



## To Speak or Not to Speak about Trauma?

Shifting the focus to the present  
impact of current events and  
assimilation on children

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## Welcome!

Thank you for participating in this peer exchange and your interest in this very important topic!

- If you need help trouble-shooting during this presentation, please use the chat box on the right or email [info@brycs.org](mailto:info@brycs.org).
- This webinar will be recorded and archived.
- A Q&A session will take place at the end of today's presentation. Please use the chat box on the right to submit your questions. Any unanswered questions will be posted and responded to on BRYCS Blog: <http://brycsblog.blogspot.com/>
- At the close of today's presentation, you will be redirected to a short evaluation. We appreciate your feedback!

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## Goli Amin Bellinger; MSW, LICSW

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## Objectives

- Collect elements of a child's trauma story for healing purposes
- Avoid creating a Toxic Trauma Story
- Benefit both sides of the Listener-Story Teller relationship
- Incorporate into the trauma story the present stressors-assimilation & news events
- Common signs of trauma impacting mood and behaviors
- Interventions and recommendations for working with children and their parents

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## Background

[Blog](#): personal format  
Disassembling the "Toxic Trauma Story"

Defined by Dr. Richard Mollica (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*, Orlando, Florida: Harcourt

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## Childhood memories- prior to departure "Rain of Bombs"

- ◇ Sitting by candlelight- *"Our apartment is tall, we don't want them to see us"*
- ◇ Pulling over the car on the side of the road- *"So they don't see us to drop bombs"*
- ◇ Standing and waiting quietly in the basement *"So they don't hear us"*
- ◇ Running to stand under doorways and stairways- *"So the ceiling doesn't fall"*

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## The "Toxic Trauma Story"

Highly Emotional; No resolution

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Listener's Response:  
Empathic Failure  
Repulsed  
Overwhelmed

Defined by Dr. Richard Mollica, (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*  
Orlando, Florida

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## The "Toxic Trauma Story"

So why share?

So why ask?!



*To Speak or Not to Speak*

Mollica, R. (2006)

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## Mollica's Elements of a Trauma Story

- 1) Facts
- 2) Cultural meaning
- 3) Revelations "Looking behind the curtain"
- 4) Listener- story teller relationship



Source: Dr. Richard Mollica, Director of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma and in his book (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*, Orlando, Florida: Harcourt.

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## Mollica's Elements of a Trauma Story

- 1) Facts
- 2) Cultural meaning
- 3) "Looking behind the curtain"
- 4) Listener- story teller relationship
  - Assess Then
  - Assess Now

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## Example: Blog

### 1) Facts **Missing:**

Narrow Focus of War  
Current teasing/ bullying  
Later conflicts in Middle East



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## Example: Blog

### 2) **Missing:** Cultural Meaning

"Who's hands is the world in (Donya daste kee hast?!)"  
September 11 & conflict in the Middle east  
Shaping of bi-cultural identity

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**Example: Blog**

**3) Missing: Looking Behind the Curtain**

- ✧ Sleep over with family
- ✧ Group unity/ cohesion/ survival
- ✧ Society's response: Radio shows for kids
- ✧ Remaining Family endured---no lasting impacts

Mollica, R. (2006) www.brycs.org

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**Example: Blog**

**4) Listener- Story Teller Relationship Result:**

- ✧ Sense that I should reassure them:  
*"I'm fine, war was fine, no problem!!..."*
- ✧ Sense that I'm strange or exotic
  - ✧ Self doubt

**(Guilt, Shame, Confusion)**

Mollica, R. (2006) www.brycs.org

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**Elements of a Child's Trauma Story**

**1) FACTS**

- Age, Length of Exposure to violence
- Type of Exposure to violence- self, witness, news
- Past and Current Political Instability in country
- Child abuse
- Separated from family/ family fragmentation
- School Interruptions
- Parental distress, marital distress, mental illness



Adapted for children. From Mollica, R (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds*. Chapter Two: The Trauma Story

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➤ **Assess THEN**

### Gathering Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

1) FACTS: Possible Exploratory Questions

- Who was with you? Who did you feel safe with?
- Where you ever alone?
- Is there a memory that comes back to you over again?
- Do you remember problems at home, in your family? People fighting
- What happened at school? With your neighbors?

