



HOST'S HANDBOOK

PREPARING TO BE A HOST

Before you begin your hosting experience, it's important to make sure you are well prepared. To help you with this, we've created this handbook.

You might already be familiar with some of it's content, and so for you it could be a refresher. Or maybe you're very new to all of this, and you're wondering what to expect or where to begin.

This handbook will cover the basics, it will help you to understand the experience of asylum seekers, and provide you with some important tips as you open up your home.

PART 1 – WHO ARE ASYLUM SEEKERS?

Introduces you to asylum seekers, and to some of the sorts of experiences they may have had prior to arriving in Australia.

PART 2 – SEEKING ASYLUM IN AUSTRALIA

A very basic overview of the legal process of seeking asylum in Australia.

PART 3 – LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

Goes through some of the key issues that asylum seekers face whilst living in the Australian community.

PART 4 – HOSTING AN ASYLUM SEEKER

What's helpful and what's not; issues that could arise and how to handle them; and how to care for both yourself and your guest.

Read on to get started!

PART 1

WHO ARE ASYLUM SEEKERS?

A HUMAN FACE

There's a technical definition for the term 'asylum seeker', which we'll get into in a second. But first and foremost (and a point that is often lost amidst the dialogue in our media), asylum seekers are people. They come from all walks of life.

In fact, they are from a diverse range of socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. They are doctors, engineers, business owners and farmers. They are mothers, uncles, daughters and brothers.

Like all of us, they each have their own life story, their own unique personality, their own weaknesses and strengths. They carry with them personal beliefs and ideas, passions and hopes.

Let's remember this as we move on, holding on to the humanity of this group of people, who ought not to be defined solely by their status as 'asylum seekers'.

LEGAL DEFINITION

The technical definition for an asylum seeker is this: someone who is *outside* of their home country, and **seeking protection** in another country.

They have not yet been granted this protection – they've only made a claim – but their claim is that they are a refugee, in need of protection.

Now, it's important to be **legally recognised** as a refugee, because this is how someone gains protection, and can't be sent back home. This is the key difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker. While refugees have been assessed and granted protection, asylum seekers have not. Asylum seekers have made a claim, and they are awaiting an outcome.

THE REFUGEE CONVENTION

Asylum seekers are assessed using the 1951 United Nations [Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) – an international legal document outlining who is considered to be a refugee, and the obligations of the international community in protecting them.

A number of countries (including Australia) have signed in agreement to the Convention, and in doing so they have put up their hand to protect refugees, by not returning them to a place where their life or their freedom is under threat.

In a nutshell, these are the requirements you need to meet in order to be considered a refugee.

Asylum seekers are assessed against these criteria, and, if successful, they are to be granted refugee status and offered protection.



Image source: <http://tealeafnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Refugee-Infographic.015.png>

INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

Asylum seekers can seek protection in one of two ways:

Apply to a Government

They may submit an application to the government of a country that is signatory to the Refugee Convention.

They have to be *in* that country in order to apply this way, and, if they are successful, they are to be allowed to remain in that country as a protected person.

Apply to the UNHCR

If they are in a country that is unable or unwilling to offer protection, then they might submit an application to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – an international body also able to grant refugee status.

Refugees will remain in these countries, in camps, cities or rural areas, while the UNHCR does their best to support them.

EXPERIENCES IN HOME COUNTRY

Asylum seekers will have had differing experiences in their home country, which have caused them to flee.

Many will have witnessed or experienced deeply distressing things. They may have lost loved ones or witnessed violence. They may have lived under surveillance or constant threat. They may have experienced systematic persecution or deprivation. They may have been abused, imprisoned, or even tortured.

These experiences will have a lasting impact, and many people will carry profound trauma with them for years into the future.

- Click [here](#) for Akbar Gholami's story.

FLEEING HOME

Most asylum seekers are forced to leave home quickly, and without warning. Some will have had time to plan and collect personal possessions and documents. Some will have had access to savings, or were able to borrow money for the journey. Others will have pooled family resources, or sold possessions and property.

