



FLEEING YOUR HOMELAND: THE IMPACTS ON REFUGEE PARENTS AND CHILDREN

**INFORMATION BROCHURE FOR FAMILIES, RELATIVES,
TEACHERS, HELPERS AND OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES**

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Fleeing – What are the possible consequences?

More than 60 Million people are fleeing worldwide. They left their native countries for several reasons: war, political persecution, suppression, ecological disasters and many others. Before, during and after the escape refugees can get in to situations, where they have to experience or see horrible things, which can have bad consequences for them. Parents usually try their very best to protect their children from experiencing bad things, but within the context of an escape they often cannot prevent this from happening. The parents are not to be blamed for this!

These refugees often saw horrible things in their native country *before they escaped*. Often these are the reasons why they leave their homes.

Also during their flight to safety, refugees can experience accidents, threats or dangerous situations that can be very trying and are hard to forget. Those memories can be very stressful.

When the way of escape is finally mastered, and the refugees have arrived in a foreign country, there can still be problems *after the escape*. First of all you have to get used to the new country because many things are unfamiliar and different from your home country. You need to learn a new language and get used to a new culture with different values.

All these challenges, which must be overcome before, during and after a flight, may be stressful even a long time after it. This is normal and happens to many people. However, every human being reacts differently to such onerous and stressful situations: some need no help, some need a little support or advice for a little time and some require help for a longer period of time, for example therapy with a therapist to master everyday life well again.

What can such an escape story look like?

This is Karim. He is nine years old and is from Afghanistan. Until three years ago he was living there with his parents and his younger sister Suna in a small village in the province of Faryab. He was a happy child and loved to play football with the other children outside.

Before fleeing:

One day it started that Karim had to watch the Taliban threatening his father, beating him or even torturing him. Karim was very terrified and worried about his father. When the Taliban suddenly attacked their village at night, he fled headlong with his family.



While fleeing:

Karim and his family did not have the time to take money, clothes or other things with them. They fled only with the clothes they wore and tried to leave the country as soon as possible. Usually they travelled at night because hiding was easier then. After many long and dangerous walks and journeys by car they reached the Iranian-Turkish border. They had hardly any food and water, and Karim always felt thirsty and hungry. Sometimes they met other families who gave them some food, but mostly they did not have anything and they often starved.



In Turkey, the family continued their journey secretly on a truck directly to Istanbul. Karim and his family stayed there for one year. They hid in a small room and all of them had to work secretly to pay the rent. Karim was working all day long in a shoe factory – a work many other children had to do, too. At night he could not sleep well because he constantly feared that someone could discover them.



After one year, the family had saved enough money to be brought across the Mediterranean to Greece by human smugglers in a rubber boat. There were still another 20 people on the small boat Karim's family was on. When a storm was coming up, some people fell out of the boat and drowned in the Mediterranean. Karim's family managed to make it to Greece. They were glad that nothing happened to them. In Greece, they had to live on the road for several months, bagging for food and water.



After a total of two years fleeing they were brought to Germany by human smugglers.

After fleeing:

Today Karim is in second grade. He is getting accustomed to the German culture, the cold weather and the language, but he has still difficulties understanding his teachers and his classmates.

At home, he sleeps badly, he cannot concentrate well and learning is difficult for him. Sometimes he is very sad and wants to be alone. But when he's all right, he is happy to play football with friends - just as he did in Afghanistan.



