

April 23, 2025

# Navigating Difficult Conversations with Clients

**switchboard**  
connecting resettlement experts



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## Today's Speakers



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Training Officer,  
Switchboard



**Danica Pucci**

Training Officer,  
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## Today's Panelists



**Chuni Lu**

Senior Program Officer,  
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**Ian Williams**

Program Officer,  
Housing Partnerships



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## Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

1

### RECOGNIZE

ongoing resettlement challenges that require difficult conversations between clients and providers

2

### IDENTIFY

key communication skills and specific phrases that help maintain supportive, respectful conversations for both clients and providers

3

### APPLY

a trauma-informed and compassionate approach to current client and service provision challenges



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# Addressing Client and Staff Challenges with Trauma-Informed Care

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Share one or two words that describe the biggest challenges in resettlement work today.

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## Factors That Affect Staff



- Large caseloads **complicate case management** and **strain client interactions**
- These factors lead to **burnout, loss of meaning in work,** and **compassion fatigue**
- Staff risk high trauma exposure from **secondary traumatic stress** and **vicarious trauma**



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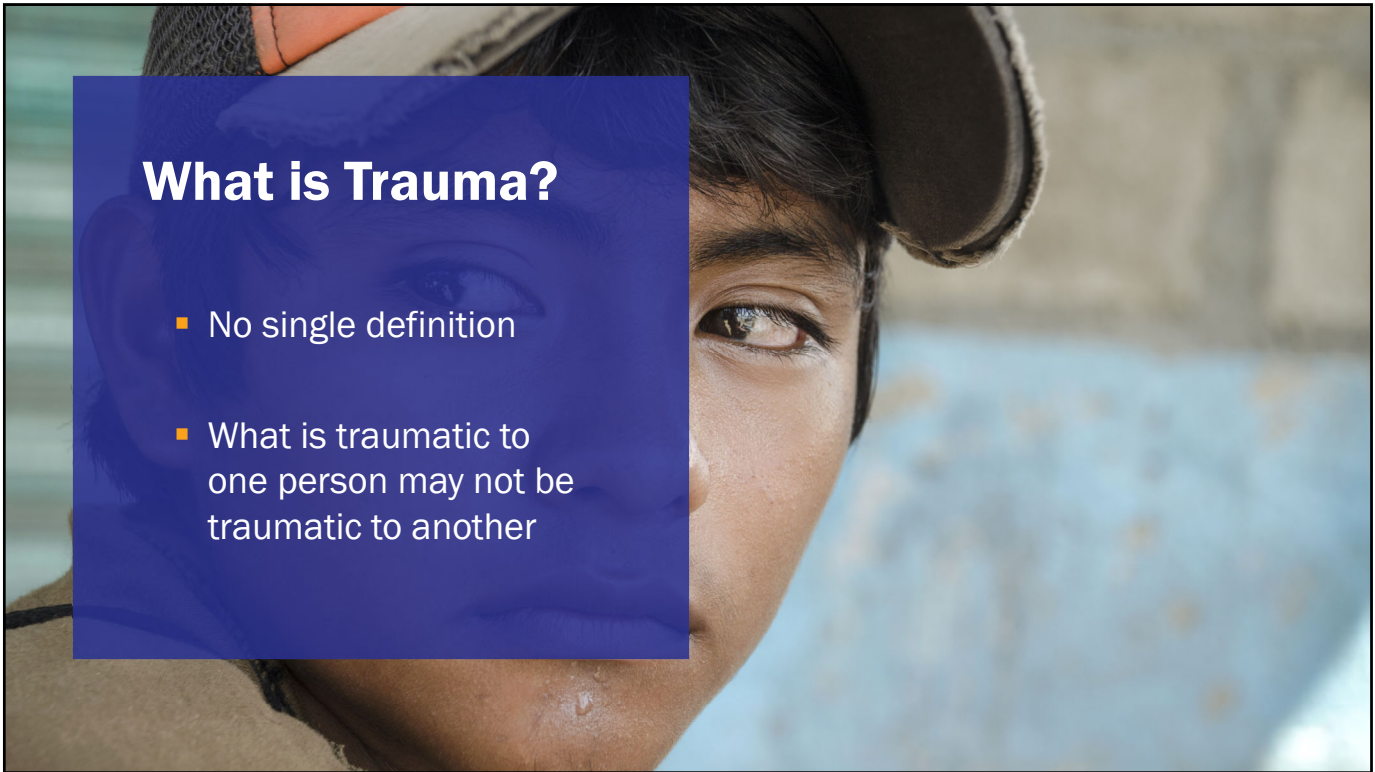
## Economic and Housing Challenges



