Journey

So, what of those who attempt to travel to places such as the UK, Germany, France, or the US? The US (largely from Central and South America) and Europe (largely from Africa and the Middle East) are the areas currently receiving most refugees and asylum seekers who travel beyond bordering countries (UNHCR, 2026) although this may change in the future as I will discuss at the end of the chapter. People may travel to these locations for many reasons; family or friends already living there, knowledge of the language, or they may have heard what a wonderful place they are to live in; everyone will have their own reasons. However, for many the journey may pose as many dangers as the life they left, and few will have been prepared for this. Travelling by whatever means possible, be it on foot or in transport provided by criminal enterprises. The dangers of crossing a sea where thousands have died before you, often handing over what money or possessions you own for this ‘opportunity’. Many people question why refugees would take such risks to get to Europe or the US, but surely this highlights the terrors of the lives that they are leaving behind; when danger faces you but is still preferable to what is behind you, this highlights the desperation that drives so many on to literally risk their lives. In addition, there is no law to protect you as you travel; criminal gangs often prey upon refugees, and you may find yourself in the company of strangers on the long journey. Again, imagine if the rule of law were withdrawn from your hometown and you were told that it was every person for themselves – would you even set foot outside your front door?

One of the most used negative tropes about immigration is that it always appears to fit young men who are refugees. Whilst this isn’t backed up by the statistics (50% of refugees are women) it also isn’t surprising if men are the ones who go on ahead to seek asylum; the dangers of assault, sexual abuse, and being caught up in the sex trafficking trade (another big global issue) are constant threats to females and minors on these journeys. When aid agencies sprang into action at the outbreak of the Ukraine war and set up outposts to receive refugees across the borders in neighbouring European countries the human trafficking organisations were not far behind them in also heading to the borders and a number of cases of suspected labour and sex trafficking ensued (UNODC, 2022); some are always prepared to take advantage of a humanitarian crisis.

The Arrival

And so, as a refugee, you arrive in the UK. You have left your country, family, friends, possessions and, in many cases, your culture behind. The people that you directly know are likely to be fellow refugees and criminal gang members. You may be suspicious or frightened of authority figures such as the police or border agents, particularly if you have come from a country where the authorities were the cause of your problems in the first place. It is therefore no wonder that so many do not engage with the ‘proper’ way of entering a country, even if they know what that proper way is. Ironically, the means of identifying yourself at the point of arrival is also one of the biggest liabilities during the journey. A document identifying you as being from a country such as Syria or Afghanistan would be a valued prize for someone with criminal intent and so it is no surprise that these are often taken or destroyed before or during the journey. However, without this document at the point of arrival it becomes difficult to prove who you are or where you are from and so refugees and asylum-seekers are often unable to formally access avenues of entry to a country that would be expected of migrants.

This can prove to be highly problematic for integration into a host society. McKay et al. (2012) found that not having applied to be in a country ‘in the right way’ is often viewed negatively by members of a host country, regardless of the legitimacy of their claim to seek refuge. Kim et al (2018), who found that negative messages about threats posed by immigrants can influence feelings of anger and contempt towards immigrant outgroups. People’s attitudes towards immigrants, particularly those classed as asylum-seekers and refugees, have shifted greatly over the last 20 years. Negativity may be particularly prevalent in times of austerity such as are being currently experienced in many countries across the world, with theories of relative group conflict (RGCT; Levine & Campbell, 1972) and relative deprivation (Davis, 1959) suggesting that a group may wish to withhold resources from outgroups that they feel are competing for those resources or who are not as “worthy” of limited resources. In addition, Integrated Threat Theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) argues that we may view outgroup members, such as migrants, as threats to our resources such as jobs and access to public services (realistic threats), and to our ways of life such as cultural norms (symbolic threats; Murray and Marx, 2013). The use of language in public discourse relating to the worthiness of asylum-seekers and refugees (e.g., “illegal migrants” in place of “asylum-seekers”) has also been identified as a factor influencing attitudes towards these groups (Graf et al., 2023; Musolff, 2015).

