

# SYSTEMIC SUPPORT

*For Those Displaced by War and  
Oppression*



Briefly look at how the project developed

Describe some of the ideas that we were introducing into the workshops

Talk about some of the themes that emerged

## THE PLAN

# Impetus

- Experience from my own heritage
- A desire to support initiatives of kindness that break down the 'othering' that can happen in a society or communities feeling under threat.
- A desire to make the scope and influence of systemic ideas more widely available
- Frontline19
- Helen Bamber



*“Better to light one candle  
than to curse the darkness”*

*How could our world of  
Systemic  
Psychotherapy best  
respond*

*Repeatedly in the testimony of survivors there comes a moment when a sense of connection is restored by another person's unaffected display of generosity. Something in herself that the victim believes to be irretrievably destroyed---faith, decency, courage---is reawakened by an example of common altruism. Mirrored in the actions of others, the survivor recognizes and reclaims a lost part of herself. At that moment, the survivor begins to rejoin the human commonality..."*

Judith Herman

[Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror](#)

# Why systemic psychotherapists

- We work with relationships – typically with families and communities
- We consider multiple contexts in our work – including culture – many of us are experienced in working cross-culturally
- We are interested in exploring connections – how these work and what helps them work.
- And in doing this, we pay attention to difference - how difference informs the way systems interact and how people connect and communicate.
- We are a strengths-based approach looking in our work to help create contexts that bring forth strengths and resources

# Being curious about difference – striving for cultural competence with refugees

- Distress may be displayed differently across cultures
- Help-seeking may take a different form
- Health beliefs may differ from those of the dominant culture
- How symptoms are displayed may impact on diagnosis & therapeutic intervention

## What we do

We try and support the “*unaffected display of generosity*”

Small teams around the country -

- Help to create Communities of Support, Contexts that enhance good safe, connections
- Liaise with refugee agencies/resettlement officers and offer workshops for hosts
- To help hosts prepare for the role of hosting, to help hosts through different stages of hosting and with specific issues – trauma, children.
- Offer an uncritical space for hosts to meet, share, consider their offer and experience – the challenges and the rewards- and support each other
- Provide information, tips, advice - Psychoeducation



- The challenges for hosts and guests
- Creating helpful boundaries and house rules
- Understanding and working with cultural and family differences
- Communication and resolving differences
- Accommodating to different parenting styles
- Thinking about the needs of children in the joint household
- Understanding and responding to distress and trauma
- Looking after yourself
- When and how to seek help.

# Example of material 1

- Inviting hosts to consider what 'helpfulness' means to them
- Introducing new lenses through which to investigate and maybe adapt their beliefs about what it means to be helpful

## BEING HELPFUL

In opening your homes to people in distress, you are, on the one hand, doing something very simple which is to provide them with a temporary home, a refuge.

On the other hand, you are doing something which is more complex, that is

helping your guests, who may have lost everything, including loved ones, begin to reclaim their lives and their dignity.

‘Doing with’ rather than ‘Doing To’

CONSULT, COLLABORATE, NEGOTIATE

- Your guests have had busy and rich lives as adults, parents, employees and employers. They are so much more than displaced people or refugees.
- Collaboration allows for a more reciprocal relationship and reduces the likelihood of ‘challenges’ that may seem to emerge from nowhere.

# Adapting “Being helpful”

Being constantly ‘grateful’ is exhausting and undermining and no-one can keep it up.