- **Difficult to align** client needs and desires with availability/access
- Impacts **client safety, self-sufficiency,** and **emotional well-being** (feelings of self-worth and dignity)



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## What is Trauma?

- No single definition
- What is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another

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## What is Trauma?





**May be...**

- deeply disturbing, frightening, or life-threatening
- outside of what would be considered “ordinary” or “normal”

**May result in...**

- feelings of being overwhelmed, helpless, or at someone else’s control or mercy
- short-term or long-term negative physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual impacts

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## Having Difficult Conversations with Clients

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What is one challenge or difficult situation you've encountered recently while speaking with clients?

① Start presenting to display the poll results on this slide.

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## Setting Up the Conversation



### Set the stage

- Offer a glass of water
- Ensure the room is comfortable
- Show you care by checking in

### This helps clients by:

- Reducing uncertainty
- Restoring a sense of power and control
- Guiding them in processing information and normalizing their reactions
- (It also benefits **staff** in building rapport and trust with clients)



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## Strategies for Difficult Conversations



Remember that  
silence is okay

Notice your own  
reactions and  
body language

Stay calm and  
co-regulate



Seek  
Supervisor  
Support

End or  
Reschedule  
Conversation

Make  
Referrals

Ask reflective and  
open-ended  
questions

Keep language  
simple and  
respectful; consider  
paraverbal

Minimize potential  
crowd

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## Mindfulness: STOP




**Stop or  
Slow  
Down**



**Take a  
Breath**



**Observe**



**Proceed**

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## Referral Steps When Needed



1

**Consent**

2

**Validate and  
Normalize**

3

**Acknowledge  
Client Strengths**

4

**Explore Client's  
Background,  
Culture, and  
Context**

5

**Offer Education  
and Resources**

6

**Encourage  
Choice and  
Empowerment**

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## Using Interpretation in Difficult Conversations

- Explain the role of the interpreter
- Reinforce confidentiality
- Provide a framework for successful interpretation (e.g., explain pauses)
- Create space for additional critical information or clarification



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## Practical Skills: Active Listening