The above relates more to the state of mind of the host population but what of the asylum seekers and refugees? You know what it is like to arrive at a destination – the sense of relief, the end of the journey and, when it is such a big step in your life – the feeling that your troubles of the past are largely behind you, and you can look forward to a bright new future. Unfortunately, for many refugees, this is not the case. For illegal immigrants who disappear into a black economy of a host nation and avoid formally registering in that nation there is the constant threat of discovery and deportation. For legal migrants with refugee status there may be detention, interviews with officials, and prolonged periods of uncertainty. There may be negativity from communities that they attempt to settle into, and the bright future that they hoped for may not be apparent for a long time, if at all.

Diaspora

Diaspora refers to the dispersal of people from their homeland, and we have seen above several elements that are integral to a diaspora such as reasons for leaving and the places that they may end up in. However, an important part of any diaspora in terms of mental health and well-being is the reformulation of some semblance of community in the new host nations. The connections, bonds, and sense of self derived from the homeland do not simply disappear. The importance of the ability to bring people back together again is a vital one that has been discussed extensively (e.g., Bhandari, 2021; Hall, 1990). Nonetheless, when host nations consider the merits of a multicultural versus a colour-blind ideological preference this can affect upon whether individuals feel that they have the support of their host nation to form communities celebrating their heritage.

Where's Mental Health?

If you have read this far in the chapter and are asking yourself where the mental health discussions are, stop and think about what has been discussed so far. Imagine that you had gone through all these things; seeing your original life destroyed, embarking upon a perilous journey, and arriving at a destination that is not everything that you imagined it would be? You may have witnessed, or experienced, trauma on a scale unimaginable to many. How would your mental health be? It is fair to say that if you were to gather all the people in a refugee detention centre where people may be housed as their claims are processed you would likely hear stories of direct experience with just about every human experience imaginable.

This is one of the key drivers behind many organisations and their attempts to work with and help refugees, not just physically during their suffering but psychologically afterwards. My own governing body, the British Psychological Society, produced a policy document in 2018 setting out the particular needs of asylum seekers and refugees due to many of the issues set out above, and more and more nations are doing similar as they realise that the psychological needs of asylum seekers and refugees do not necessarily mirror those found in their own populations.

For example, whilst we can understand that someone who has experienced the trauma of losing loved ones in a violent way may be similar to models that we use in the host society, how do we deal with someone who has been politically persecuted and physically tortured by their own government in a way that is anachronistic within our own society. The notion that the sight of an official uniform, particularly if someone comes from a country where those in uniform may have been the cause of their suffering, may have a triggering effect upon that individual's mental health may not be one that we immediately consider. We have talked above about how heritage and culture are so important for a person's self-identity and well-being, but someone working in the UK supporting asylum-seekers and refugees may have little, if any, knowledge and understanding of the causes of the suffering in a country such as Syria or Eritrea for instance.

At the same time as trying to help asylum seekers and refugees with mental health support there are also the balances that need to be made between providing support for those from outside and those from the host culture. It is easy, particularly at this moment when we face economic hardship in our own society, to say 'we must look after our own first'. But surely, as humans, we should be doing what we can to look after each other regardless of where people come from, and many refugees are more in need of psychological support than most due to the nature of their experiences. There are a lot of people to blame for their plight - those in governments and groups across the world who make them flee in the first place, the criminals who profit from them as they try to escape - but the individual refugees themselves are blameless, victims of circumstances not of their own making. The philosopher John Rawls argued that we should approach everything from the position of a 'veil of ignorance' making moral decisions from the point of view that we could end up in the group most affected by that decision. If your life were turned upside down right now and you were forced to flee your country and go through what many refugees experience, how would you want a host country to treat you?

My final point relates to the future. As I said above, right now the US and Europe host the majority of asylum seekers and refugees; however, this is likely to change in terms of proportions over the next few years, partly relating to ideological pressures within these states as border controls become an ever-greater issue within these societies, but also as numbers inevitably continue to increase. Countries that have not traditionally been destinations for asylum seekers and refugees are likely to find themselves receiving far greater numbers, either through direct movement of people or through reciprocal arrangements with other nations. Some of these countries will be ill-equipped to deal with the psychological requirements of these asylum seekers and refugees; it can be argued that those countries that already experience this enforced migration are ill-equipped despite their many years of dealing with it. And so, it will be important for nations to prepare by providing psychological and mental health training for all those who may meet asylum seekers and refugees in the future to support them in the ways that help to integrate them into the host society. After all, this is an issue that is only going to increase in the coming years.

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