Many will have travelled long distances over dangerous terrain and through numerous countries, encountering many challenges along the way.

And while the media and our politicians like to focus heavily on the boat journey that many asylum seekers take to reach Australia's shores, the fact that there are also a number who arrive by air is often overlooked.

- Click [here](#) for Qubra and Pervez's story.

Keen to learn more about the asylum seeker journey? Click below.



PART 2

SEEKING ASYLUM IN AUSTRALIA

The process of seeking asylum in Australia is quite convoluted, especially if you arrived by boat.

We'll endeavour to take you through it, however there's lots to be said, and it's always changing - so we'll only mention the essentials.

We'll provide some links to further reading for those of you who wish to go down the rabbit hole of asylum seeker law, and find out more.

AUSTRALIA'S HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

Australia has a humanitarian program for refugees, that encompasses two broad components:

Onshore

The onshore component is for those who seek protection from within Australia, as per the Refugee Convention. They do this by submitting an application for protection to the Australian Government after they arrive in the country, and it is the responsibility of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to assess their claim.

Offshore

The offshore component is for those already classified as refugees living overseas (e.g. in refugee camps). It involves taking part in the UNHCR's resettlement program by allowing a limited number of these refugees to come and live in Australia. Very few places are offered to refugees to resettle, the reality being that less than 1% of the world's recognised refugees will be given this opportunity.

DID YOU COME BY BOAT OR BY PLANE?

Of those asylum seekers who engage in the onshore system, the Australian Government categorizes them into two broad groups:

1. Those that arrive by plane – “Non illegal maritime arrivals” (non-IMA’s)

2. Those that arrive by boat – “Illegal maritime arrivals” (IMA’s)

PLANE

Those that arrive by plane with a visa (typically arriving on short term visas such as tourist or study visas) will reside in the community upon arrival. After submitting an application for a Protection Visa, they will be granted a Bridging Visa, which allows them to remain in the community legally, whilst they await an outcome.

BOAT

Those that arrive by boat without a visa are detained upon arrival, being placed in a detention facility within Australia (e.g. Villawood Detention Centre) – or more recently – outside of Australia (Manus Island or Nauru). Only the Department of Immigration and Border Protection has the power to release people from detention, and this happens by grant of a Bridging Visa.

Both groups were once able to apply for the same visa, the Protection Visa Subclass 866. This visa allows refugees to live in Australia as permanent residents. However now it’s the case that those who arrived by boat are no longer eligible for this visa. We’ll talk about this soon, but for now, let’s take a look at the standard process of applying for a Protection Visa in Australia.

APPLYING FOR A PROTECTION VISA

Submit written application	✓	If the decision is positive, and an applicant is deemed to be a refugee, they are granted a Protection Visa and allowed to remain in Australia.
Complete health and character checks		
Complete health and character checks	✗	If the decision is negative, and an applicant is deemed <i>not</i> to be a refugee, they must either appeal this decision, or return home.
Await security checks		
Await visa outcome		

Click [here](#) to read about the appeal options at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT).

Click [here](#) to read about subsequent options at the Federal Magistrates Court and the Ministerial Interventions

TEMPORARY PROTECTION

Legislation passed in December 2014 saw the return of [Temporary Protection Visas](#), an alternative to Permanent Protection Visas, created exclusively for those who came by boat.

Now, all asylum seekers in Australia who have arrived by boat can only access **Temporary** Protection.

This means that if – after having been assessed by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection – an asylum seeker is indeed deemed to be a refugee in need of protection, they can only be granted a *Temporary* Protection Visa (TPV), which lasts for 3 years.

At the end of the 3 year time period, their legal status as a refugee comes to an end, and they must re-apply for another TPV, proving again their need for protection.

This is in place for those who arrived by boat, but not for those who arrived by plane. Those who arrive by plane are still able to receive a **Permanent** Protection Visa, if they are found to be a refugee.