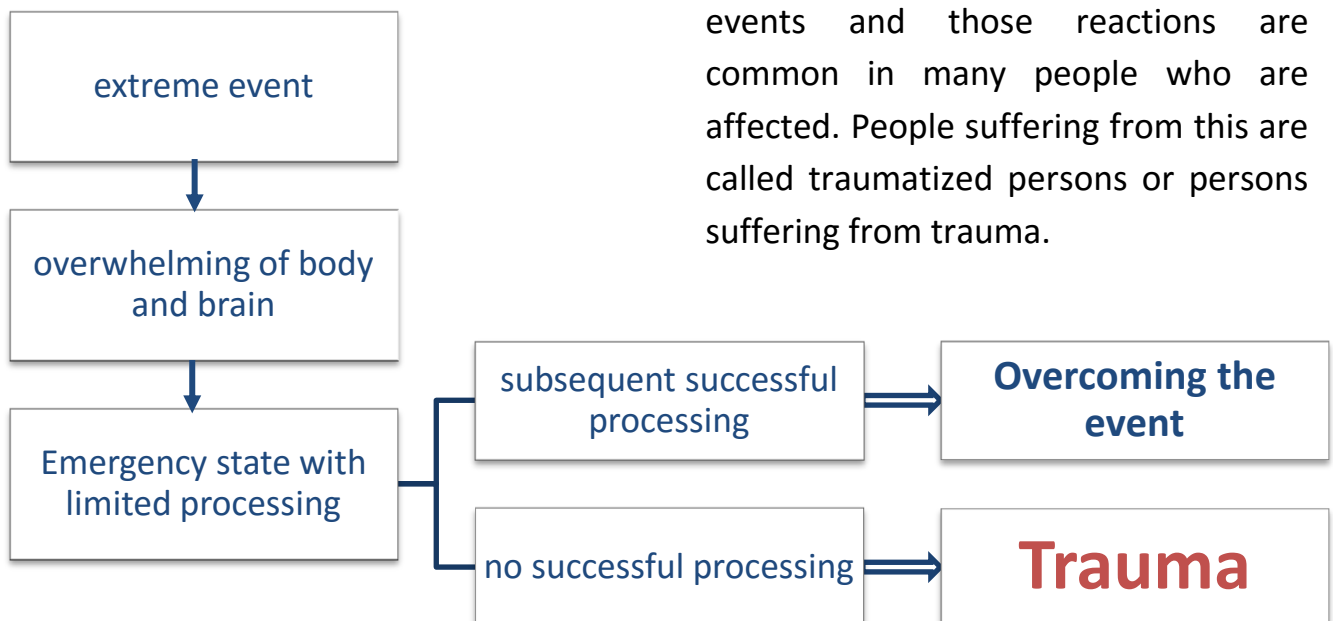
What is a trauma?

A trauma is a terrifying event in the past with consequences up to the present / future. It relates to a profound psychological injury that can have psychological and physical symptoms as consequences (Liedl, Schäfer & Knaevelsrud, 2013).

There are situations that can be so severe that you feel totally helpless and powerless. This may for example be an accident that you experienced or observed, a natural disaster or a violent attack. Such a terrible situation **overwhelms our body**, so that it regulates down to a "state of emergency" in order to function in the situation so that you can survive.

Only when the situation is over can you assimilate the experience and often it is only once the experience is over that you can begin to realize what just happened.

Depending on how often someone experiences a traumatic event or how bad such an event is for the person, these events **cannot be processed adequately**, so that they induce great fear which persist even a long time after the situation. This prevents the person from continuing life in a normal way. This is normal after traumatic events and those reactions are common in many people who are affected. People suffering from this are called traumatized persons or persons suffering from trauma.



A trauma as a wound...

You can easily compare a trauma with a wound that you have suffered in the past (from Liedl, Schäfer & Knaevelsrud, 2013).

<i>OPEN WOUND</i>	<i>TRAUMA</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ If you have just cut yourself, the wound is bleeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ If you experienced something terrible, you have great anxiety and fear and you are mentally very hurt.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Then you have to care well about the wound, you have to look at it, clean it and dress your wound.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ You can let the trauma rest for a while, you can also look at the trauma again and – if it has healed well – let it rest.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ It takes time until the wound heals completely. This can be helpful: bed rest, cleaning the wound, ask a doctor for help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Also a trauma takes time to „cure“.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Sometimes it is helpful to re-open the wound and clean it (which then hurts).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Sometimes a trauma does not heal by itself. Possibly you have to talk about the trauma again (which can also hurt, because you re-experience anxiety and fear), but after that it is usually better.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Social contact feels good: it is helpful when somebody is there who cares for you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Also with trauma social contact is helpful. If you feel afraid or strange, it helps to talk to others to be distracted or simply be hugged.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Even if the wound has completely healed, scars may remain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ If the trauma is overcome, „scars“ can remain. This means, that you are sometimes reminded again about it or that it can still hurt sometime.

The most common mental illness that can occur as a result of a trauma, is called **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a delayed and persistent response to such a stressful event.

What are symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder?

People who have been traumatized typically show different behaviors or reactions because the brain was not able to process the experiences that occurred during the traumatic situation.

Such an emergency leading to **reduced functions of the brain** can cause lapses of memory so that the person cannot remember exactly what has happened.

The phenomenon of not being able to remember the event at all is called amnesia. This occurs in order to protect the person: The memory of the event would be too painful and distressing.

It may happen that **pictures or other memories** (for example, a smell or a sound) of a situation **appear suddenly** and the person has the feeling of experiencing the traumatic event again although this is not what is really happening. These memories may also emerge in the form of nightmares and are associated with psychological distress and physical reactions.

In addition, traumatized people often **avoid** everything that could possibly either lead to a repetition of the traumatic experience or to a memory of it. For example, they go a long way round in order to not pass a place where they have experienced something bad, or they avoid thoughts and feelings that are connected to the trauma.

