Mental Health and Human Rights Info (MHHRI)

is a database that gives free information in English and Spanish on the effects of human rights violations on mental health in contexts of disaster, conflict and war. The database contains a list of publications that discuss psychosocial interventions at individual and community level. It also lists organisations that work in this field.

This manual is one of our three resources and has been piloted in three different countries. It is written by a team composed of: Helen Christie, responsible for the project
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The manual will soon be available in Nepalese and Ukrainian and can be downloaded free of charge from our manual website www.hhri.org

Children exposed to sexual violence
in war, conflict, humanitarian crisis and low resource communities
A mental health manual for helpers
Working with children exposed to sexual violence

Sexual violence against children is a severe violation of human rights. These rights are frequently violated all over the world but in particular in poverty settings as well as during wars, conflicts, and migration. Additionally, sexual violence often happens in situations where there is limited or no access to specialised health services, and the lack of any help and support causes many children and young people to suffer mentally. This can have severe and negative consequences for the rest of their lives.

The manual is designed to:

- Identify and understand reactions to trauma.
- Deal with the different immediate and long-term responses that children display after they experience traumatic events.
- Explain in accessible terms the psychology of trauma and how traumatic events affect mental health.
- Identify the signs.
- Assess the signs and how it can be understood.
- Include culture in order to understand the context of the abused child.
- Support helpers and caregivers on how to approach children who are very distressed after having been sexual abuse.
- Support helpers and caregivers to create safe spaces for dialogue and give tools that will help the child to recover and heal.
- Advise how to refer to human rights principles and address the rights of child survivors.

The focus of the manual

This training has been developed for helpers and caregivers who work with vulnerable children and their families in war, conflict, humanitarian crises and particularly in low resource communities. Its purpose is to assist helpers and caregivers who meet children in their daily lives and who can assist children through play, teaching and socialising. Though they have different roles, the work of helpers and caregivers has much in common.

The manual is not a therapy manual, but a training manual that can be used to support formal teaching and supervision, group trainings, or personal study (alone or in groups). First of all, it is a collection of useful advice, ideas and practical exercises and tools. As well as theoretical knowledge that can be of value when talking with children who have been exposed to sexual abuse or violence. In addition, it links human rights to practical work with children. Because many children have been exposed to serious human rights violations, helpers should make themselves aware of the relationship between abuses of human rights and provision of care and assistance to children.

The manual has five parts:

Part One
Provides practical information about the manual, its purpose, use and structure. It is followed by original stories about abuse, which are based on real cases that were sent into us from Brazil, India, Nepal, Nicaragua, Northern Iraq/Kurdistan, South Africa, and Sudan. Their purpose is to describe the behavioural and psychological reactions of child survivors concretely, so that children’s experiences and responses are recognisable in other situations.

Part Two
Discusses the helper’s role and responsibility, and how helpers can strengthen their skills. In addition, it considers how to be a good helper and how to create space for difficult conversations.

Part Three
Discusses what is useful to know when you are working with children who have been sexual abused. It describes theories that explain trauma reactions and explains how trauma and sexual abuse affect the brain, development and attachment. It also discusses the way children think, their survival strategies, and their resilience.

Part Four
Discusses useful forms of help, practical skills and techniques that helpers can draw on when they work with sexually abused children. This Part includes information about how children express trauma and how to create conditions in which children feel safe, as well as exercises, tools and information on understanding and managing children’s emotions.

Part Five
Focuses on helpers. Empathy is an important quality for a helper or caregiver; to be able to take care of children who have been traumatised, helpers must feel for the children in their care but must not be overwhelmed by what the children have suffered. This section discusses how to manage the stresses to which helpers are exposed to.