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# EFFECTIVE AND RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Community-Based Protection in Action

Community-Based Protection Unit, Division of International Protection





## ● OVERVIEW

Effective and respectful communication is central to all refugee<sup>1</sup> work. UNHCR and partner staff and refugees regularly communicate with each other in formal and informal daily encounters, interviews, participatory assessments, and other interactions. These interactions, even though they may focus on a specific issue or a personal case, are of critical importance to an understanding of the broader protection environment and refugees' needs and capacities. However, when both refugees and staff are under pressure, it is not always easy to remain friendly, patient and attentive. Communication may be negatively affected by various factors: emotions such as anger, insecurity or fatigue can impede refugees' ability to express themselves. Under such circumstances, distressed people frequently have difficulties in recounting their experiences. Similarly, stress and high pressure may decrease staff members' ability to listen actively and act respectfully. That ability may also be hampered by pre-existing prejudices. These conditions may interfere with our work to ensure protection of persons of concern, if not handled appropriately. Furthermore, the power imbalance between refugees and staff can limit the openness of communication, create unrealistic expectations, and heighten tensions.

This note provides guidance on dealing with and managing stress and emotions, enabling staff to treat persons of concern with dignity and empathy, and to further facilitate and strengthen effective communication.

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<sup>1</sup> This note refers to refugees, but it is applicable to communication with other persons of concern to UNHCR as well.

## ● KEY CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. AT THE BEGINNING OF AN INTERACTION

At the beginning of all interactions, try to make the individual or group feel comfortable in order to build trust and create an environment where they feel safe to share information.

#### CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHICH FOSTERS TRUST, SAFETY AND RESPECT

Due to the sensitive and private nature of many interactions, both formal and informal, refugees might be reluctant to talk about complex issues (such as the presence of armed elements in a camp, recruitment of children, and sexual exploitation and abuse). It is our responsibility to make them feel safe by creating an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality, and to clarify expectations to avoid disappointment.

*First of all, adjust the physical space to create a positive speaking environment:*

#### ACTION

- When possible, secure a private space where you can conduct sensitive exchanges and nobody else can overhear the conversation.
- The setup of the room determines to what extent the refugee feels welcomed. It may be useful to remove physical barriers between you and the refugee, such as desks or computers, in order to demonstrate that you are equal.

*Secondly, actively create a relaxed atmosphere to foster a relationship of trust and respect:*

#### ACTION

- Adjust your behaviour to refugees' emotional state.
- Put refugees at ease by greeting them in their language, or having some sort of informal exchange that is practised in their culture such as asking about the well-being of their family before starting the interview.

- In some instances, refugees may feel more comfortable speaking with persons of their own gender. This is often the case when interviewing survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) or torture. Be respectful of this request and do your best to find an appropriate solution.
- If possible, keep water and tissues at hand.
- Introduce any other participants, such as interpreters or other UNHCR staff, at the beginning and explain why they are present.
- Inform the refugees that they should feel free to take a break at any point.
- Some refugees might be distrustful of people they do not know. Try to put the person at ease and create trust.

Although it is important to put your interlocutor at ease, it is equally important to always maintain a high level of professionalism. Acting too informally and overly casual is not beneficial to establishing trust and might mislead the refugee as to how to behave and interact with you.

#### ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY

During interactions such as interviews for refugee status determination (RSD), case management, resettlement and responses to SGBV, very private details of refugees' lives are discussed. They might be reluctant to share these details with someone they do not know. They also might be afraid that this information will be shared with others or could endanger someone else.

#### ACTION

- Take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information for everyone involved.



- Use a simple statement of confidentiality and privacy at the beginning of a formal conversation.<sup>2</sup>
- Ensure that the interpreter is aware of UNHCR's confidentiality policy and has signed a confidentiality agreement.
- If confidential information needs to be shared with others, inform the refugee of the circumstances and reasons and ask for consent.
- Clearly stating who will or will not have access to the information can help create a safe environment in which the person feels able to communicate openly.