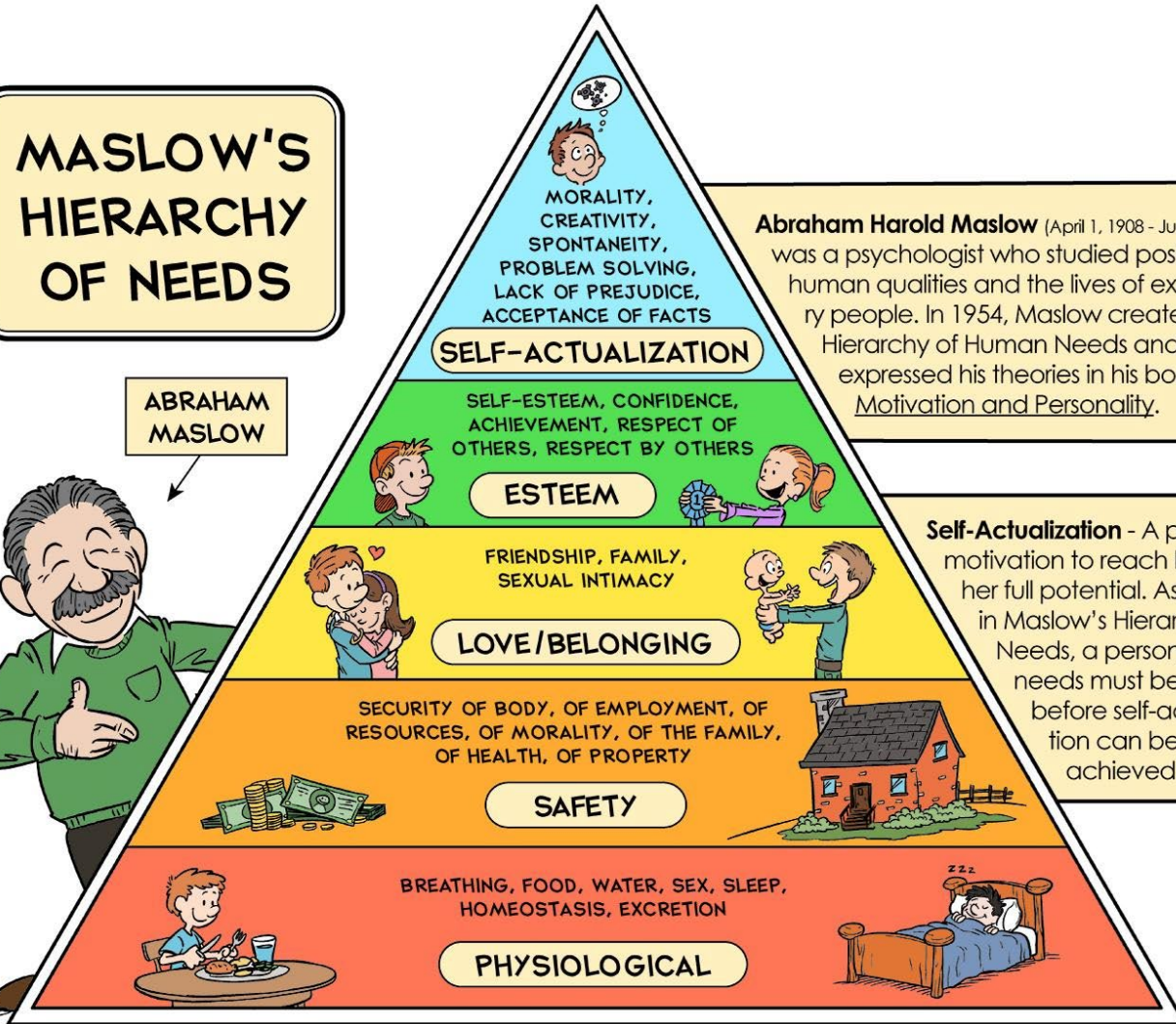
Consulting guests defers to their expertise about their own family, restores their dignity and helps them to feel more in charge of their lives again.

## Example of material 2

What does it mean to help someone feel  
psychologically safe

# MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

ABRAHAM MASLOW



**Abraham Harold Maslow** (April 1, 1908 - June 8, 1970) was a psychologist who studied positive human qualities and the lives of exemplary people. In 1954, Maslow created the Hierarchy of Human Needs and expressed his theories in his book, *Motivation and Personality*.

**Self-Actualization** - A person's motivation to reach his or her full potential. As shown in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a person's basic needs must be met before self-actualization can be achieved.

# CLARITY

Knowing the rules and boundaries. Not having to tip-toe around working them out and feeling apprehensive about getting things “wrong”

(Things like noise/quiet, bedtimes, bathroom times – use of hot water, kitchen cleanliness - are all important).



# STRUCTURE

Getting the balance between adapting to your guests whilst keeping to your routines and everyday tasks, habits etc, is tricky but valuable.

The regular aspects of your everyday life can help guests whose lives have been subject to chaos, to feel secure, specially knowing that the life of the house and the family is not being turned upside down by their arrival.

# LISTENING

All therapies – for grief, for trauma, for loss - are rooted in listening;

Not asking lots of questions, not giving advice, not sharing one's own experiences, not saying things that sound comforting but aren't necessarily true "It will all be all right now" -

Just listening and acknowledging.

Remember though about your own boundaries and avoid being overwhelmed.

