

The Mental Health Toll of Uncertainty

Humans are hard wired for predictability. Predictability gives us a sense of control and safety, which helps us feel calmer and enhances our ability to focus, make decisions, and be emotionally present. When situations are uncertain, our brain strives to find familiarity and patterns. Our nervous system reacts to that strain, eroding our physical health and mental wellbeing.

Forcibly displaced children and families have already faced pervasive uncertainty before they seek safety in the U.S. (*Will the war come to our town? How will we know when it is time to leave?*), during their journey (*Where can we go? Who will let us in?*), and while encamped or in exile (*Will we ever return home? Will we have to stay here forever?*). After arrival, considerable uncertainty remains as forcibly displaced people step into unknown challenges and navigate a new culture and context.

When the landscape becomes even more unpredictable, stress and distress naturally rise. Since January of this year, numerous federal actions have threatened the stability and safety of forcibly displaced people in the U.S. The U.S. Refugee Program was indefinitely suspended, extending the separation of families who had been waiting years and sometimes decades to be reunited. All humanitarian parole programs were terminated, with humanitarian parole beneficiaries now at risk of losing status and facing expedited removal. The ending of Temporary Protected Status put Ukrainians, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans at future risk of deportation. Changes in the Department of Homeland Security's 'sensitive location' policy, along with threats of expanded detention and deportation have generated anxiety and caused parents to pull out of the labor market and keep children home from school.

Uncertainty, fear, prolonged family separation, and denial of safety and permanency, can negatively impact mental health, functioning, adjustment, and family stability. Just like trauma-informed care, providers caring for forcibly displaced families must become uncertainty-informed and consider the chronic or increased state of unpredictability in their clients' lives, adapting their services accordingly. This includes:

- **Understanding the types of uncertainty their clients are experiencing.** This means understanding the social and political shifts that may be impacting a community, acknowledging these shifts, and asking clients if these changes are impacting them or their families, how these changes may be impacting them, and how they are feeling in general.
- **Exploring how uncertainty is impacting emotional and physical health.** People who are experiencing profound uncertainty often have a harder time concentrating, sleep less, have higher anxiety, and generally feel more fatigued. Increased uncertainty may exacerbate existing mental health symptoms or cause new ones. Normalizing these reactions can provide clients with a sense of relief, as well as a runway for discussing coping.

- **Focusing on coping skills.** Uncertainty can rob people of the sense of safety needed to do focused trauma therapy. Providers should focus on skill-building to help increase their client's ability to manage the psychological stress of unpredictability and maintain functioning.
- **Connecting clients to sources of community resilience and resistance.** While the mental health profession has long recognized the power of support from individuals with similar experiences, the power of community is often overlooked. Communities can provide critical support, targeted information, and even offer collective protection to clients.

Uncertain times can leave providers and clients feeling stressed, anxious and powerless. There is no simple intervention or solution, especially given that the future may become more unpredictable. By attending to the role uncertainty is playing in our client's lives and including reflection in how it is showing up in our practice, we can better support and sustain services, resources, and hope.