*In addition, demonstrate that you take confidentiality seriously:*

### ACTION

- Stop the conversation if others enter the room.
- Do not discuss other persons of concern in front of the refugee, or with the interpreter.
- Do not leave any confidential paper(s) or folder(s) unattended in interviewing rooms or reception areas.
- When taking notes, explain why you are writing things down; if circumstances allow it, you can also share with the refugee what type of information you are noting (i.e. biodata).

<sup>2</sup> Example: "You have a right to privacy. The information you share with me today will not be shared with anyone without your permission." Please note that privacy and confidentiality rules are different in certain circumstances such as RSD interviews where the applicant's informed, explicit, and written consent is required to share information with third parties such as medical doctors or community workers. Please refer to UNHCR's *Interviewing Applicants for Refugee Status* (1995) at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3ccea3304.pdf> for more information.

## CONFIDENTIALITY WHEN DEALING WITH A FAMILY<sup>3</sup>

In interviews with multiple family members, remember that family is critically important and may be the only assurance a refugee has left. Even in cases of suspected abuse, or when a family member needs to reveal something that cannot be openly spoken of (such as SGBV or sexual orientation), staff should see the family together first, then offer a neutral reason for wanting to speak individually with one or more persons.

### ACTION

- Make preparations for interviewing family members separately ahead of time and with discretion.
- Provide separate waiting room areas for persons prior to and after the individual interview to ensure confidentiality.
- Be wary of exposing children to sensitive information; if possible try to speak to their parents privately and arrange a separate room where children can draw or play.

## USE INTERPRETERS IN A CAREFUL MANNER

Interpreters do not replace the interviewer, but play a vital role in facilitating communication with a refugee. Their presence can help or harm communication. Effective interpretation can provide a better understanding of conversations and facilitate the exchange of information. However, a refugee may also feel more reluctant to participate in meaningful communication if the interpreter present is not trusted. Given ethnic or social class differences, the interpreter may have (or be perceived to have) biases that would influence their translation and decisions taken as a result.

### ACTION

- Whenever possible, use certified interpreters and ensure they have adequate language and interpreting skills and the necessary training.
- Consider the age, gender and diversity characteristics of the interpreter that may make the refugee more open to communicating (e.g. selecting a

female interpreter when speaking with a female refugee).

- Brief the interpreter on the nature and intended structure of the encounter; discuss common terminology and stress the importance of confidentiality, neutrality and impartiality.
- At the beginning, introduce the interpreter, explain her or his role, and encourage the refugee and interpreter to have a brief informal exchange to test communication.
- Place the interpreter to the side of the two parties that are communicating but slightly apart from both, not directly in between. The interpreter should not block the line of vision: communication is between you and the refugee.
- Avoid talking to the refugee "through" the interpreter. Address and make eye contact directly with the refugee, not with the interpreter.
- Take into consideration that complex UNHCR terminology may not be easy to translate into other languages. Select your words carefully in order for the interpreter to clearly understand. Avoid using acronyms.
- Consider the effect the interpreter may have had on the communication before acting on the information you have gathered: To avoid misinterpretation and loss of information, if you have sufficient time, apply triangulation techniques (i.e. rephrasing responses, reformatting questions) in order to minimise loss of information from interpretation.
- Ensure that complaint procedures are available to provide the refugee with the opportunity to report comments and complaints about the interpretation
- Remain alert to any signs of potential problems with the quality of the interpretation (for instance if the response does not answer your question; the interpretation is significantly longer or shorter than appears appropriate; words you recognize without interpretation are not interpreted; exchanges between the interpreter and the refugee are not interpreted) and address any concerns immediately.

<sup>3</sup> For information on specific considerations to be taken into account when working with children, please see: UNHCR, *Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents*, July 2012, at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fffe4af2.html>



## UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERACTION

Throughout the exchange, keep refugees' priorities in mind. Try to better understand why they wish to speak to you and assess what type of information, advice or help they are seeking. Remember that they may start conversations with a less essential or symbolic issue before revealing their true concerns. Having a strong understanding of their current conditions in the country of asylum, as well as those in the country of origin, along with the options currently available to them, is essential in effectively comprehending their context and specific needs.

