

Exploring Reactions, Responses and Behaviors after Trafficking Experiences. Guidance for Practitioners in Interacting with Trafficking Victim-Survivors.

Introduction

The experiences of trafficking can deeply impact how trafficking victims and survivors relate to other people and how they respond to professionals from government institutions, NGOs, and community organizations. This applies to all victims—adults, children, and adolescents alike. While trafficking victims may exhibit different behaviors, including different reactions and responses over time, common responses include mistrust, avoidance, emotional withdrawal, or expressions of anger and hostility.

Children and adolescents, in particular, may avoid asking for help, shy away from institutions because they are afraid or prejudiced about their functions, they may feel hopelessness and not trust, and may respond by fleeing from contacts, showing hostility, anger, and lack of interest in their processes.

Adult victims may display similar responses, often compounded by feelings of shame, guilt, or self-blame, especially if they have endured prolonged exploitation or were trafficked under coercion related to economic survival, migration, or intimate relationships.

These reactions and responses reflect survival strategies in a world that has harmed them. These are natural, trauma-informed responses to trafficking. They are protective mechanisms on the part of victims, shaped by trauma and fear. They are not personal attacks on professionals, failure on the part of professionals, or rejection of help.

Nonetheless, these behaviors can be challenging, frustrating, and even hurtful for professionals and service providers. They may be misunderstood and misinterpreted by professionals who may understand it as unwillingness to cooperate, lack of appreciation, aggression, and hostility, and not as trauma responses or coping mechanisms. This can lead to emotional fatigue, miscommunication, and even strained relationships between practitioners and the persons they are trying to support.

Different reactions and responses to trafficking exploitation

The reactions and responses of trafficked victims—regardless of age—can differ significantly depending on the specifics of their experience, their stage of recovery, and the type of practitioner they interact with, and the goal of the interaction with professionals.

Nonetheless, there are some general patterns and trends in terms of how trafficking victims experience their post trafficking lives and how they react and respond as a consequence.



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In the immediate aftermath of escape or rescue from trafficking exploitation, survivors often experience conflicting emotions. While they will feel relief and happiness at having escaped their trafficking situation, they also express fear, confusion, and a strong distrust of authority, which may lead them to avoid engaging with professionals or fleeing from safe environments. This reaction is driven by a survival instinct born out of their experiences of manipulation and control by traffickers.

In the initial stages of recovery phase, survivors may exhibit anger, hostility, or withdrawal as they begin to process their trauma but still feel hopeless or trapped by their past experiences.

In the long term, over the course of reintegration, some victims may start to rebuild trust and re-engage with the professionals and systems that failed them. But this process is slow and non-linear, often marked by emotional setbacks, especially if new triggers or institutional failures arise. Victims may continue to struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, or distrust towards institutions, even when they begin to experience healing.

Reactions and behaviors may include:

- ✱ **Widespread distrust:** Trafficking in persons destroys not only trust in others, but also in institutions and often in oneself. This loss of trust can result in a range of reactions and behaviors that reflect the difficulties and trauma suffered. Victims may lose the ability to trust people and institutions because of their experiences. This may extend to authorities, social services, friends, or family, causing reluctance to accept help.
- ✱ **Avoidant, defensive, or aggressive behaviors:** Trauma may lead victims to avoid conversations, isolate themselves, confront others, or even react aggressively. Aggression may stem from fear, a need to protect themselves, or frustration over a perceived lack of control.
- ✱ **Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness:** Victims may feel they lack control or see no future, leading to emotional isolation and disengagement from support or help.
- ✱ **Depersonalization and dissociation:** Victims may disconnect from their experiences emotionally, making it difficult to recall events or engage during interviews.
- ✱ **Self-destructive behavior:** Feelings of entrapment may manifest in risky behaviors such as substance use, self-harm, or social withdrawal.
- ✱ **Refusal of help:** Victims may reject support if they perceive available resources as inadequate or untrustworthy.

When interacting with different professionals, these feelings and reactions inform how victims perceive and respond to practitioners.

