

Utilising a cultural lens on the road to recovery from trauma: Tarah's story

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STARTTS Clinical Master Class

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NSW Service for the Treatment
and Rehabilitation of Torture
and Trauma Survivors

Presentation Content

- Socio-political historical geographic context of client experience
- Cultural aspects
- Cultural Framework
- Trauma History
- Presenting problems
- Assessment
- Formulation
- PTSD symptoms in cultural context
- Interventions
- Outcomes
- References

Socio-political historical geographic



➤ <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/iraq>






Yazidi/Ezidi – Brief Background

- Ethno-religious minority from Northern Iraq, Northern Syria, Western Iran, Eastern Turkey
- Yazidism – orally transmitted monotheistic religion.
- Structure incorporates hereditary castes who have defined relationship with sacred customs and status.
- Closed ethno-religious group, cannot join, cannot leave. Marriage can only be to Yazidi and within caste. Sexual contact with outsiders is prohibited.
- Consequences for breaches, means losing Yazidi identity and community relations.



Some cultural elements

- Cultural, communal and gender-based role norms.
- Common cultural collective identity of being very sacred people with the most ancient religion and being the most persecuted people.
- Long history known within community of 74 episodes of persecution and massacres over last 800 to 1000 years.
- Shingal Mountain has been important over this history as a place of refuge when times get hard.
- Misunderstanding within cultural religious narratives of some other regional groups, that Yazidi name, sacred symbols and beliefs are heretical.



Yazidi Genocide

Roja Resh – Black Day

- 2013 - 2017, ISIS (Daesh) (Islamic fundamentalist militants) committed atrocities against the civilian population in Iraq and Syria. Yazidis were among the most severely affected communities targetted due to their ethnicity and religion.
- 3 August 2014, ancestral home of Yazidis, Shingal, was attacked by ISIS who killed, kidnapped, enslaved thousands of men, women and children. Many fled up the Shingal mountain and endured deprivation of food, water and shelter during their refugee flight, and many were displaced to refugee camps in Turkiye and IDP camps in Iraq.
- This year is the 10th Anniversary of this Yazidi genocide.



Theory informing intervention through cultural lens

- DSMV – cultural expression of distress
 - (DSMV, 2022)
- Cultural meanings of torture experience
 - (Kirmayer et al., 2018)
- Conceptual Model for counselling people affected by trauma across culture
 - (Ninnis, 2018)



Cultural concepts of distress -DSMV

- ▶ ***All forms of distress are locally shaped, including DSM disorders.***
- ▶ DSM disorders can be understood as operationalized prototypes that started out as cultural syndromes and became widely accepted as a result of their clinical and research utility.
- ▶ PTSD is a cultural concept in DSMV.

Cultural concepts of distress - DSMV

- Ways that cultural groups experience, understand, and communicate suffering, behavioural problems, troubling thoughts and emotions.
- Across groups there are culturally patterned differences in symptoms, ways of talking about distress, and locally perceived causes, which are associated with coping strategies and patterns of help seeking.
- Cultural concepts of distress are not endorsed uniformly by everyone in a culture. They change across groups and time.
- Emphasis is on explanations or experience of distress rather than culturally distinctive configurations of symptoms.
- Assess culture and engagement with dominant or resettled culture separately and include acculturation distress.

Cultural concepts of distress - DSMV

➤ ***Cultural syndromes***

- Clusters of symptoms and attributions that tend to co-occur among individuals in specific cultural groups, communities, or contexts and that are recognised locally as coherent patterns of experience.

➤ ***Cultural idioms of distress***

- Ways of expressing distress that may not involve specific symptoms or syndromes, but that provide collective, shared ways of experiencing and talking about personal or social concerns.

➤ ***Cultural explanations or perceived causes***

- Labels, attributions, or features of an explanatory model that indicate culturally recognised meaning or etiology for symptoms, illness, or distress.



