



The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)

1) What is STARTTS?

STARTTS is a free service that provides support for a range of people from refugee backgrounds who may have experienced torture and trauma in their home country. People who work at STARTTS help people who have come to Australia as refugees, with many different aspects of making their lives in a new country.

Living in a situation of war is often a frightening experience and people can have many different reactions. Sometimes people may find that they can't stop thinking about terrible things that happened. They may have nightmares or experience pictures in their head that remind them of terrible things. They may feel as if they are living again in a terrible scene from their past. Sometimes people find it really difficult to sleep may feel tense and 'wound up' or may feel extremely sad. This often affects the people closest to them, like their wife/husband and children.

2) What can STARTTS do for us?

Many people who come to Australia as refugees have had difficult experiences in the past and face many situations in their new country that are difficult for them to understand and manage. Sometimes the difficulties have to do with family issues, sometimes they have to do with mental or emotional or physical health issues, sometimes they have to do with things that have happened in the past that still affect people now.

In different cultures, people have different helpers they can go to for advice and support when they feel worried or want to sort out problems and make decisions. For example, a helper could be a senior family member or a member of their church. Because they may no longer have access to these helpers when they come to Australia, people have to find new ways to get support, to understand and manage the difficulties that they are facing. STARTTS has many different helpers, sometimes called counsellors that people can talk to about their worries and difficulties. These counsellors may be able to help people to sort out their worries, or send them to others who can assist them better. STARTTS counsellors are trained and experienced to help people to understand and manage the psychological and emotional effects of war and conflict. STARTTS community development workers are trained and experienced in assisting communities to gain access to resources and information that may help them to become stronger and more cohesive in this new society, and more able to understand and help each other.

Meeting with someone from STARTTS one- to -one gives people the opportunity to talk with someone in private about the way that they feel as a result of being in a situation of war. Some people say that they are nervous about talking with their families about the horrible things they have undergone or witnessed, or that they can't stop memories and thoughts from overwhelming them. Talking with someone from STARTTS, who is professionally trained to help, can lighten some of the pressure of dealing with the intense feelings alone.

STARTTS groups bring people together to support each other, learn about the effects of living with violence and often to have fun as well. STARTTS runs groups that often include craft activities, social outings, practical information about settlement services, and relaxation as well as providing a chance to learn new skills. People tell us that these groups help them feel more relaxed and supported as well as provide them with the opportunity to make new friends. STARTTS also runs camps for young people that are very popular.

STARTTS workers spend time getting to know people from different communities. Different communities have different needs and different ways of doing things. The more we know about what your community needs, the more we are able to provide help in a way that is practical and useful for you. STARTTS attends community meetings, forums and community activities. We help communities identify what their needs are and then assist them to meet these needs.

3) When can and should we call STARTTS?

There are many common experiences that people who come to Australia as refugees can have. Maybe they feel worried too much. Maybe they have trouble with remembering things or feel aggravated and angry when they don't want to. Maybe they feel very sad and can't stop thinking about sad things or feel nervous or stressed. Maybe their family is having too many difficulties or arguments. Some people can feel that they can't control their own behavior anymore and they want some help to do that. All sorts of things.

These feelings and reactions to terrible events are very normal responses to horrific situations. When people feel that they would like some help with feelings like these or with other emotions that they don't like or understand they can contact STARTTS.

If you experience any of these things or others I mentioned before such as nightmares, sleep problems, thoughts about terrible experiences that are persistent and don't go away, pictures in your head about terrible things or a feeling of sadness, emptiness or stress and 'nervousness', then talking to someone at STARTTS might help.

Having traumatic and upsetting experiences in the past can have a big effect on people. Sometimes the effect can last a long time. Sometimes the effect of past experiences does not seem to impact upon them until years after the event. However, when someone does find that the past is making it hard to live in the present, it can be very helpful to talk to someone at STARTTS about it.

4) What happens when we call STARTTS?

If you call STARTTS yourself, our receptionist will transfer your call to our Intake Officer. They take down some information over the phone and may ask questions about your experiences overseas, when and how you came to Australia and how you are feeling now in Australia.

5) Does it cost anything to go to STARTTS?

No STARTTS is a free service. Even the group programs are free.

6) What happens if there is no one there who speaks my language?

Many staff at STARTTS are bi-lingual. Interpreters are available for any languages where we do not have a worker who speaks a language. STARTTS staff are trained in using interpreters. It may feel a little strange at first, to speak to someone about personal matters in the presence of an interpreter, but people tell us that it doesn't take long to get used to speaking with an interpreter. All interpreters are qualified and keep all of your information private. You can also contact STARTTS by using the Telephone Interpreter Service. Just call 131450 and ask for a (please insert either Somali, Dinka, Sudanese Arabic or Kurdish)interpreter.

7) Some people say that going to a service to help you with mental health means you are crazy. Is this true?

Not at all. It's normal that people have strong and upsetting reactions to experiences of violence and war. After all, they are unnatural situations, and are extremely frightening. Looking after yourself and getting the help you need is important to help you feel better and stronger. When you talk to a counselor, these reactions will usually become less intense over time, and you will be able to feel more in control of yourself and your life.

8) What has STARTTS done to help refugee communities and how can STARTTS help our community?

Being exposed to violence has big effects on individuals, families and on the community. In Australia, refugee communities may be fragmented, suspicious of government-related services and contain a significant amount of internal conflict. They may have little formal structure, so that people do not feel that they have a voice in the community, or that the community is able to effectively access services to benefit its members. However, it is important to note that these suspicions and divisions are not the result of differing cultural and religious characteristics of these communities. They are the effects of trauma and state-instituted violence

STARTTS generally works in three ways with communities:

1. Developing social networks – including through youth camps and social support and other types of groups for parents, young people, women and men. [Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) Program].

2. Strengthening refugee communities – including through assistance with structure establishment, community education, community liaison, consultations and numerous other projects as identified by a particular community.
3. Making mainstream society and institutions more accessible to refugee communities – including through advocacy, training, consultancy, and awareness raising in mainstream society and institutions.

To contact STARTTS call 9794 1900 (our Carramar office) or 9646 6666 (our Auburn office) or 8778 2000 (our Liverpool office)