Some differences in reaction emerge in the roles and responsibilities of the different practitioners. For example, social workers and psychologists are often seen as advocates, which may make survivors more willing to trust and engage with them, especially if they approach the survivor with empathy and patience. By contrast, interactions with police officers can be more challenging, as survivors may fear law enforcement due to past exploitation, the risk of arrest, or deportation, and past negative experiences with police. This can lead to avoidance, withholding information, or outright hostility towards law enforcement, even if they are trying to help.

Nonetheless, all professionals will face some difficult and tense responses from trafficking victims, as victims may not make a distinction between professionals' roles and responsibilities and will not always understand who they are and what they are doing, especially in the immediate aftermath of trafficking. Moreover, victims will still resist or withdraw from practitioners due to prior negative experiences or the perceived power imbalance.

Understanding these nuanced responses and meeting survivors with consistent, trauma-informed care is essential to rebuilding trust and empowering them to take the first steps toward recovery.

Below we share some reactions, responses and feelings that trafficking victims have expressed or practitioners have observed on this topic.

- * "I said, 'I will not go to that shelter, I can't be in a closed space. I've had enough of closed spaces. I've had enough of mistreatment'." (Trafficking victim) [1]
- * "My mental condition after trafficking was in a bad shape. I was sick for a long time. That was why I didn't do any work. That was my lowest point (...) I was unstable and shaken". (Trafficking victim) [2]
- * "It was a feeling of longing and being a bit ashamed. Because after working abroad for so long we came home with nothing". (Trafficking victim) [3]
- * "I simply did not want to be tormented with questions... I was in a state of depression... I didn't want to talk about what had happened to me...". (Trafficking victim) [4]
- * "...the word trust is a big word for us as we came from an experience of being tricked." (Child trafficking victim) [5]
- * "...there are times there are things that you could not disclose, because you can't trust anybody..." (Child trafficking victim) [6]
- * "Some trafficked children and adolescents are very afraid because most of the families, they don't support the child. And most of the traffickers are from within their community..." (Practitioner)[7]
- * "These children need help in developing trust and healthy and lasting relationships with people who are trained." (Practitioner) [8]

[1] Surtees, R. (2007) Listening to victims: Experiences of identification, return and assistance in South-Eastern Europe. Vienna: ICMPD and Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute, p. 179.

[2] Surtees, R. (2017) Moving On. Family and Community Reintegration Among Indonesian Trafficking Victims. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute, p. 90.

[3] Surtees, R. and T. Zulfahary (2018) Seeing the unseen. Barriers and opportunities in the identification of trafficking victims in Indonesia. Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute. p. 61.

[4] Surtees, R. (2007) Listening to victims: Experiences of identification, return and assistance in South-Eastern Europe. Vienna: ICMPD and Washington, D.C.: NEXUS Institute, p. 65.

[5] Cody, C. (2017) Connecting the Dots: Supporting the Recovery and Reintegration of Children Affected by Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International, p. 42.

[6] Cody, C. (2017) Connecting the Dots: Supporting the Recovery and Reintegration of Children Affected by Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International, p. 42.

[7] Hargitt, K. (2017) Casting Light on the Care, Recovery and (Re)integration Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children. Bangkok: ECPAT International, p. 174.

[8] Cody, C. (2017) Connecting the Dots: Supporting the Recovery and Reintegration of Children Affected by Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International, p. 43.

Managing and responding to trafficking victims' reactions and responses

The physical, psychological, and emotional impacts of trafficking are profound and multifaceted, deeply affecting the lives of victims. These individuals often endure harrowing conditions throughout their exploitation, suffering not only severe physical hardships but also deep psychological and emotional scars.

Trafficking victims may be subjected to deplorable living and working conditions, including inadequate sanitation and hygiene, poor nutrition, unsafe work environments, excessive work, exposure to HIV/AIDS and other infections, and a complete lack of access to healthcare. Such conditions can lead to a variety of physical health issues, from malnutrition and infectious diseases to chronic pain and injuries. Moreover, the neglect of basic health needs, including reproductive health services, further exacerbates their suffering.