TPV holders are able to:

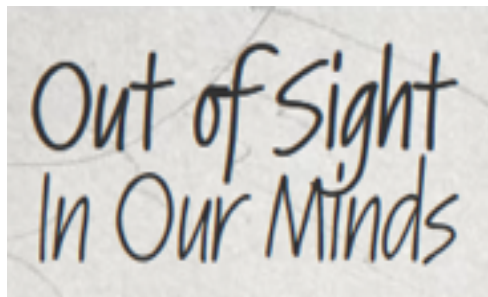
- Remain in Australia for 3 years
- Work
- Study
- Access Medicare
- Access Centrelink

TPV holders aren't able to:

- Obtain a permanent visa
- Access settlement support services
- Bring their family members over
- Travel outside of Australia without permission

There are a number of other restrictive laws in place for asylum seekers who have arrived by boat. Explore the links below to learn more about these policies, and to understand the implications they have for people seeking asylum in Australia.





PART 3

LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY AS AN ASYLUM SEEKER

Over recent years lots of asylum seekers have been released from detention to live in the community.

They've been released on a Bridging Visa, which is a bit like a 'waiting visa', allowing them to live lawfully in the community whilst their application for protection is being processed.

And let's not forget that there are many who have arrived by plane living here on bridging visas too.

While this is a good thing – living in the community is a much more preferable option – the reality is that life for these asylum seekers can continue to be very tough.

Let's move on now to explore some of the issues facing asylum seekers whilst they live in the Australian community.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

"After paying the rent we have \$35 left for two weeks....we are eating noodles and eggs...normally one sometimes two meals a day. We realise this is not good for us... .the body is not getting what it needs."

- Asylum seeker, Australian Red Cross Vulnerability Report¹

Asylum seekers live a precarious existence in the Australian community. In fact, they are one of the most marginalised groups in our country today.

Often arriving with a limited amount of money and personal possessions, and knowing almost no one - perhaps having one or two contacts - asylum seekers can quickly find themselves facing poverty and destitution.

¹ Quote source: Australian Red Cross Vulnerability Report, at http://www.redcross.org.au/files/ARC_VulnerabilityReport_LR.PDF

Some asylum seekers are not eligible to work because of the conditions attached to their Bridging Visa. And those that do have the right to work, may simply not be able to.

We all know how hard it can be to find a job, but imagine if you were new to the country, couldn't speak the language, and had qualifications that weren't recognised. Imagine trying to convince employers to give you a job when you couldn't guarantee how long you'd be in the country. Add to this the fact that many asylum seekers have complex physical and mental health issues that prevent them from working - or at least make it very difficult to.

Consequently, many asylum seekers do not have access to an income of their own, and must rely on a meager income from the government (89% of the Centrelink Newstart Allowance).

Or, if they are not eligible for this (and lots aren't), they must rely on charity, or on support from family overseas or from other contacts in the Australian community (if they have them).

This makes covering the cost of rent, food, transport, health care services and other essentials extremely difficult. Many asylum seekers will not be able to afford such things, and will have to forgo daily necessities.

HOUSING ISSUES

"I go from place to place trying to rent anything, just a small place will be fine but I never get them. I have no references in Australia and there are so many people at the real estate agents. I have stopped telling them I am an asylum seeker, they say no straight away otherwise. I don't think I can afford to rent now, each week the prices are getting higher and higher, what to do?"

- Asylum seeker, ASRC Report²

² Quote source: Locked Out, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, at <http://www.asrc.org.au/pdf/locked-out.pdf>

High rental prices, a competitive market, limited English, financial hardship, ineligibility for housing services, prejudice and discrimination...these are only a handful of barriers that asylum seekers face in finding somewhere to live in Australia.

Many will live in overcrowded and cramped conditions, often sharing a room or a flat with a number of others.

Others will couch surf, living off the good will of friends or contacts in the community, and moving on when their welcome has worn out.

Those in rental properties or subletting arrangements may be vulnerable to exploitation or abuse from landlords or housemates, while others might be charged exorbitant amounts to stay in boarding houses or hostels, with the most basic of facilities.