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➤ **Assess NOW**

<b>SCHOOL</b>	<b>HOME</b>	<b>COMMUNITY</b>
Bullies	Parents	Neighbors
Teachers	Siblings	Gangs
Classes	Sleep	Television
English	Dreams/Nigh	Politics
Bus	tmares	Facebook
		Terrorism

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➤ **Assess NOW**

### Gathering Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

1) FACTS: Possible Exploratory Questions

- Do ever feel in danger or unsafe?
- Have you ever talked with your parents about it?
- Do your class mates or other kids bother you in school or in your neighborhood. How have they hurt your feelings?
- Have you ever thought a teacher was mean especially to you?
- Is there a part of you that makes you different, that you don't like?
- What have you seen on the news or internet that has bothered you?
- Has anything on Facebook/social media scared you?

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## Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

2) STORY IN CONTEXT, CULTURAL MEANING

- Knowledge of historical context
- Cognitive level of understanding
- Age and Developmental Stage
- Protection by caregivers

Adapted from Mollica, R (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds*. [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

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## Gathering Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

2) STORY IN CONTEXT, CULTURAL MEANING

Possible Exploratory Questions

- > What did you understand of why there was xx
- > What did you learn later, what did you find out since leaving?
- > Anything you hear with the elections that bother you?
- > Tell me what happened to you when you first learned about current event x (terrorism, war, refugees)

Adapted from Mollica, R (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds*. [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

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## Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

3) LOOKING BEHIND THE CURTAIN

- Child's Wishes and Hopes
- Development of Cognitive skills
- Life long process
- Parental distress
- Intergenerational transference of trauma
- Feelings of safety and control



Adapted from Mollica, R (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds*. [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

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### Gathering Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

3) "LOOKING BEHIND THE CURTAIN" Possible Exploratory Questions

- > What helped you then when you were scared?
- > What helps you now when you are scared?
- > If you could have three wishes, what would they be? For your country
- > If you could have three wishes, what would they be? For this country
- > How has your thinking about it changed over time?
- > Does anything you experienced in your past help you better deal with problems here? Or understanding when bad things happen on the news/ elsewhere in America/ the world?
- > How has coming to America changed your parents? If at all?

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### Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

4) LISTENER- STORY TELLER RELATIONSHIP

- Healer-client relationship
- Client is the Teacher
- Mutual learning
- Build coping skills
- Affect regulation
- Empathy and validation
- Help fill the gaps in their story
- Facilitate Parental Support-Sharing the story with their parents
- Cultural Identity formation

Adapted from Mollica, R. (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds*.

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### Elements of a Child's Trauma Story

4) LISTENER- STORY TELLER RELATIONSHIP

Possible Exploratory Questions

- > Have you ever told your parents about xxx (home country)
- > Have you ever told your parents about xxx (US)
- > How do you/ do you see yourself as an xxx American
- > How has your religion helped you?

Empathize by reflecting back feelings, concerns, desires  
Thank you, you really helped me understand better xxx.

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## Stress Reactions In Children & Youth

Trauma versus Traumatized

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## Child Stress Reactions

Traumatic Response Symptoms

- + **Re-experiencing of the disaster during play, dreams, or flashbacks:**
  - o Repeatedly acting out the disaster with toys or other kids
  - o Nightmares or content of dreams
  - o Distressed when reminded
  - o Acting or feeling as if the disaster is happening again
- + **Avoidance of reminders of the disaster:**
  - o Avoiding activities that remind
  - o Impaired memory
  - o Withdraws
  - o Difficulty feeling positive emotions
- + **Increased "arousal" symptoms:**
  - o Difficulty falling or staying asleep
  - o Irritability
  - o Difficulty concentrating
  - o Startled easily

