

Refugees and mental wellbeing. A call for community approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand

Summary

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine community based, trauma informed to support refugee mental health and wellbeing, recognising that refugee status is met through forced displacement in which refugees have experience of personal human rights abuses and have survived atrocities in which family and community have been lost.

Design/methodology/approach – A co-production approach was taken to review existing literature and policy to produce a position statement on how to better meet the needs of people who experience mental distress who are refugees. The co-production was between refugee and mental health researchers and refugee representatives.

Findings – Understanding the mental health needs of refugees has conventionally focused on incidence of mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. If mental health and illness are understood as a continuum, diagnosis of mental illness indicates a significant problem, and furthermore access to services is predicated on risks associated with mental illness. When accessing mental health services, refugees have an added issue in a lack of communication availability and recognition of the trauma that they have survived.

Originality/value – In this paper, a different position is advocated, that understanding the mental health of refugees can be framed more effectively as a process of recovery from trauma that emerges during resettlement, and over a long period of time before people are able to talk about the trauma they experienced. Community-based responses that enable recovery from trauma are more readily able to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of refugee communities.