

Caring for diverse populations

A resource for GPs supporting people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds



Executive Summary

This resource provides guidance for GPs to deliver trauma-informed, culturally safe and person-centred care to refugee and asylum seeker patients during Mental Health Treatment Plans (MHTPs).

Resources and Referrals

- Interpreter services information
- Visa types and Medicare eligibility overview
- Referrals to trauma services, refugee health clinics and legal support

Key objectives of this guide

- Helps GPs ask respectful, inclusive questions and navigate sensitive topics such as trauma, migration experiences, and mental health
- Developed by an expert working group with lived experience input and reviewed by RACGP and external organisations
- Intended as a flexible guide – clinical judgment and individualised care remain essential

Core principles

- **Trauma-informed care (TIC):** Emphasise safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration and peer support
- **Cultural safety:** Actively affirm cultural identity, avoid assumptions and stereotypes
- **Consent and confidentiality:** Explain clearly, respect privacy and ensure informed consent
- **Intersectionality:** Recognise overlapping identities and systemic barriers impacting health

Practical guidance

- **Introductions and rapport building:** Ask about name pronunciation, language preferences, and interpreter needs; offer choice of clinician gender
- **Physical and emotional health assessment:** Begin with physical symptoms; explore eating habits, sleep patterns, energy levels and emotional wellbeing
- **Safety and suicide risk assessment:** Conduct culturally safe risk assessments for harm from others and self-harm; use sensitive language and prioritise crisis planning
- **Impact of forced migration:** Discuss visa status, migration journey and resettlement challenges to understand social determinants of health
- **Trauma disclosure:** Screen for PTSD symptoms without probing trauma details
- **Strengths and support networks:** Identify protective factors, community ties and coping strategies
- **Future care planning:** Offer culturally appropriate referrals, consider Medicare eligibility and include interpreter requirements in referral letters

Clinical context

- **General population** – 42.9% have experienced a mental disorder; 21.5% had a 12-month disorder (ABS 2023).
- **Refugee populations** – 31% PTSD, 32% depression, 16–17% serious mental illness. Self-reported rates (~5%) likely underestimate prevalence. Children show up to 26% psychological complaints in detention.