## ACTION

- Assess what social context may be influencing the refugee's priorities and decisions (e.g. social stressors, level of education and literacy, language).
- Before the conversation, learn about core issues faced by the refugee's specific cultural, religious, social or economic group.
- Assess whether or not you are well placed, or have enough expertise, to respond to the refugee's needs. If not, identify colleagues who are better suited and arrange a meeting with them.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> When referring refugees to other colleagues, do not give out the colleagues' names before the proposed colleague has 'formally' taken up the issue. Confidentiality must be ensured on both ends.

## MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Refugees often have high hopes when speaking to UNHCR staff and might be disappointed if a solution to their specific problems is not found immediately. Avoiding unrealistic expectations from the very start will prevent misunderstandings and subsequent anger and frustration. This also serves to build trust with the broader community.

### ACTION

- Establish clear expectations and explain what is possible and what is not.
- Ensure transparency by explaining UNHCR's procedures and policies (such as the *Code of Conduct*) as well as the repercussions of acts such as fraud.
- Refrain from making promises, instead, let the refugee know that you will try your best to find solutions to his or her concerns, taking into consideration existing or unexpected limitations.



## 2. DURING AN INTERACTION

This section describes general rules of effective and respectful communication that should be applied during all phases of an interaction. The tips can facilitate communication with refugees but they can also be used to deal with one's own stress and emotions.

### PAY ATTENTION TO CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our culture provides us with certain biases. We need to acknowledge that these exist and that cultural habits can influence our way of communicating. Consider refugees culture as well as your own and be aware of other factors, such as health conditions, distress and emotions that may influence your conversation.

### ACTION

- Consider the age, gender and diversity characteristics of the persons you are speaking with. Interaction with older persons, for instance, may require applying specific cultural norms of communication (i.e. referring to the person as an "elder" to demonstrate politeness and show respect).
- Depending on the cultural context, the refugee may prefer to talk to someone of the same or different

ethnic, religious or linguistic background. This is also applicable to the choice of the interpreter.

- Acknowledge others accompanying the refugee. Assess their relationship and roles, based on, for example, the use of last names or first names, titles, the greeting style and level of interaction between them.

### LISTEN ACTIVELY

Communication can only be effective if everybody involved is attentive to what each other is saying. Instead of focusing only on conveying your messages, pay close attention to what the refugee is saying. Use age, gender and diversity sensitive communication skills to ensure mutual understanding so that the person's needs and protection risks are adequately

identified. To fully focus on the interaction, take note of your own physical and mental state, which affects your ability to listen. Separate other events, stressors and encounters from the communication.

### ACTION

- Physically adjust your body to encourage two-way communication.
- Listen carefully by giving your full attention and avoid interrupting.
- Avoid looking at your phone, computer or anything else that could distract you from the interaction.
- Nodding, asking questions and giving constructive feedback will show your interlocutor that you are following and understanding.

## ASK QUESTIONS

Asking questions can help you better understand the person you are speaking with. This is a critical part of active listening. Questions may open or cut off the flow of exchange and may come in two forms: close-ended or open-ended. Close-ended questions are most effective when seeking factual data: when, where, and who. Open-ended questions are most effective when seeking a description or an elaboration on an answer.<sup>5</sup>

### ACTION

- Evaluate what types of questions are appropriate and address sensitive issues in a culturally respectful, gender-sensitive and age-appropriate way.
- Phrase questions to reflect non-judgment.<sup>6</sup>
- Invite answers by using language such as: "Do you have any questions" and "Feel free to stop me if you

are not sure of what I am saying."

- Ask clear questions. Where appropriate, give a reason for asking them.
- Ask for clarifications when more information is needed or the meaning of a response is unclear.<sup>7</sup> Notice when probing is counterproductive.
- Allow the refugee time to think, especially after an open-ended question.
- Do not ask more than one question at a time.