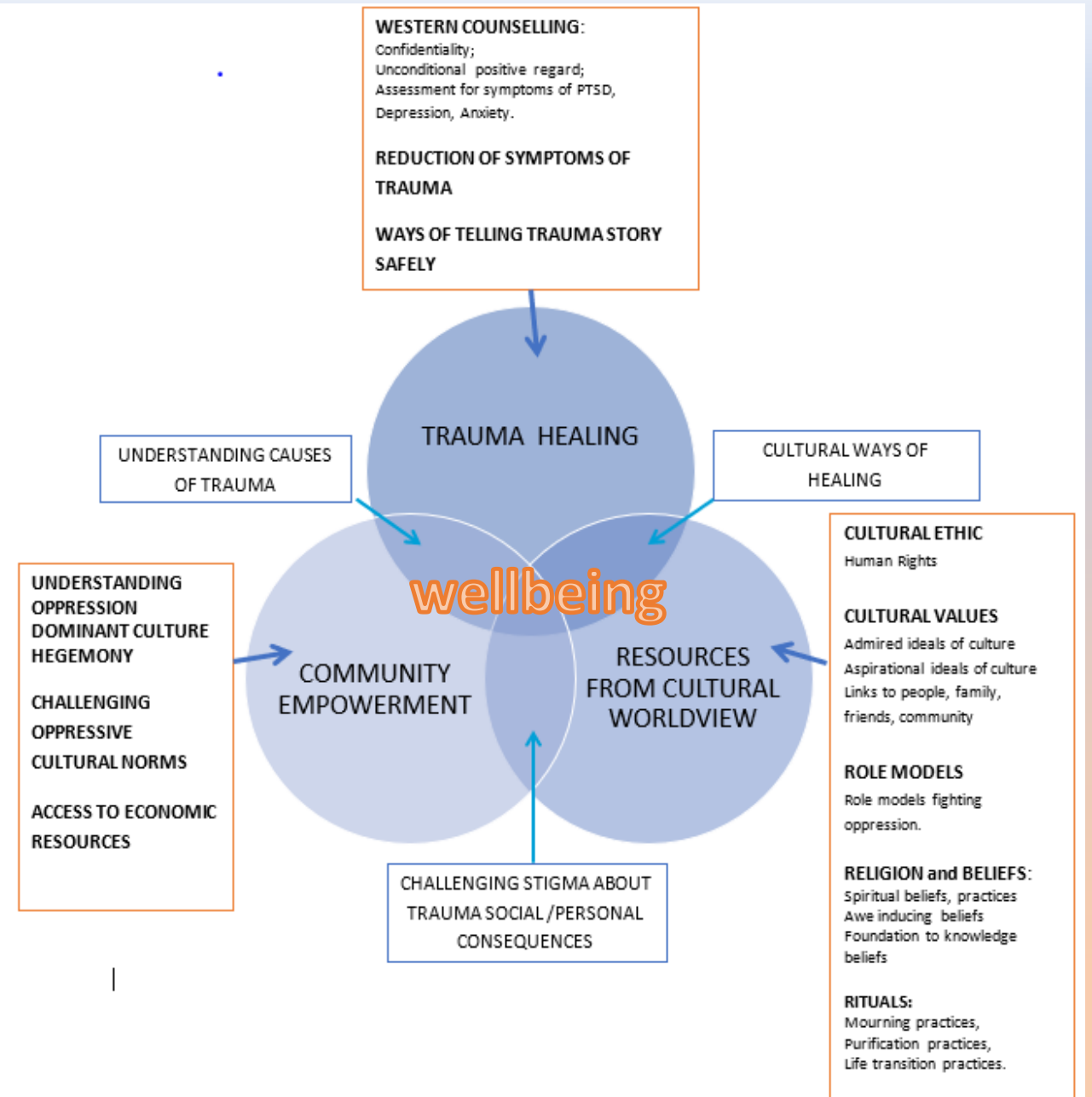
Cultural meanings of torture experience

- ▶ All forms of torture follow an affective logic rooted both in human biology and in local social and cultural meanings of experience.
- ▶ Understanding the impact of specific forms of torture on individuals requires knowledge of their learning histories, and of the personal and cultural meanings of specific kinds of violence.
- ▶ Exploring cultural meanings requires attention to over-arching discourse, embodied practices, and everyday engagements with an eco-social environment.
- ▶ Restitution, treatment and recovery can then be guided by knowledge of cultural meanings, dynamics, and strategies for coping with catastrophic threats, injury, humiliation, helplessness and loss.
- ▶ (Kirmayer et al., 2018, p. 84)

Universal conceptual model
for counselling and group work
across culture

with people affected by trauma and
intergenerational trauma

Ninnis (2018)