Another attempt to protect oneself is an **extreme vigilance**. That makes sense inasmuch as the body is always ready to deal with threats. But this high vigilance is often accompanied by

- **sleep problems,**
- **irritability,**
- **aggressiveness,**
- **restlessness,**
- **nervousness and**
- **concentration problems.**

Summarized: Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder:

- **Re-experiencing**
- **Avoiding**
- **Emotional symptoms**
- **Increased physiological arousal**

Post-traumatic stress disorder in children and adolescents

Children and adolescents who have been fleeing and are traumatized usually show the same symptoms as adults. But there are some characteristics in which they differ from traumatized adults.

At school: At school traumatized children often have difficulties in concentrating and paying attention to the teacher. This can happen because of memories emerging suddenly which makes them restless and afraid. Therefore, it often occurs that children achieve lower grades at school after having experienced trauma.

Development: Sometimes a child appears much younger after a trauma because it suddenly behaves inadequately for its age and seems to be set back in its development. Likewise, it can also happen that a child suddenly behaves like an adult.

Play behavior: It often happens that children cope with their experiences in their games and images and play "war" or paint pictures of horrible scenes.

Withdraw: It's also possible that children act normally and seem to be happy although they have actually experienced very bad things. That may be the case when they repress the memory of the traumatic situation. It can be hard when the memory someday suddenly reappears and is experienced heavily.

Future: In adolescents, a negative view of the future is frequently observed after a trauma. They are hopeless and sometimes overwhelmed with making plans for their own future.

All these reactions are normal after a traumatic event. Many children and adolescents who suffer from a post-traumatic stress disorder feel the same.

When do these symptoms occur?

The brain of a person who experiences trauma is usually not able to process the trauma adequately. Thus it happens that the brain confuses different individual memories of the trauma. It connects parts of the memory with feelings and thoughts that actually do not belong together.

That's why it can happen that random objects (or sounds, smells, physical

conditions such as hunger, thirst, lack of sleep) which were also present during the traumatic situation are being associated with negative feelings such as anxiety and tension.

Persons can feel set back into the traumatic situation and may lose touch with reality.

Memory as a closet

Usually, the brain stores memories in a very ordered way. It can be imagined like a closet: old memories are placed in above while more recent memories are sorted below. When you open the closet, everything is tidied up. You can easily take out a certain thing and close the closet again.





In individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder sorting does not work well. **Their brain just puts the traumatic memories randomly into the closet without sorting them.** This is why the closet gets messy and when it is opened, everything will fall out. The closet sometimes cannot be closed again because something blocks or overhangs. It is therefore important to sort memories so that all of them are in their place again and the closet can be opened or closed as needed.

How can a traumatized child's behavior look like?

With his class, Karim makes an excursion to the zoo.

Unfortunately, he forgot that they would come back late in the evening and therefore took just a little bit of water and only one piece of bread with him. In the afternoon, his bottle of water is already empty and lunch has been some hours ago. So Karim is very hungry and thirsty. When his friend Thomas scares him in fun, Karim responds very strangely: He begins to tremble and cry, tries to batter Thomas and gets in trouble with his teacher.

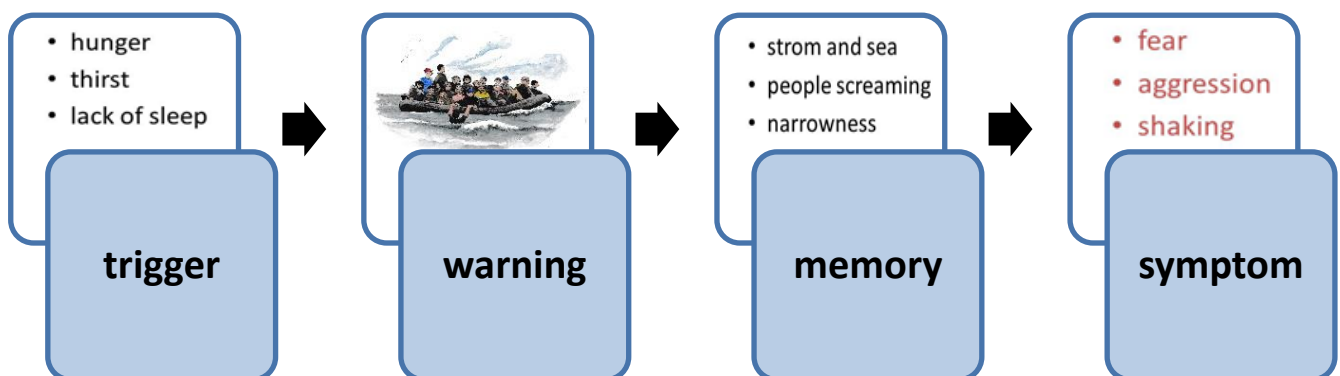


What has happened to Karim?