## RESPOND EFFECTIVELY

Put the refugee at the centre of the interaction and ensure that she or he feels heard, valued, understood and respected. Paraphrase what she or he says to demonstrate that you have listened, understood correctly and to show that it is important to you. Acknowledge different viewpoints and reconcile potential misunderstandings. In order to facilitate understanding, try to answer questions as concretely as possible.

### ACTION

- Paraphrase or summarize after each part of the discussion to make sure that you both understand what was said: "I understand that you are upset because..."
- Use non-judgmental phrasing in your responses and follow-up questions.
- Be understanding of refugees' anger or reluctance to reveal or repeat certain details, but encourage them to disclose the information that you are requesting as fully and accurately as possible.
- Try to respond by giving information rather than advising, especially with sensitive communication such

<sup>5</sup> Examples of open-ended questions include "What were the reasons you wanted to move to another place?" and questions with a polite command such as "Please tell me about..."

<sup>6</sup> Keep in mind that "why" may be interpreted as a request for a justification, which can shut down communication whereas "how" and "what" are more open.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of these requests include: "When you say that \_\_\_\_, can you tell me what you mean by that?" or "To help me see the whole picture more clearly, give me some more examples of what you are saying."



as when speaking about experiences of torture.

- Use clear and easy to understand language when responding.

as well as cultural differences and his or her background.

- Consider that cultural groups place different meaning to nonverbal cues; thus, do not generalize across groups or individuals

## TALKING TO PERSONS WHO ARE DISTRESSED

Persons who have experienced potentially traumatic events may no longer accurately remember dates and events. Some may be unable to speak of them. There are different levels of distress, but some easily recognizable physical reactions include: tiredness, nervousness, and avoidance of eye contact. Talking about certain events can potentially renew wounds or fears; be aware that even well-intentioned questioning may feel like an interrogation to refugees, particularly those who are traumatized.

### ACTION

- If an individual cannot remember exact dates and events, reassure her or him that this is not uncommon and make a note of it in your files.
- Do not force people to speak about traumatic events.

## CONSIDER NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Non-verbal behaviour or body language such as gestures, facial expressions, movements and tone of voice can convey receptivity, interest, comprehension, hostility, disinterest, anxiety or discomfort. Take an inventory of your body language. Also consider what the expressions or gestures of the person you are communicating with suggest. Do they fit the accompanying words or does the person's body language convey a different message?

### ACTION

- Evaluate your own non-verbal behaviour and ensure that your body language and physical actions are culturally sensitive.
- Consider the non-verbal behaviour of the person

## PROVIDE SPACE FOR MANAGING ANGER

The experience of conflict, human rights abuses and displacement may increase feelings of insecurity, fear, anger or frustration, reducing people's ability to clearly state how they feel or to express their point. It is important to create an environment in which refugees can fully express their anger, work through it and move beyond it. Dealing with anger can be a difficult task and takes time. No single approach can assure overcoming frustration and impatience. Be understanding: many refugees have survived traumatic events and struggle with daily challenges. The wait for support and solutions can be devastating. Your overall goal should be to respect and allow the expression of anger and not to suppress it. Summarizing angry remarks may help reflect and clarify the intensity of their feelings while deescalating conflict. Restate thoughts calmly and demonstrate that you understand their feelings.

### ACTION

- Be patient and allow time for the full expression of anger.
- Remember that acceptance of the other's emotions creates trust.
- Carefully summarize angry remarks to focus on underlying feelings and needs.
- Remember that the anger is likely aimed at the situation and not at you.
- Show respect and understanding by putting yourself in the refugee's situation to gain perspective on their situation.
- Ask questions purposefully to facilitate exchange of information and to clear up misunderstandings in order to make sure that the refugee's concerns have been understood.

## OVERCOME COMMON BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

There are common behaviours, which can be barriers to effective communication and make positive outcomes less likely. Listed below are some recommended ways to increase positive interactions. Note however that not all recommendations will be appropriate in every context. The below must be tailored to the cultural context.