### Paraphrase

Demonstrate understanding, use client's own words when possible

### Express Empathy

Find points of connection, honor the individual client



### Summarize

Clarify conversation and any possible miscommunications

### Notice Non-Verbal Cues

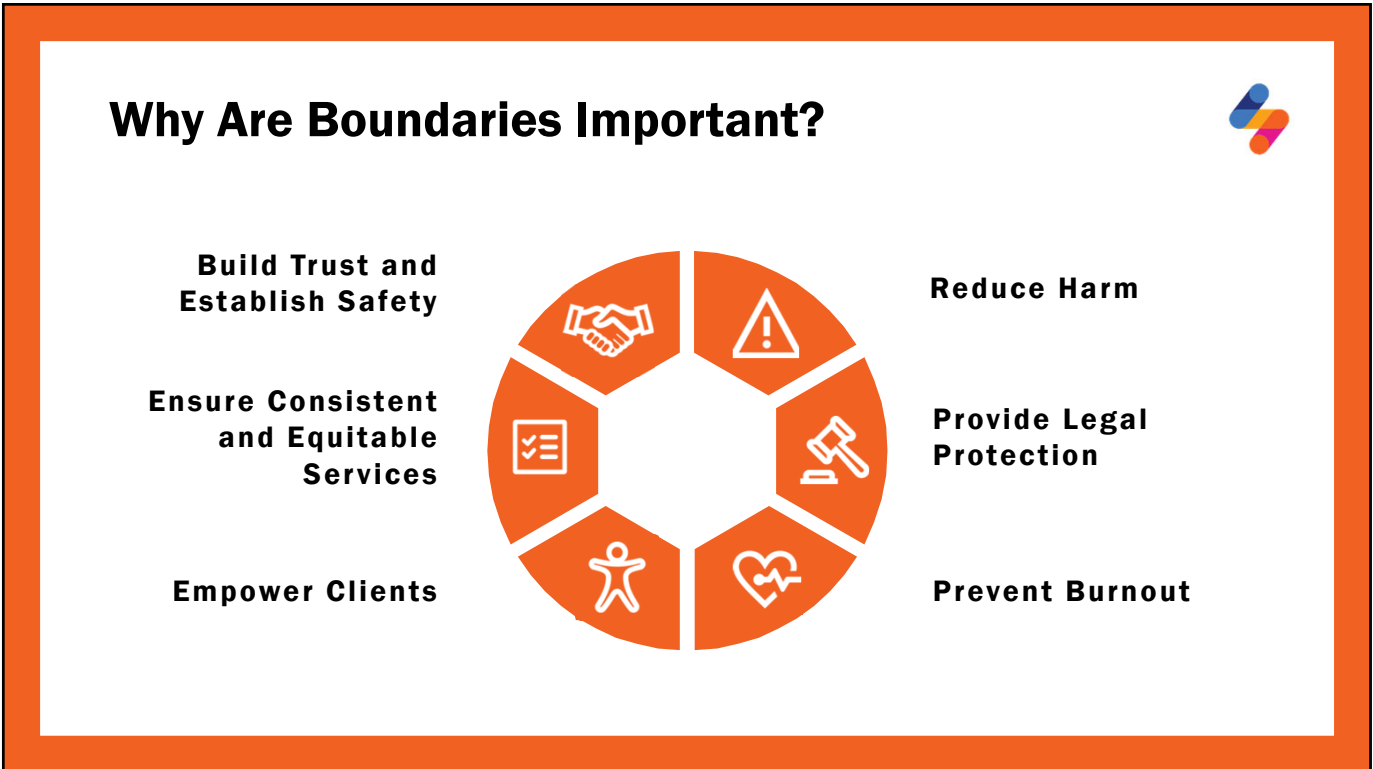
Consider cultural norms, e.g., eye contact, body language

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**Having difficult conversations includes setting boundaries.**

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## Setting Clear Boundaries



1

Limit self-disclosure and sharing of personal details

2

Keep physical contact to a minimum

3

Stay within the scope of your role

4

Treat all clients equally, and consistently enforce rules

5

Follow organizational policies around accepting gifts, food, and drink

6

Seek support from supervisors when needed

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## Setting Boundaries Respectfully



"I'm hearing that finding a new apartment is really important to you and your family. **Unfortunately, I am not able to help with that.** I would be happy to **refer you to someone else who may be able to help.**"

"I know that would help you a lot. I wish I could help you search for better employment. **But I am not able to. My job is to focus on \_\_\_\_.** I would love to refer you to \_\_\_\_ who can help you search for a better job."

### Guidelines:

- Validate the concern
- Set the limit
- Provide an explanation
- Offer an alternative

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## Trauma-Informed Approach and Case Scenarios

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### Trauma-Informed Approach



- Considers trauma's **physical, emotional, and spiritual** impact
- Identifies trauma signs in **behavior, relationships, and dynamics**
- Builds **positive, restorative relationships**
- Embraces a **holistic** client approach
- Minimizes trauma **triggers**

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## Benefits of Trauma-Informed Care



- 


Improves client engagement in services and enhances client outcomes
- 

Fosters safe environments for all clients and staff
- 


Improves staff wellness and reduces burnout

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## The Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care



**Safety**



**Collaboration and Mutuality**

**Trustworthiness and Transparency**

**Empowerment, Voice, and Choice**

**Peer Support**

**Cultural and Contextual Issues**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014, July). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach (HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884). <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4884.pdf>

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## Examples of Trauma-Informed Responses



“I cannot continue this conversation if you are disrespectful. That is one of our agreements in the client rights and responsibilities. I’m sorry you’re feeling discriminated against. I would love to speak more about your concerns calmly.”