Karim has experienced many bad things during fleeing and was living in constant fear that the Taliban might find him and his family. During this time, Karim's family **did not have enough to eat and drink**, so Karim was often hungry and thirsty.

In the zoo, Karim has accidentally got into a similar physical condition as during fleeing: He was hungry and thirsty.

For Karim's brain, hunger and thirst are conditions that warn him of possibly being re-exposed to a dangerous situation. Through this trigger, Karim's brain felt set back into the situation of fleeing and tried to react to this perceived threat with fear and aggression.



Triggers

During the course of fleeing, most people experience periods of time with a lack of food and water or they cannot sleep enough because they need to be awake and vigilant all the time.

So did Karim and his family feel like during their escape, for example when they had to hide out.

In people who have been traumatized by certain events while fleeing, **hunger, thirst and lack of sleep** can be so-called triggers for the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

When a person is exposed to hunger, thirst and lack of sleep again after fleeing, there is a higher risk of remembering and re-experiencing. This can be very stressful.

However, for each person there may be very different and individual triggers that can cause memories of a traumatic event.



What can be done?

Persons who suffer from a posttraumatic stress disorder should look for help. In Germany, people who can help children and young people in such a situation are called "child and adolescent psychotherapists" (*"Kinder- und Jugendlichenpsychotherapeuten"*) or "child and adolescent psychiatrist" (*"Kinder- und Jugendlichenpsychiater"*).

Psychotherapeutic treatment methods are very successful in trauma and have been evaluated in many studies to be effective for improving symptoms. Even if they are not culturally adapted to certain groups, they seem to work well in young refugees from different cultural backgrounds (Anders & Christiansen, 2016; Eberle Sejari, Nocon & Rosner, 2015).

If you or your child need psychotherapeutic help, you can contact the following addresses:

For children and adolescents:

Kinder- und Jugendlichen-Psychotherapie-Ambulanz Marburg (KJ-PAM)

Department of Psychology (Philipps-Universität Marburg)

Frankfurter Str. 35

35037 Marburg

You will find us on the first floor (above the *Sparkasse*).

Phone (secretariat): +49 6421 28 25096

Fax: +49 6421 166 72 96

E-Mail: kiju04@staff.uni-marburg.de

For adults:

Psychotherapie-Ambulanz Marburg (PAM)

Department of Psychology (Philipps-Universität Marburg)

Gutenbergstraße 18

35032 Marburg

You will find us on the third floor. There is an elevator.

Phone (secretariat): 06421 - 282 - 3657

Fax: 06421 - 282 - 8904

E-Mail: pam@uni-marburg.de

Low-threshold help:

Regardless of whether there is a "full" post-traumatic stress disorder, it is helpful to be aware of the personal triggers.

When children are traumatized by events while fleeing, it may even be helpful when affected children eat, drink and sleep enough.



By meeting these basic needs, a sense of security can be given to the children so that symptoms of trauma disorder don't occur easily.

Advice:

- Be sure that your child has breakfast in the morning and drinks enough.
- Give your child food and drink for school.
- Your child should have enough sleep and go to school well rested. In case of sleep disorder, the advice below (*sleep hygiene*) can be helpful.
- By receiving warmth and closeness from you, your child will feel more secure and safe.



eat
drink
sleep

Mentally distressed refugees can often cause tensions **in the classroom** and be distressing for their classmates and the teachers. Teachers should make sure to establish rules and a clear framework for the pupils in order to allow a feeling of safety and predictability.

Sleep hygiene for children



There is a number of ways how **falling asleep and sleeping** in children can be improved:

- **Regularity:** Make sure that there is a fixed bedtime as well as a certain time to awaken. Also a regulated daily routine and plenty of fresh air are good for healthy sleep.
- **Consistent rituals** before going to bed (bedtime stories, listening to music, bathing, reading, ...) can promote sleep and the preparation of the body for sleeping.
- Even if your child cannot sleep, you should not play with him at night. **The night should only be reserved for sleep.**
- **Bed is a place to sleep.** Make sure that it is only used for sleeping so that children can learn the direct link between bed and sleep. During the day, children should not spend time in bed.

Literature

Liedl, A., Schäfer, U. & Knaevelsrud, C. (2013). *Psychoedukation bei posttraumatischen Störungen*. Stuttgart: Schattauer.

Steinhausen, H. (2010). Belastungs- und Anpassungsstörungen. In *Psychische Störungen bei Kindern und Jugendlichen* (S. 233-243). München: Elsevier.

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Anders, M. & Christansen, H. (in press). Unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge. Eine systematische Übersicht über psychologische Interventionen. *Kindheit und Entwicklung*.

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