

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and implications for the second language classroom

Victoria Wilson  
University of Southern Qld  
Victoria.Wilson@usq.edu.au



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### What does PTSD have to do with us?

High risk populations:

- Refugees & immigrants
- War & terrorism survivors
- Survivors of natural disasters
- Torture & abuse survivors
  - incl. domestic & sexual violence

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### Snapshot of numbers

- Aust settles 13K refugees per year (Refugee Council.org.au)
- Qld set to take 3,500 Syrian refugees (Qld govt 2015)
- A "typical" adult ESL class in Toowoomba (mine!):
  - 75% directly fleeing persecution &/or war
  - 88% female → (1 in 3 women worldwide suffer sexual or physical violence (International Women's Development Agency)

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### Manifestation

**Mood swings** withdrawal **disassociation**  
Insomnia **control & trust issues** startle response  
lack of confidence Difficulty starting new tasks  
concentration problems Sleeping in class  
distracted & distracting **absenteeism**  
memory impairment  
**Difficulty setting goals** physical symptoms  
Loss of meaning & connection  
**flashbacks** **panic attacks**

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### But we are not therapists...!

- Pedagogical and ethical imperatives

“If we do not recognize that trauma issues are present in the classroom, and that instructors’ actions can help or hinder learners’ processes, we leave learners and educators isolated and unsupported.”  
(Horsman, 2004, 5)

AND...

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### Best practice for all learners

“learners are not disembodied cognitive devices for processing language input, but persons with histories[...] **teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs of the trauma-affected comprise instructional practice for all learners**; and artful acts of instruction in themselves can be therapeutic and **build resilience** in **all language learners.**”  
(Medley, 2012, p. 112; emphasis added)

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### Cognitive impacts

- Speed of language acquisition & long-term symptom load of PTSD inversely related; ongoing life stressors will exacerbate PTSD: Sondergaard & Theorell, 2004 320.
- Deficit in verbal learning
- Reduced capacity to learn new information
- Poor concentration & memory

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### Teaching Implications

- Lesson content & materials
- Interaction
- The physical classroom

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### Lesson content & materials

Avoid materials/content which could trigger relapse of symptoms

- What learning purpose is this serving?
- Can these learning goals be achieved in other ways?

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From Reading Explorer 3 (1st Ed.)

**WARM UP**

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Have you ever been in a life-threatening situation?
2. Do you know any stories of people who survived accidents or another dangerous event?
3. Why do you think some people survive certain events while others don't?

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### A Photographer's Quest

- In December 1984, National Geographic photographer Steve McCurry was in Pakistan doing a story on the war in neighboring Afghanistan. Because of the conflict, millions of Afghan people had fled<sup>a</sup> to Pakistan and were living in refugee<sup>b</sup> camps. On a visit to one of the camps, McCurry took a number of photos. "I remember the color and confusion in that refugee camp..." he wrote later about the experience. "I asked the teacher for permission to enter the girls' school and photograph a few of the students." One girl, a shy student with intense green eyes, agreed to have her photograph taken.

National Geographic featured her photo on its cover in June 1985, and her image became a symbol of the pain, as well as the strength and beauty, of the Afghan people. Questions about the "Afghan Girl" poured in: What was her name? What happened to her? But no one could answer these questions, not even the man who had taken the famous photograph.

<sup>a</sup> If you flee from something, you escape from it.  
<sup>b</sup> A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their home or country, usually because of war.

From Reading Explorer 3 (1st Ed.)

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but the eyes had not changed—they were the same bright color, with the same intense stare. The woman, through an interpreter, was introduced as Sharbat Gula. At last, the girl in the photo had a name and could tell her story.

In the winter of 1984, when Gula was just a child, bombs<sup>a</sup> exploded in her village, killing her parents. She, her grandmother, brother, and sisters fled in terror across dangerous mountain roads to Pakistan. Once there, they stayed in various refugee camps along the border of the two countries, living in crowded surroundings at the mercy of other people. It was in one of these camps that McCurry met and photographed young Sharbat Gula.

"when Gula was just a child, bombs exploded in her village, killing her parents. She, her grandmother, brother, and sisters fled in terror across dangerous mountain roads to Pakistan. Once there, they stayed in various refugee camps...at the mercy of other people."

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### Lesson content & materials

- Give students opportunities to share life experiences **but** allow them to choose disclosure level
- Stress and stress management as content area
- Encourage students to track progress through reflective journals &/or portfolios

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### Interaction & instruction

#### Restore collaboration & trust:

- Learner-centred classroom
- Develop classroom guidelines *with* students
- Do not force participation
- Transparency: lesson goals & program policies
- Predictability: routines & rituals
- Repetition, recycling & scaffolding

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- Validate learner strength & abilities\* be concrete!

"[M]any survivors are very adamant about **not wanting to see themselves as victims**, and fear that if attention is directed to their symptoms, they will be seen in a negative light [...] having others see them as **competent and strong** can be extremely helpful, and help them build up their inner resources" (Adkins et al, 1998, 14-16)

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### The physical classroom



Above all, should be a safe space

See esp. Balliro, 2012

- Comfortable, organised & calming
- Clear pathways to doors; visible exits
- Visually appealing
- Accommodate physical well-being

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### Program support: For learners AND staff

See Balliro, 2012; Adkins et al., 1998

- Mandatory training for all staff
- Counsellors
- Emergency plan & hotlines (inc. L1)
- Linking to/collaboration with community resources
- Mental health for staff incl. reflective sessions
- School policies

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### Further resources

Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma: <http://qpastt.org.au/resources/>

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