

# Understanding, Welcoming, and Making Space for Refugee Backgrounds in Higher Education Classrooms



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## Refugee Background Students in the Classroom

Refugee background students may be present in our classrooms but are likely not identified as such.

These students may require the use of principles and practices of trauma-informed classrooms that create welcoming environments for all students without singling out specific groups.

Refugee background students may be susceptible to elevated levels of neuroception of danger as an adaptive coping- and survival mechanism. We should adapt our classroom practices to accommodate students who have experienced trauma and toxic stress.

Porges, S. W., & Porges, S. (2023). *Our polyvagal world: How safety and trauma change us*. W.W. Norton & Company.

## Who is a refugee? A Migrant?

"A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee conflict or persecution and has crossed an international border to seek safety. They cannot return to their country without risking their life or freedoms. It is a legal term that carries with it certain protections that refugees are entitled to."

"The term 'migrant' does not have an international legal definition. However, it is commonly understood to refer to someone who has chosen to leave their home to start a new life in another country. A migrant can return home without risking their life or freedom. The movement is understood to be voluntary."

The UN Refugee Agency. (n.d.). *Refugees*. UNHCR US. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/refugees#:~:text=A%20refugee%20is%20someone%20who,that%20refugees%20are%20entitled%20to>



## Refugee Trauma(s):

Multiple traumas in the course of flight and resettlement are not uncommon. These traumas may include:

- Loss of family/friends/culture/status.
- Torture of witnessing torture/family member tortured.
- Starvation
- Genocide
- Natural disasters
- Unsafe refugee camps/decades to resettlement



## Post-Resettlement Stressors/Traumas:

- Social Isolation
- Discrimination in resettlement country.
- Loss of cultural anchor/generational culture clashes
- Resettlement in high poverty and high crime areas leading to ongoing activation of the HPA-Axis, possible lifelong health consequences.

Ellis, B. H. et al., (2014). Understanding the Mental Health of Refugees: Trauma, Stress, and the Cultural Context .... In *The Massachusetts General Hospital Textbook on Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity in Mental Health* (pp. 165-187). essay, Humana Press.

Toxic stress. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2020, August 17). <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

Resilience is not the same as the absence of trauma impacts. Our students can be resilient and carry with them the traumas of their journeys, both psychologically and neurobiologically.

Atari-Khan, R., et al., (2021). Concepts of resilience among trauma-exposed Syrian refugees. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 49(2), 233-268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100020970522>

## Trauma-Informed Classrooms- Core Practices:

1. Create welcoming educational environments for all students. Avoid singling out refugee students in order to not increase neuroception of danger.
2. Engage in cultural humility. Reflect on biases, be curious and respectful of all students. Expect a lifelong learning process. Tervalon, M., & Murray-Garcia, J. (1998). Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 9(2), 117-125. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2010.0233>.
3. Understand that safety is collaboratively built. It is experienced on a spectrum. Safety in classrooms can't be declared. It must be embodied and experienced.
4. Understand that learning is a social event. We learn best from those we feel safe with and who we know care about us. Cozolino, L.J. (2013), *The Social Neuroscience of Education: Optimizing Attachment and learning in the Classroom*, W. W. Norton & Company
5. Build and communicate core messages of support and belonging for all students.
6. Examine language used in F2F and online classrooms. Every sentence is a bridge to learning (or not).
7. Anticipate neuroception of danger and proactively respond to it offering multiple avenues of support and connection repeatedly.
8. Choose inclusive images when illustrating content. Representation in images sends a message of belonging and, over time, can help reduce neuroception of danger.
9. Create safety via predictability in course and module structures.
10. Identify and embody your implicit curriculum.
11. Include all supportive services at CSU on your syllabus. Offer referrals repeatedly to all students to normalize the process.
12. Instead of telling students what you think they need, ask them what they need. Make space for their voices. Choices build safety and connection.



## Key Concepts:

**Trauma:**  
"Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being." Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2012, p. 2

**Toxic Stress:**  
"Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate adult support. This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years." *Toxic stress.* Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2020, August 17). <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

**Neuroception:**  
"Neuroception can be viewed as a sort of invisible sense or radar system that constantly scans the world for any and all external signs and signals that might help us determine how safe we are...This process happens nearly instantly, and is outside of our conscious control." Porges, S. W., & Porges, S. (2023). *Our polyvagal world: How safety and trauma change us*. W.W. Norton & Company., pp. 19-20

## One Thing to Always Remember:

We are all wired for survival. Our protective responses to real or perceived relational threats are largely involuntary and biologically based. As educators we must send messages of belonging and support in all classrooms and courses to ensure that all students, including refugee background students can learn.