



Press Release – Friday 17 June 2022

## Psychological Society of Ireland promoting empathy on World Refugee Day

On Monday 20 June, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) will celebrate World Refugee Day. This year's theme is the right to seek safety. Whoever needs safety, whenever they need safety, and wherever they are from, everyone has the right to seek safety. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) considers World Refugee Day as an opportunity to build empathy and understanding of the plight of refugees and to recognise the strength and resilience of refugees in rebuilding their lives.

Since the end of February this year, the world has seen people fleeing conflict in Ukraine to seek safety. Similar situations exist in countries such as Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and Yemen as people leave their homes seeking refuge from war, economic and political instability, drought, and other natural disasters.

As Ireland opened its doors most recently to those arriving from Ukraine, the PSI is using this current experience when exploring empathy for those seeking refuge.

- **Factors needed to build empathy for those seeking refuge**

In recent months, Irish people displayed empathy and understanding for the plight of Ukrainians: inviting them into our homes; communities; activities; and classrooms. We have become privy in some small way to their harrowing traumas and their resilience too. Appealing to our values, finding commonalities, showing compassion, and driving social change are identified as important attributes to help build empathy for Ukrainians seeking refuge. In this way, Irish people have joined a global community in showing empathy for people seeking refuge. This crisis has appealed to people's deep-held values to do good by welcoming Ukrainians into their homes, groups, classes, and communities; they have shown curiosity about what is happening in their country and to their families who still are living there. We have found **commonalities** in our cultures and what is needed to welcome Ukrainian families into a different school system and culture. People are actively driving **social change** by welcoming Ukrainians seeking refuge.

PSI Chartered member, Dr Claire Crowe states: "A key change we all could adopt would be to refer to the people fleeing the war in Ukraine as individuals "seeking refuge" rather

than “refugees”. When they become refugees, they are separate from us, and empathy is blocked. We need to hold on to the temporary nature of their situation to remind ourselves that this is not who they are but rather this is where they are right now.”

- **What happens when we cultivate empathy?**

The Irish have long been an immigrant people so it is not surprising that we hold an ideal of ourselves as a welcoming people. For communities who have embraced the nearly 28,000 Ukrainians, in particular the host families who have brought them intimately into their families, there is also an inherent psychological reward in it. Research highlights times when we cultivate empathy, we actually improve the quality of our own lives.

- **What we learn, what our children learn**

We gain psychologically when we give support to others. In helping people escape war, conflict, and persecution we feel better about ourselves; it gives us a sense of belonging and of purpose, it boosts our self-esteem, and it even helps us to live longer. It is also contagious. Our children learn valuable lessons on moral and ethical values. Living in a world where their family has chosen to reach out and house or support individuals seeking refuge teaches children about how to treat others. Having these role models has been shown to foster a value in humanity and justice that is lifelong.

- **Compassionate wisdom and courage**

Compassion is a motivational system linked with having a sensitivity to suffering as well as an intention and commitment to alleviate it. The key compassionate ingredients to help alleviate and prevent suffering are courage and wisdom. If we take an example, a host family is motivated to address suffering of others, they think wisely and importantly about what is and also importantly, what is not possible for them in hosting a family. With this wisdom, they show courage to bear witness to stories and experiences of people leaving a war-torn country to provide what individuals seeking safety might need. In the same continuum, a person who provides a welcoming meal for a Ukrainian family is motivated to address suffering too. They might employ the wisdom to know their house may not be suitable for a long-term stay and feel the courage to do what they can such as providing a meal, some clothes and supplies, recognising it may fall short of their bigger dreams and wishes. In this way, we need to have courage with wisdom – we need to wisely think through what we can and cannot do and we need courage to approach and try and alleviate the suffering of others. Importantly, the war rages on, so we need to continue to nurture our wisdom, our courage, and to show empathy to people seeking refuge whatever way we can.

- **Psychological first aid**

It is important for Ukrainian people who flee war to have a sense of safeness. To help support fostering a sense of resilience, they need to have a safe place, remain calm, hold onto hope, feel connected to others, and have a sense of self efficacy. It is important to emphasise that counselling or psychological therapies are not recommended in the

immediate aftermath of a crisis. It is normal to experience distressing feelings and thoughts after a traumatic event. We understand we want to help and support those who have experienced the most horrific war crimes. Instead, psychological first aid, which is a humane and non-invasive approach to dealing with someone who has experienced a trauma and can be carried out by any person, is recommended.

We may have experienced a slowing down of our response to those seeking refuge. This is to be expected at this junction as we take stock and re-evaluate our resources and needs. Additionally, some may worry they will develop compassion fatigue and take on the worries and trauma of others. In compassion research, to take the metaphor of an oxygen mask, you have to have the courage to put your own oxygen mask on before helping others. If you do not have your own oxygen mask on, you will run out of oxygen and be physically unable to help anyone else. This oxygen mask is looking after yourself through getting adequate sleep, nutrition, social activities, exercise, and relaxation to help keep balance and be able to tolerate and witness other people's experiences, without taking it on board. This oxygen mask self-care supports our capacity to continue to show empathy, wisdom, and courage in our approach to individuals seeking refuge.

Dr Claire Crowe states: "On World Refugee Day, let's continue to build our empathy, bring wisdom and courage to ask how can I become involved to help others have a sense of safety, no matter how small a contribution, it matters. We can reflect on how we have contributed and what ways we can continue to contribute. Starting from a place of empathy on this World Refugee Day, take a moment to remind ourselves about what these people are fleeing from in order to take refuge and find safety here in Ireland. Pause and acknowledge what horrific traumas they have witnessed or been subjected to; or their family and friends have been subjected to. When people arrive in this country, they are seeking help and seeking safety. We can all have a role, no matter how small, in supporting that."

The Psychological Society of Ireland has a dedicated *Time of War Resources* section on the Society website, [www.psychologicalsociety.ie](http://www.psychologicalsociety.ie). This resource aims to provide assistance to those seeking refuge and who have been affected by war in Ukraine and in other countries.

**ENDS.**

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**Points to note:**

- The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) is the learned and professional body for the profession in the Republic of Ireland, with the primary object of advancing psychology as an applied science in Ireland and elsewhere.
- Connect with the PSI through [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), and [LinkedIn](#).