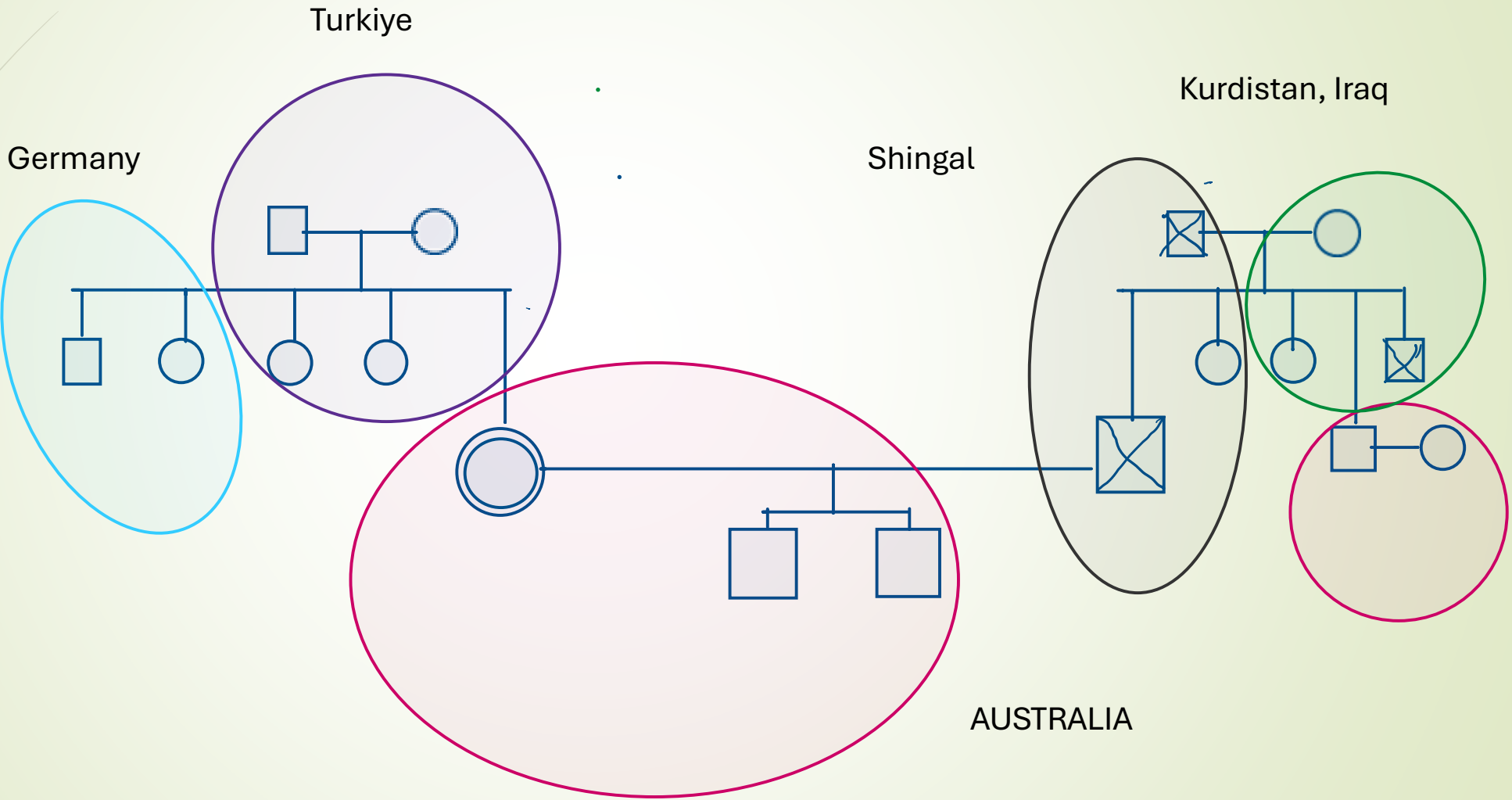


Tarah

Background Information

- Woman Age 32
- Yazidi ethno-religious group
- Language Kurmanji
- No formal Education
- Married with 2 children aged 15 and 13, husband deceased
- Arrived in Australia on Humanitarian Visa with children
- Regular Sessions over 18 months

Genogram





Trauma History

- ▶ Witnessed atrocities and killings when village invaded by ISIS
- ▶ Attacked, threatened and captured by ISIS militants
- ▶ Experienced sexual assault, cruelty, kept in isolation, forced conversion
- ▶ Experienced dangerous escape and flight
- ▶ Lived in refugee camp in circumstances of deprivation