Balaban, V. (2011) *Psychological Aid for Children and Adolescents*. In *Global Mental Health: Trauma & Recovery*. Ed. Mollica, R

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## Child Stress Reactions

- + **Depressive Symptoms:**
  - o General emotional numbness
  - o Crying
  - o Changes in appetite
  - o Fatigue
  - o Insomnia or not wanting to sleep alone
  - o Sadness
  - o Loss of interest in previously preferred activities
- + **Fears & Anxiety:**
  - o Being left behind or separated from family
  - o Something will happen to a family member
  - o Fear of the dark
  - o Fear of being alone
  - o Fears that they caused some part of the disaster



Balaban, V. (2011)

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## Child Stress Reactions

- + Behavioral Symptoms:
  - o Regressive age-appropriate behavior: baby talk
  - o Hyperactive or silly behaviors
  - o Whining
  - o Irritability, anger outbursts
  - o High risk behaviors: sexual activity, drugs, alcohol
  - o Stop participating in activities
- + Somatic Symptoms:
  - o Headaches
  - o Stomachaches
  - o Nausea
  - o Dizziness
  - o Loss of Bladder Control



Balaban, V. (2011) [www.brycs.org](http://www.brycs.org)

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## Age Dependent Interventions

**By a mental health professional**

- + Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- + Short Term Therapies
- + Narrative Therapies

**Including Psycho-education**

- + Focus on recognizing, understanding and managing stress and grief reactions
- + Exploring & Replacing negative memories
- + Journaling and alternative narratives



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## Age Dependent Interventions

**Psycho-education by trained paraprofessionals**

- + Stress and stress management
- + Grief reactions
- + Self and body awareness
- + Relaxation techniques
- + Building coping skills
- + Social skills training



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**Recommendations:  
To maximize mutual benefits  
from interactions with children**

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**Recommendations:  
Start w/ Strengths**

The children have adapted to a new life and new language.  
The parents chose to begin their life over again.  
Community Resiliency & Protective Factors.

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**Identify Protective factors and  
Resiliency: Community Survival  
Example**

Sleep overs with family were my favorite  
Waiting together "in safe places"  
Stories for children on the radio  
Eating Vanilla wafers

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### Recommendations: Recognize adaptability & coping skills

Honor the decisions to not talk about the past.  
Forgetting the past can be a valuable coping skill.  
People are adaptable

➤ Always remember: Only a small percentage of the population gets *and* remain "traumatized".

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### Recommendations: Simple Screen for Mental Well-being

"Do you have nightmares?"  
"Do you have any difficulty sleeping?"

If yes, you can ask about memories or dreams about the past.



**If no, focus on the present.**

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### Recommendations: Interventions w/ Parents

- Inquire about changes in child's behavior – pre & post arrival
- Assess parent functioning
- Assess parent levels of distress
- Strengthen parent child interactions- play/ talk



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### Recommend Parents to: Monitor and Ask about Social Media for

- Bullying & Harassment
- Traumatic news stories
- Alarming political commentary
- Discriminatory/ offensive posts

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### Recommend 'to facilitate healing'

The Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma recommends:

- Altruism – Mentoring, Tutoring, Leadership
- Work -School Attendance, Activities, & Sports
- Spirituality

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### Recommendations: Provider Self-Care

- Take Lunch Breaks
- Take Breaks
- Talk with peers

Set up regular peer exchange to discuss case/ topic related to trauma and healing

Goals: Breathe, Rest, Relax, Learn, Support

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### Selected Literature

Mollica, R. (2006) *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*, Orlando, Florida: Harcourt

Balaban, V. (2011) *Psychological Aid for Children and Adolescents*. In *Global Mental Health : Trauma & Recovery*. Ed. Mollica, R.

American Psychological Association. (2010) *Resilience and Recovery After War: Refugee Children and Families in the United States*. & (2009) *Working with refugee children and families: Update for Mental Health Professionals*. Available at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/refugees.aspx>

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### Resources

The National Traumatic Stress Network  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma  
[www.Hprt-cambridge.org](http://www.Hprt-cambridge.org)

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### Questions?



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