Some will stay in homeless shelters for a night or two, here and there. Or they might sleep in places such as churches, mosques, garages, cars, or on the streets.

Some will be able to access medium term accommodation provided by small community based asylum seeker services, however the demand for these services greatly outweighs their capacity to assist everyone.

- Have a read of [this article](#), published by **The Big Issue**, highlighting the problem of homelessness for asylum seekers.

HEALTH ISSUES

Asylum seekers may arrive with complex physical and mental health issues that have come about through experiences in their home country such as physical abuse, torture, deprivation, poverty or limited access to health care. Or perhaps they encountered some of these things on their journey to Australia. In addition to this, the stress of seeking asylum in Australia, with all that it entails, will likely take its toll on the body as well.

The NSW Refugee Health service tells us that the main health issues experienced by asylum seekers in the community tend to be:³

- Psychological disorders (e.g. depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder)
- Musculo-skeletal problems (e.g. result of injury or torture)
- Gastro-intestinal disorders
- Hypertension & heart disease
- Women's health issues
- Dental problems

Depending on the conditions of their Bridging Visa, asylum seekers may have access to Medicare, or they may not. Those that don't may be able to access general health care services through government funded asylum seeker programs. However, not everybody is eligible for such programs, and so they must pay full fees. There are some health clinics run by community based organisations that asylum seekers can access, free of charge. And there's also a policy within NSW Health that allows asylum seekers to access some essential public health services like emergency and maternity care, despite having no Medicare.

For health issues that require specialist treatment, things can get tricky. Some might be lucky enough to find a sympathetic practitioner, willing to waive or reduce their fees. But others may have to persevere with ongoing pain or chronic illness, as specialist fees prove too much.

Medication costs can add up too, especially for those not eligible for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Again - there are some who can be assisted through government funded asylum seeker support programs, by having their medication costs subsidised, But even then, on such a limited income – the costs can be too high.

Navigating the health system can be difficult for those who are unfamiliar with the system, have little English, or who may be fearful of health professionals or procedures due to torture or trauma experiences.

³ [NSW Refugee Health Service Fact Sheet 3: Asylum Seekers, 2010](#)

On the other hand, health services may not be aware of the unique situation that asylum seekers are in (including what they are eligible for and what they are not). They might be ill equipped to deal with the complexity of their needs, or they may not provide a service that is culturally appropriate

TRAUMA

“When we talk about fear, we are talking about the fear that wakes you up in the middle of the night that gives you nightmares. We’re not talking about concern, we’re talking about terror.”

– Former Clinical Psychologist at Villawood Detention Centre⁴

Fear, when experienced to the degree that it overwhelms, or convinces us that our life is at risk – this sort of fear sticks with us.

Our brains and our bodies are wired to protect us from danger. To respond by running away from a threat, or fighting to protect ourselves from harm. But traumatic experiences can leave a lasting imprint on our brain, causing our bodies to continue to fight or flee in response to everyday events, that are actually no threat at all.

Despite being out of imminent danger, asylum seekers can continue to experience the impact of traumatic events that may have occurred long ago in their country of origin, or on their journey to Australia, or maybe even in Australia whilst in detention.

Watch this video to [hear refugees explain](#) what this sort of fear is like.

Trauma can cause people to live in a state of constant anxiety, with a whole range of physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms. It can also lead to other mental health issues such as depression, substance abuse, self harm or even in some cases, suicide.

⁴ Quote source: Kevin O’Sullivan, former Clinical Psychologist at Villawood Detention Centre, at , Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, at <http://www.sbs.com.au/detentioncentre/>

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is the formal diagnosis given to those who develop a *persistent pattern* of responses to a traumatic event/s.

- Read more about PTSD [here](#), and more about torture and trauma [here](#).

LEGAL ISSUES

Asylum seekers face a difficult road in navigating the legal system in Australia – with laws and policies constantly changing and so complicated that many legal professionals are kept guessing – you can only imagine how difficult it must be.