*Clients may need resources to meet their immediate needs and may be unsure of whom to trust. Resist thinking that clients’ behaviors are manipulative.*

“Many clients we support have experienced what you are experiencing. We know it’s hard, and we are here to help you navigate this difficulty.”

“No problem, I can explain again. Unfortunately, your services in this program are now coming to an end...”

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## Case Scenario: Miguel, Sinola, and Esperanza





Miguel, Sinola, and their daughter Esperanza (19) are from Cuba. They arrived in the U.S. two months ago. Miguel was an accountant in Cuba, and Sinola worked at a restaurant near their home. Esperanza is determined to go to school and has told their case worker that she does not want to work. Miguel wants to work but only in an accounting job, to avoid wasting his education and experience. Over the last two months,

his employment specialist presented him a few entry-level positions that he turned down. Sinola was also offered two job interviews but turned them down. The family is nearing the end of their employment service period with no job prospects in sight. The family is distressed and angry and begins telling their case manager that they need to do more for them.

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**Describe how you would use a principle of trauma-informed care to respond to the family's distress and anger.**

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**What might you say or what action would you take to carry out this trauma-informed principle?**

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## Case Scenario: Ahmed and Sara's family



Ahmed, Sara, and their three children—Kaheld (7), Noora (3), and Kareem (1)—are refugees from Syria who just arrived in the U.S. one week ago.

Ahmed and Sara are extremely unsatisfied with their new home. During your first home visit, told you that it needs to be much bigger, cleaner, and closer to downtown. They do not like the neighborhood they are in and feel uncomfortable with the

neighbors they've seen. They demand that you find them a different home.



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**How can you establish clear boundaries with Ahmed and Sara that are safe and supportive to both them and you as their case worker?**

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What are you taking away from today's training?

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# Today's Panelists



**Chuni Lu**

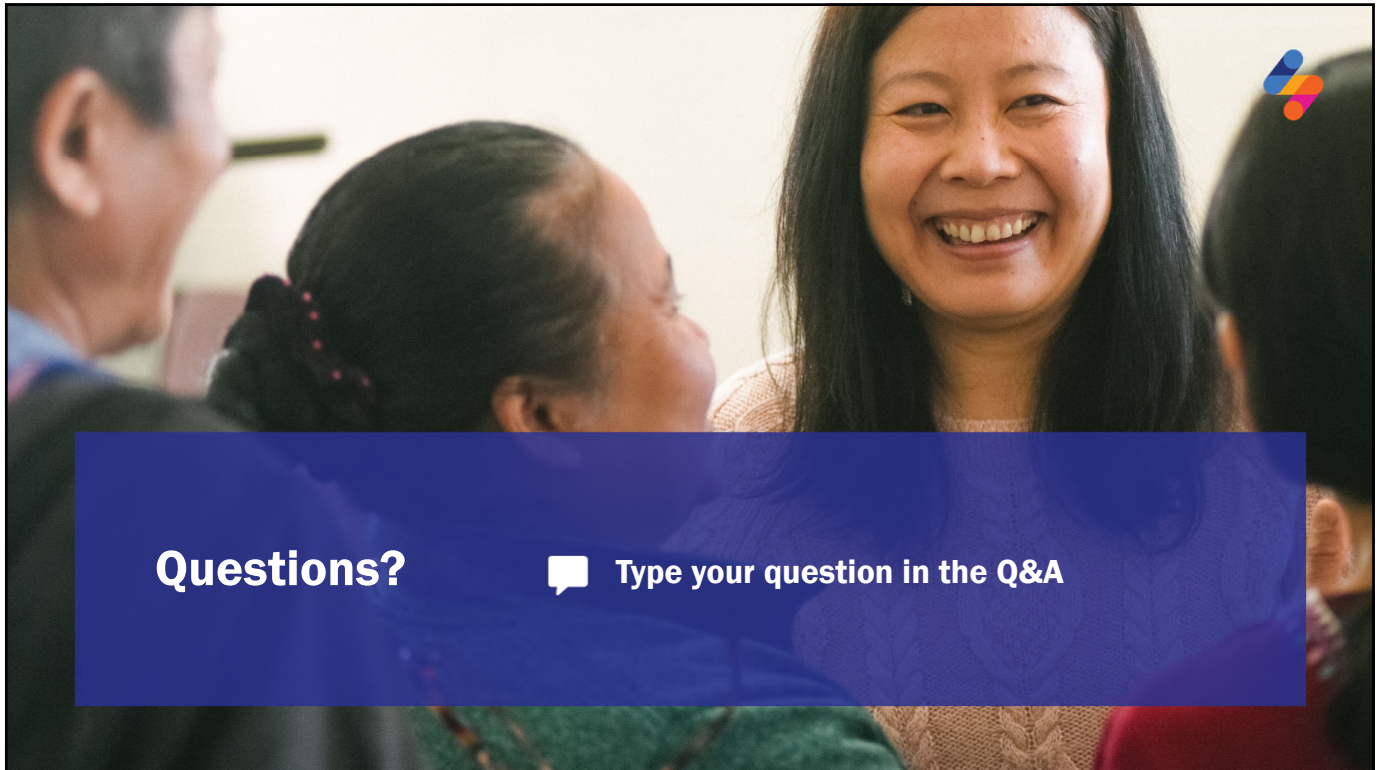
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## Help us help you!