Beyond the physical toll, the psychological and emotional impacts are equally devastating. Victims frequently experience a range of persistent mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and feelings of helplessness and isolation. The treatment they receive from traffickers and others—characterized by repeated physical, sexual, and psychological violence—can lead to deep-seated trauma that affects their ability to recover and reintegrate after trafficking in persons. The coercive control exercised by traffickers strips victims of their autonomy and self-worth, leaving victims with profound emotional scars that can persist long after their escape.

Professionals working with trafficking victims must understand the impact of trafficking in persons on victims to ensure that their responses, reaction and interventions are effective, ethical, and trauma-informed. This applies to practitioners working in the areas such as child protection, health care, law enforcement, education, and social services. Understanding these many impacts of trafficking in persons is crucial in developing effective interventions and policies for trafficking survivors that address not only their immediate needs but also their long-term recovery and reintegration.

Understanding the impacts of trafficking in persons also helps practitioners to interact sensitively with trafficking victims and respond appropriately to their actions, reactions, and behaviors. This knowledge and understanding enable practitioners to recognize and respond not only with professional competence but also sensitivity and empathy and to avoid re-traumatization.

Some suggested practices for daily work with trafficking victims include:

- * Ongoing training on a trauma-informed approach and trauma-informed practices
- * Develop, strengthen, and practice empathetic communication skills
- * Encourage self-compassion and self-reflection
- * Reinforce safety and confidentiality training

- * Develop knowledge about available resources
- * Recognize and manage the emotional impact of the work
- * Collaborate with other professionals

Ongoing training on a trauma-informed approach and trauma-informed practices

Trafficking in persons and its consequences are complex issues, and victims often suffer deep traumas that affect their psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. To improve the ability to help them, it is essential to train and update knowledge on the trauma-informed approach.

Develop, strengthen, and practice empathetic communication skills

The way we communicate with trafficked persons is critical to build trust and help them open up. Improving active listening skills, practicing empathy, and using clear and accessible language are essential steps to improve the quality of interviews and interactions. Attention should be paid to the nonverbal cues that victims may show, as many times their body language speaks louder than their words.

Encourage self-compassion and self-reflection

Working with trafficking victims can be emotionally challenging, and it is easy for professionals to be affected by the suffering of victims. Self-compassion and self-reflection are powerful tools for preventing emotional exhaustion and vicarious trauma. It is important to find spaces to reflect on our emotions, seek professional supervision when necessary, and surround yourself with a supportive environment where you can talk openly about your feelings without judgment. This will help you maintain a balanced and healthy approach to your work.

Reinforce safety and confidentiality training

Trafficked persons fear being identified or retaliated against by their traffickers or other actors involved in their exploitation. As a professional, it is important to make sure they understand the confidentiality of your interventions, but also to be clear about the exceptions when this confidentiality must be broken to protect their well-being. Protecting their identity and data is essential to ensure their safety and give them confidence in the process.

Develop knowledge about available resources

It is critical to be aware of the resources available to trafficked persons, both locally and nationally. This includes protection alternatives, shelters, psychological support, legal assistance and protection, and other services important for reintegration. The more information you have about what options exist, the better you will be able to guide victims to the resources they need, which will also strengthen the victim's confidence in your ability to help them.

Recognize and manage the emotional impact of the work

Working with trafficking victims can have a profound emotional impact on professionals. Burnout or vicarious trauma are common risks. To manage it, it is important that you have self-care mechanisms in place and do not hesitate to seek professional supervision or psychological support when needed. Setting healthy boundaries at work and dedicating time to take care of your mental health is crucial to prevent burnout and maintain your ability to perform your job to the best of your ability.

Collaborate with other professionals

Working with trafficking victims is multidisciplinary. Collaborating with other professionals, such as lawyers, social workers, psychologists, and physicians, will allow you to provide a more comprehensive and coordinated approach. In addition, having a support team helps you manage the emotional challenges of the work and share best practices and strategies.