RECOMMENDED	NOT RECOMMENDED
<b>FACIAL EXPRESSIONS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally appropriate use of eye contact</li> <li>• Warmth and concern reflected in facial expression</li> <li>• Eyes at same level</li> <li>• Appropriately varied, animated facial expressions</li> <li>• Mouth relaxed, occasional smiles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of eye contact</li> <li>• Staring at the person or at an object</li> <li>• Lifting eyebrows critically</li> <li>• Eye level higher or lower</li> <li>• Nodding your head excessively</li> <li>• Frozen or rigid facial expressions</li> <li>• Inappropriate smile</li> </ul>
<b>BODY LANGUAGE</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arms and hands moderately expressive</li> <li>• Appropriate gestures</li> <li>• Body leaning slightly forward, conveying attentiveness but relaxed</li> <li>• Be physically on the same level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigid body position</li> <li>• Arms tightly folded/crossed</li> <li>• Body turned at an angle</li> <li>• Fidgeting with hands, squirming</li> <li>• Slouching or placing feet on desk</li> <li>• Hand/fingers over mouth</li> <li>• Pointing finger for emphasis</li> </ul>
<b>SPEECH</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly audible but not loud speech</li> <li>• Warmth in tone of voice</li> <li>• Tone of voice varied to reflect nuances of feeling and emotional tone of refugee's message</li> <li>• Moderate speech pace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking inaudibly or mumbling</li> <li>• Voice only in one tone or very loud</li> <li>• Overly informal language</li> <li>• Alienating language (such as using "you/your people")</li> <li>• Prolonged silences</li> <li>• Excessively animated speech</li> <li>• Slow, rapid or broken speech patterns</li> <li>• Nervous laughter</li> <li>• Consistent clearing of throat</li> </ul>
<b>PHYSICAL SPACE</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Half a meter between chairs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive closeness or distance</li> <li>• Talking across desk or other barriers such as computers</li> </ul>

## CHECK FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

If communication is meaningful, you may observe that the person is:

- Staying on the topic;
- Volunteering more relevant information spontaneously; and/or,
- Affirming the validity of your responses verbally or non-verbally.

Conversely, if the communication is not effective, the person may be:

- Rejecting your responses verbally or nonverbally;
- Changing the subject;
- Ignoring your message or remaining silent;
- Avoiding answering your questions;
- Appearing confused;
- Becoming defensive; and/or,
- Arguing or expressing anger, not examining the relevance of their feelings.

## ● CONCLUDING AN INTERACTION

At the end of a formal or informal conversation, the refugee should be given the opportunity to ask questions. Prior to ending the conversation, be sure that both parties are aware of what future steps will be taken by all. It is important that the refugee knows that the end of the conversation is not the end of your involvement. She or he should be kept informed of any developments.

## ● KEY REFERENCES

- UNHCR, *UNHCR Gender Training Kit on Refugee Protection*, Ch. 6: Interviewing and Interpreting, (2002) at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3f463b632.pdf>
- UNHCR, *Self-Study Module 3: Interpreting in a Refugee Context*, (1 January 2009), at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49b6314d2.html>
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- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Caring for Survivors of Sexual Violence in Emergencies: Training Pack*, (2010), at: <http://onerresponse.info/GlobalClusters/Protection/GBV/Pages/Tools%20and%20Resources.aspx> or <http://www.rhrc.org/resources/index.cfm?sector=gbv>
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- WHO; War Trauma Foundation; World Vision International, *Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers*, (2011) at: [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/publications/guide\\_field\\_workers/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/publications/guide_field_workers/en/)
- UNHCR, *Listen and Learn: Participatory Assessment with Children and Adolescents*, July 2012, at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fffe4af2.html>

### ACTION

- Explain how we will be giving feedback to the refugee.
- Remind the refugee of confidentiality mechanisms and her or his right to privacy
- Allow the interviewed to ask questions.
- Keep the refugee “in the loop”.



To learn more about community-based protection and share your own experience, join our community of practice at:  
<http://www.unhcrexchange.org/communities/9159>



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