Scan the QR code or click the link in the chat to access our feedback survey:

- Six questions
- 60 seconds
- Help us improve future training and technical assistance



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## Recommended Resources

### Switchboard

- **Guide:** [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers](#) (2023)
- **Guide:** [Preventing Crises and De-Escalating Difficult Situations with Newcomer Clients](#) (2023)
- **Archived Webinar:** [Trauma-Informed Care in Case Management](#) (2022)
- **Tool:** [Sample Housing Onboarding Guide](#) (2024)
- **Blog:** [Managing Newcomers' Housing Expectations](#) (2023)
- **Info Guide:** [Job Development in Times of Economic Hardship](#) (2021)
- **Video and Facilitation Guide:** [Adjusting to Life in the U.S.: Advice from Clients to Case Managers](#) (2020)
- **E-Learning:** [Introduction to Working With Interpreters](#) (2023)

### International Rescue Committee (IRC)

- **E-Learning:** [Empathic Communication in Resettlement, Asylum, & Integration Settings](#) and [De-Escalation in Resettlement, Asylum, & Integration Settings](#) (2021)



### Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers

Trauma-informed care is a practice that requires constant attention, awareness, sensitivity, and transformational change within organizational cultures.<sup>1</sup> While there is no simple checklist or one-size-fits-all approach, common principles and guiding practices of trauma-informed care can inform resettlement and integration services. This information guide describes some of these key principles and practices for refugee service providers, including case managers or those in similar roles, seeking to integrate trauma-informed care into their work.

#### What is trauma?

Trauma is a complex concept with many definitions. Essentially, trauma refers to the psychological, emotional, or physical responses to an event that is deeply disturbing, frightening, or life-threatening. Traumatic experiences can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leaving short-term or long-term negative physical, emotional, psychological, and/or spiritual impacts.

To better understand trauma, it is helpful to be aware of the **fight/flight/freeze response**. When a person experiences a potentially traumatic event, the body initiates an automatic response to protect them from danger and threat. Through these instinctive responses, the brain instructs the body to react in a way that is most likely to ensure survival—through fighting back, running away, or staying extremely quiet and still to avoid detection. When the threat has passed, the body then initiates a cycle of release and restoration.

<sup>1</sup> SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. (2014, July). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). <https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/trauma-informed-care>

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