Complex presentation

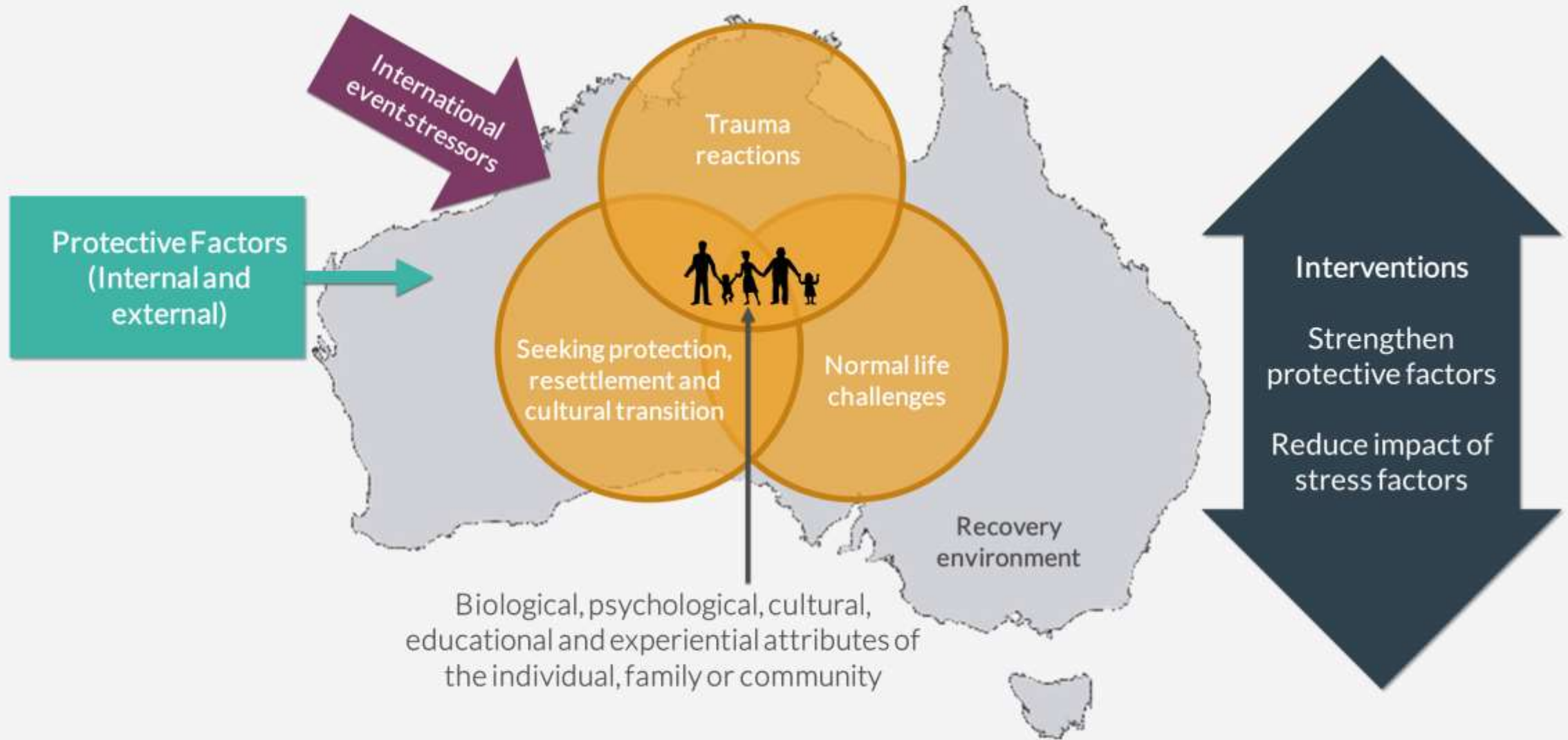
- Feels fear all the time, hyper-vigilance
- Intrusive memories, flashback memories
- Nightmares
- Poor sleep, fear of sleep and nightmares
- Feels angry, irritable outbursts
- History of dissociative collapses related to distress
- more soon after release, then decreased to none over last few years.
- Congruent with PTSD

- Prolonged and unresolved Grief

Assessment - initial

Harvard Trauma Questionnaire Symptomatic.		2.81/4
Hopkins Symptom Checklist for Anxiety Symptomatic		3.40/4
Hopkins Symptom Checklist for Depression Symptomatic		2.47/4
WHO5	3/25	very limited wellbeing
Risk Assessment		Denies suicidality

The complex interaction of challenges



Therapeutic Goals

➤ **Tarah's goals**

- Be a good woman and mother
- Have a normal life

➤ **Counsellor goals**

- Develop therapeutic relationship
- Create safety
- Understand PTSD symptom expression and Tarah's worldview
- Reduce PTSD symptoms
- Improve sense of control Tarah has over her life
- Support Settlement



PTSD symptoms in cultural context



Cultural idioms of distress

- **'Feeling breathless'** is the English translation of the Kurmanji expression for feeling anxiety. Communication about the experience and subjective focus is on the somatic impact on the body.
- **'Headaches'**. Is not just physical pain but relates also to stress and tension as well as the struggle with intrusive memories, and rumination, and the feeling of not wanting to be around people.
- Tarah describes 'feeling breathless' and 'headaches' as significant indicators of feeling less well and having a difficult week.