# Example of material 3

## TRAUMA

- Trauma is the response to an event – not the event itself
- Memories of the traumatising event can be blocked out so the sufferer may not know why they are feeling as they do.
- Trauma is often experienced in the body as an ailment, pain etc

- 'Trauma' is a word often used inaccurately
- Being distressed, bereaved, displaced is not the same as being traumatised.
- Different people respond differently to traumatising events

Our nervous system continually evaluates risk and prioritises adaptive behaviours for survival

- The same event can trigger different reactions in different people
- It is not a cognitive phenomenon
- It happens outside our conscious awareness.

# How Trauma Can Manifest generally

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Confusion
- Anger, irritability, mood swings.
- Anxiety and fear.
- Guilt, shame, self-blame.
- Withdrawal
- Feeling sad or hopeless.
- Feeling disconnected or numb.
- Disbelief, Denial
- ‘Sitting staring at a wall’

# Common reactions in babies and toddlers

- Unusually high levels of distress when separated from their parent or primary carer
- A kind of 'frozen watchfulness' – the child may have a 'shocked' look
- Giving the appearance of being numb and not showing their feelings or seeming a bit 'cut off' from what is happening around them
- Loss of playful and engaging smiling and 'coo-ing' behaviour
- Loss of eating skills
- Avoiding eye contact
- Being more unsettled and much more difficult to soothe
- Slipping back in their physical skills such as sitting, crawling or walking and appearing more clumsy.

# Trauma Symptoms in Pre-School Children

- Fear of the dark
- Bad dreams
- Nightmares without recognized content
- Waking from sleep
- Separation anxiety
- Irritable behaviour and angry outbursts towards people or objects



# Trauma Symptoms in School Age Children and Young People

- Hyper-alertness
- Disproportional Guilt
- Panic Attacks
- Complicated Bereavement
- Depression
- Behavioural Disorders

# Experience of trauma can mean

- Feeling out of control
- A possible need to be continually vigilant
- An emotional reaction can appear to emerge out of the blue without an obvious lead up

# Avoid questioning re trauma

- Don't ask direct questions about the trauma your guests have experienced – it can re-traumatise them.
- They will tell you what they want you to know in their own time - be led by them.
- Remember anything they tell you is their story to tell, not yours.

## Recovery from trauma requires time:

- Connection
  - Time alone
- Routine and structure,
  - Being listened to,
- High parental support and family cohesion
  - Regaining confidence,
- Regaining a sense of belief in one's judgement
  - Self-reported support from friends
  - Self-reported positive school experience

## Example of material 4

### CHILDREN

- Support your guests' parental authority. This may have been eroded by the vulnerability of the experience thus far
- Children who speak English may enjoy the role of interpreter, but don't rely on this continually. It can undermine parents and give children extra unnecessary responsibility.

Children often carry a great weight of responsibility in their heads when they know their parents are in distress.

This can compound their fears and anxiety.  
It may be helpful for them to see that there are now other adults supporting the family and their parent/mother

## SLOW DOWN THE PROCESS OF LIFE DECISIONS AND ACTIONS - EXPLAIN

It may well be helpful for children to know what will be happening and what the adults will be doing at home whilst they are at school, so they can go to school feeling reassured that life is settling down.

# Themes arising

- Cultural differences – childcare, communication
- Sense of hosts' responsibility. 6 month term – coming to an end and nowhere for guests to go.
- Dignity and Shame - Sense of shame hosts can feel at struggling at all when guests have suffered so much
- Variability of connection – guests fixed to phone, media
- Variability of services – Urban versus rural, mediation, schools, meet ups for guests and hosts separately
- Tension hosts struggle with around degree of support they should give
- Responding to distress signals. When to ask for help,



# Examples

- Mother pre-occupied with phone and news of war, leaves children alone – host becomes child carer and gets cross. Sends guest an email.
- Account from outraged village elder of story of a Ukrainian guest who let her young child cross bus road unaccompanied.
- Host who takes guest's children to school every day and says one day to hosting organizer 'I need to go back to work ' Organizer says 'you shouldn't have been doing this anyway'

- Host who cooks every meal 'I don't let anyone else use my kitchen'
- Children who won't go to school and cling to their mother
- Hosts who are nervous of setting boundaries - woman finds guest and children in her kitchen and creeps off upstairs
- Children who are anxiously responsible 'parentified' and boys trying to step in to their absent fathers' shoes

Fazel, M., Reed, R., Stein, A., (2015) Refugee, asylum-seeking and internally displaced children and adolescents. In Rutter's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (ed. A Thapar, DS Pine, JF Leckman, S Scott, MJ Snowling and E Taylor), Chap 44, 583-585.

Fazel, M. (2018) Psychological and Psychosocial Interventions for Refugee Children Resettled in High-Income countries. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Stress* 27, 117-123.