



EVALUATION RESULTS TEACHING RECOVERY TECHNIQUES PROGRAMM („KRÄFTE STÄRKEN – TRAUMA BEWÄLTIGEN“) FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN AUSTRIA

– *Dr. Petra Krenn-Maritz*

Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) is the first low-threshold and large-scale mental health intervention for refugee children and adolescents in Austria. The implementing organisation AFYA aims at reducing the burden of trauma-related problems for school children and their families. The present evaluation investigated the program's first year in Austria. It indicates that this intervention has a significant positive effect on PTSD symptoms.

Receiving asylum in a European country means safety and help for refugee families from areas of war or natural disasters, but the traumatic experiences they made before or during their escape to Europe continue to live on in their minds and many of them develop Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) is a low-threshold program which was initially developed by the “Children & War Foundation” to help children and adolescents in areas affected by war or natural disasters to cope with the effects of their traumatic experiences. TRT focuses on the known symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In the TRT sessions the children and adolescents learn to understand, recognise and control their symptoms. In Austria this program was implemented 2018 by the organisation AFYA under the name „Kräfte stärken – Trauma bewältigen“ – „increasing empowerment – coping with trauma“. On an international level TRT has been evaluated in a number of settings like war zones or after natural disasters, but only limited data was available about the program's effects in safe asylum countries. This study aimed to evaluate the TRT program in school-settings in Austria as a safe country of asylum. The study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to test the effects of TRT on PTSD symptoms and to examine the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

„PTSD“

= **Post traumatic stress disorder**

= a mental disorder that can develop after a person was exposed to a traumatic event or a threat to a person's life. Symptoms may include: disturbing thoughts, feelings or dreams related to the event (intrusive memories), increased anxiety, irritation and anger, mental or physical distress. Attempts to avoid anything related to the trauma.



TEACHING RECOVERY TECHNIQUES (TRT)

TRT is a low-threshold group intervention where children and adolescents learn coping strategies to deal with traumatic experiences and to reduce PTSD symptoms. TRT includes 6 sessions for children and young people between 10 and 18 years in groups up to 10 persons. The AFYA program follows the Teaching Recovery Techniques (TRT) Manual developed by the "Children & War Foundation". Slight adjustments were made due to the specific school-settings. All trainers working for AFYA in Austria are qualified according the Teaching Recovery Techniques guidelines.

The six training units of the TRT program cover the following topics: psycho-education, stress management skills, affective modulation skills, relaxation exercises, sleep hygiene, mastery of trauma reminders and intrusive memories, and the development of strategies for the future.

LOW-THRESHOLD



Program directly at schools



Positive communication



Training, not therapy



Trainers from same cultural background



Work in groups rather than individual

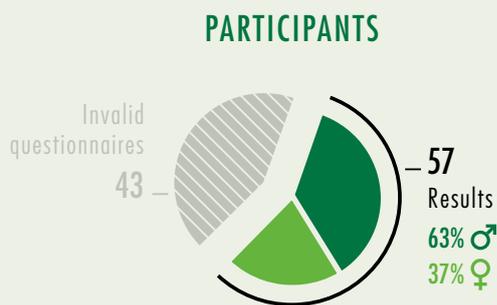


No additional costs for families and schools

RESULTS

During the investigation period, a total of 100 children and adolescents in 5 schools participated in the TRT program. For the quantitative evaluation the Children's Impact of Event Scale (CRIES-8) questionnaire was used to examine intrusion and avoidance, two of the main PTSD-symptoms. For 57 participants pre- and post-measurements were available.

For the qualitative evaluation 39 interviews were conducted. The qualitative content analysis revealed fundamental information about the way the pupils, their parents and their teachers perceived the effectiveness of the program. The children and adolescents reported noticeable improvements in terms of sleeping, concentration, high tension, anger and aggression.

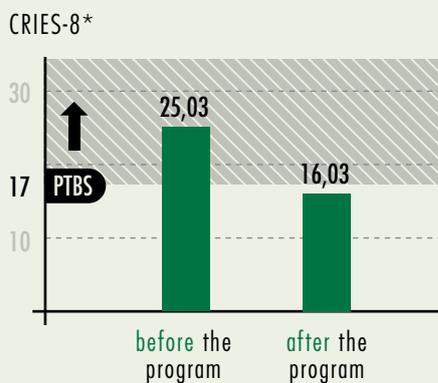


Much has changed, before I participated in the program, there were so many things in my head... Things that I did not like and that I couldn't get out of my head. But now, I have control.

60% of the children and adolescents tested positive for PTSD before the intervention. In this group the results showed a significant reduction of these symptoms for the children and adolescents that completed the TRT program.

Sleeping problems are common with PTSD and often lead to fatigue, headache and lack of concentration. The participants found the relaxation exercises and strategies for mastery of trauma reminders very helpful to relax and to gain control over intrusive memories and thoughts. It helped them to improve their sleep and to have less nightmares.

PTBS SYMPTOMS before and after TRT



Difficulty to concentrate on tasks or actions is another frequent PTSD symptom, which often is a major problem in regard to learning a new language and performance assessments at school. The interviewed children and adolescents found the concentration exercises very helpful. In general relaxation exercises were highly estimated and praised as very helpful by the participants.

I learned how to better understand myself; I mean how to get rid of stress, especially when I am under severe pressure. How I can influence this experience and how I can feel well again.

* Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: from scores ≥ 17

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some children and adolescents said that they had difficulties with their anger-control, like screaming and sometimes even beating. Some of them described a change in regard to these feelings and said that the TRT program helped them to develop strategies for dealing with rage and aggression.

The teachers expressed a general uncertainty regarding trauma as well as the desire to get further information or training on this topic. They appreciated the fact that the TRT trainers are native speakers; in their view, this offers the opportunity for children and adolescents to talk in their own language about emotional issues. Some of the interviewed children and adolescents worried about missing regular lessons while participating in the TRT training.

The results confirm previous studies on the effects of the TRT program and prove that this program can be implemented with great benefit in the context of schools in safe asylum countries. The evaluation shows clearly positive effects for these children and adolescents.

- Intensify the parental involvement in order to reinforce their psycho-social health competence
- In the pre-selection of participants focus on those with clear traumatic experiences
- Solve the conflict of interest between participating in the TRT training or participating in regular school lessons.
- Make workshops on trauma available for teachers
- Continue the CRIES analysis for further evaluation of the TRT program

OUTLOOK

Even with the numbers of asylum claims decreasing in Europe during the last three years, there are still thousands of refugees from war zones in the challenging process of integration. The topic “Refuge-Trauma-Integration” will continue to be of concern in European countries. Supporting these people to cope with their traumatic memories of war and loss will continue to be an important task.

The overall result of the present evaluation is that the TRT program makes an important contribution to the mental health of children and adolescents who have experienced war and trauma.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author completed TRT-training at the Children & War Foundation in London. During the pilot period of the program in Austria, before the start of the present evaluation, she worked as a TRT trainer on behalf of AFYA. She is also member of the board of the AFYA association. At no time during the evaluation period did she take part in the training or was involved in the organisation of the trainings. The evaluation process was carried out in strict compliance with objective scientific criteria.