Cultural Explanation of Nightmares

► Dreams

- Belief that during sleep the soul wanders.
- dreams are a portend for things to come and can be interpreted.

► Nightmares

- bad dreams can increase the risk of bad things over the following day.
- Dreams of seeing the dead and of the dead wanting the dreamer to stay with them may be a sign of a pending death.
- Tarah confirms that these experiences can compound her stress over several days.
- Dreams of war atrocities and torture can increase Tarah's fear of these things happening again.



Dissociative collapse (Functional seizures): Cultural dimension for Yazidi women

- Culturally influenced somatic manifestation of emotional distress combined with culturally shaped perception of deep shame and fear of being excluded from the community form part of seizure scaffold of functional seizure (Kizilhan et al., 2020, p. 141)



Dissociative collapse (Functional seizures): Cultural dimension for Yazidi women

- From my experience and reports of other STARTTS clinicians, many Yazidi women express Dissociative collapse in demonstrative ways of wailing and flailing limbs, before collapse.
- This parallels mourning rituals for Yazidi women expressing distress.
- This is also very distressing to witness.
- In the context of chronic PTSD, Dissociative collapse demonstrates
 - cannot tolerate this level of pain
- In the context of the Yazidi genocide
 - look what ISIS has done to me / to Yazidi




Intervention

Recovery by engaging with culture



Intervention

- Create safety and build rapport
- Expressed standard that torture is not acceptable and that what ever action happened to client is unacceptable (discussed human rights)
- Psychoeducation – overactive danger detection system in brain due to trauma
- Gentle exploration of life experiences within her windows of tolerance
- Narrative development of the trauma story, strength, resilience and resistance components of experience emphasised
- Strengths and values focus: explore Tarah's relationship to cultural strengths and values and how her own strengths and values intersect.
- Develop self-compassion (related to feelings about torture and prolonged struggle with trauma)
- Body and Mind strategies for reducing stress system activation




Recovery by engaging with culture

- **Explore cultural expression of distress and how this helps healing**
- **Ritualised mourning practices.**
 - Impact of mourning rituals for women of wailing and allowing grieving self to be physically supported by other women.
 - Communal understanding of emotional distress by experiencing the visceral somatic impact of crowd transmission of emotion, being in the presence of others who are performing mourning practices and sharing the intensity and discomfort of that emotion.
 - Discussion about importance of this to Tarah linked to resilience personally and culturally.




Recovery by engaging with culture

- **Explore relationship to communal identity**
- **Understanding the role of shame**
 - in relation to personal expectations, cultural adherence and alignment to cultural norms
- Discussion with Tarah allowed exploration
 - of strengths and ways to embrace them and
 - of unhelpful aspects and how to respond to these.




Explore cultural resources and cultural ways of healing

- ▶ **Explore rituals and practices that may add to mind body stress system reduction**
 - Yazidi Prayer custom to pray for everyone's wellbeing.
 - Discussions about connections to cultural values
 - Explored aspects of mindful focus,
 - and generating feelings of compassion within the body,
 - and capacity to shift focus from distress to blessings.
 - Utilising music traditions of listening to mournful and sad music to induce crying with the expectation that after crying will feel better, body more regulated and intense somatic feelings associated with distress will be more settled.



Cultural change for healing cleansing ceremony at Lalish sacred spring

- New cleansing rituals were established with blessing of Yazidi spiritual leader in September 2014, to reintegrate women survivors of sexual violence, forced marriage and forced conversion into the community.
- Women make pilgrimage to Lalish sacred temple for Yazidism and participate in cleansing ceremony of receiving a white scarf dipped in the sacred spring to symbolize their rebirth.
- Formal directive from Yazidi spiritual leader to Yazidi community that the women are full Yazidi community members.
- (Graham-Harrison, 1 Jul 2017)
- Discussion with Tarah about the meaning that this has for her and how it has contributed to her healing and identity.



Explore cultural resources and cultural ways of healing

- Discussions about contemporary role model Nadia Murad.
- Nadia Murad is a Yazidi woman who wrote 'The Last Girl: My story of captivity, and my fight against the Islamic State', about her experiences as a captive of ISIS.
- She won the Nobel peace prize in 2018 and many other subsequent awards for her work informing the world about the Yazidi genocide, promoting peace, and advocating against sexual violence in conflict.
- Nadia Murad is a role model who is Empowering, inspiring and healing for other women.



Recovery by engaging with culture

- **Challenges**

- **In relation to counselling with Yazidi**

- Potential client caution about discussing elements of religious significance to themselves.
- specific details of religious beliefs are not openly disclosed or publicly available due to sacredness of religion, closed religion and history of persecution
- Caste and gender inform access to some religious aspects.



Outcomes

Outcomes

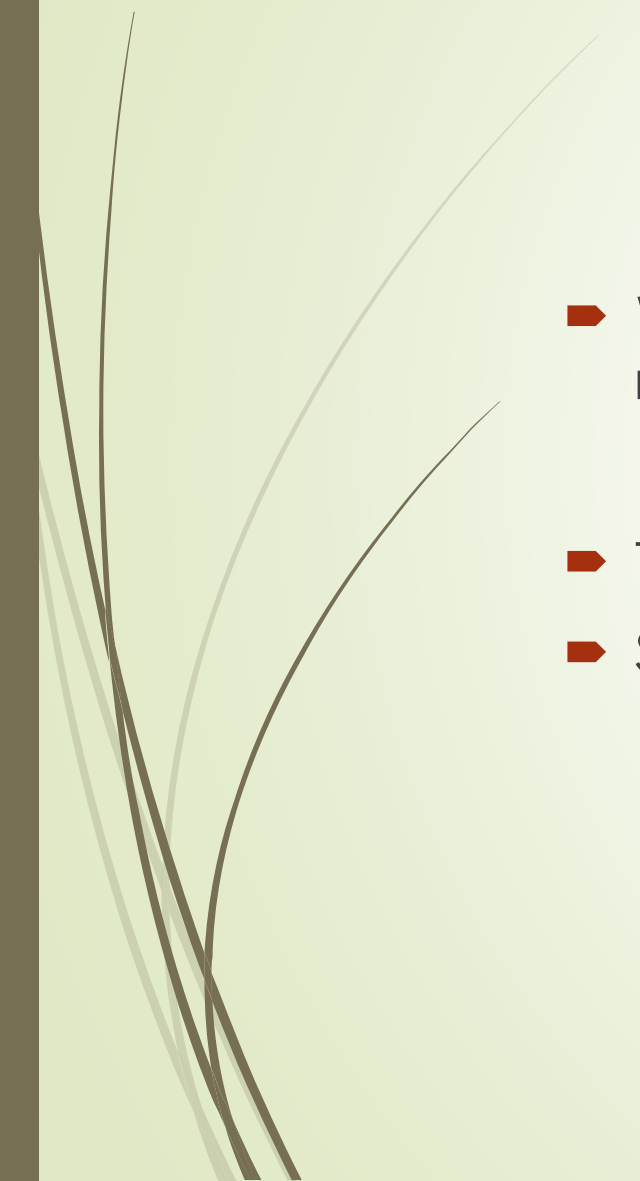
- Tarah developed a more coherent story of trauma experiences that emphasises her values and acts of resistance aligned to her community and cultural identity despite the torture and deprivation she was subjected to.
- Increased capacity to articulate life experience in terms of values, strengths, resilience and resistance that support a desired self, in community, and within culture.
- Increased capacity to manage intrusive fear responses, intrusive memories and nightmares by range of interventions including culturally meaningful strategies.
- Able to engage with body and mind stress management strategies when distressed, including some linked to cultural practices.
- Tarah self reports these are helpful although not always.

Assessment - final

Harvard Trauma Questionnaire Less Symptomatic.	1.75/4
Hopkins Symptom Checklist for Anxiety not Symptomatic	1.70/4
Hopkins Symptom Checklist for Depression not Symptomatic	1.34/4
WHO5 improved wellbeing	17/25



Finishing counselling

- ▶ We both agreed to finish therapy, with the knowledge that re-referral can be made when needed.
 - ▶ Tarah has plans to pursue other aspects of her settlement.
 - ▶ She is more focused on her life in the world.
- 

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