Visa outcomes are decided by a single Case Officer within the Department of Immigration and Border protection, meaning that final decisions can be quite arbitrary. Decision makers are not required to take active steps to explore whether an applicant is in need of protection, and the burden of proof lands squarely on asylum seekers.

Forgetting a few key details, getting confused about a sequence of events, or perhaps being unable to provide evidence for a certain aspect of their story - will all weigh heavily against an applicant as they are questioned about their claims.

The process is made more difficult for those who are experiencing mental health issues, and for those who may have difficulty remembering things due to trauma. Or perhaps they aren't able to express themselves fluently in English, and must rely on an interpreter to get their story across.

Others find the process difficult due to the myriad of other pressures they are facing - financial and housing stress, isolation, separation from loved ones...to name but a few.

The visa determination process has become increasingly strict, and for these reasons legal advice is a must.

Free legal help is available to some, however recent government cut backs mean that many asylum seekers are not able to not get the help they need.

WAITING...

“With no decision, I am in a world of uncertainty....I find myself lost here...I am suspended. I feel mentally down.”

- Asylum seeker, Australian Red Cross Vulnerability Report⁵

Asylum Seekers commonly wait years before they receive a final outcome on their visa. Unable to make future plans or to settle properly, asylum seekers exist day by day in limbo, not knowing whether their future is secure.

Many live in isolation, separated from family or friends, and without a strong support network.

Opportunities for meaningful engagement are all but non-existent, with most unable to work due to barriers to gaining employment.

Without much else to fill their time or their headspace, asylum seekers are left to dwell on their case, on the safety of family members back home, or on the uncertainty of their future.

While it takes great resilience to cope in such a situation, living like this for an extended period of time can wear people down. Many report feeling utterly powerless, and a whole range of mental health issues can ensue. Some even reach crisis point, with self harm and suicide being a very real risk.

⁵ Quote source: Australian Red Cross Vulnerability Report, at http://www.redcross.org.au/files/ARC_VulnerabilityReport_LR.PDF

RESOURCES

...A bleak picture, isn't it?

These are just some of the challenges that asylum seekers face in Australia.

There'll be others - adjusting to a new culture, managing the language barrier, dealing with grief and loss, separation from family and friends, strained family relationships, racism and discrimination...to name but a few.

And while we've dwelt very much on the difficulties, let's also recognise the incredible strength and resilience of asylum seekers. Strength that has seen them survive great adversity, and that has got them to where they are today.

Despite the closed doors that they face in Australia, there are some invaluable services and growing number of positive community initiatives available to help asylum seekers.

Let's take a look now at what's available in the community to support asylum seekers.

GOVERNMENT FUNDED SUPPORT SERVICES

We've made mention of some government funded support services available to asylum seekers whilst they live in the community. Funded by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, and delivered by various non-government organisations, these services are known as [Status Resolution Support Services \(SRSS\)](#).

SRSS provide differing levels and types of support, depending on an individual's circumstances. Generally asylum seekers accessing SRSS will receive a basic fortnightly income, health care services, and some sort of casework support.

The major organisations contracted to provide SRSS in NSW are (click on the icons to be directed to their websites):



the
power of
humanity



WE
LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS
VE



Not everyone will be eligible for SRSS, particularly those at the latter stages of their visa determination process, those who do not meet the vulnerability criteria, and those who arrived by plane but do not pass a very stringent financial hardship assessment.

- Read more about SRSS [here](#).

NON-GOVERNMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Those who are unable to access SRSS may be able to receive welfare or emergency assistance from other community based organisations.

Here are some key services assisting asylum seekers in the community (click on the icons to read about each):





St Vincent de Paul Society
good works



Bridge for Asylum Seekers Foundation

LEGAL SERVICES

Here are some of the invaluable legal support services for asylum seekers:

RACS REFUGEE
ADVICE &
CASEWORK
SERVICE

**justice
connect**

Salvos Legal
Justice, together

iarc
Immigration Advice
& Rights Centre Inc.

Legal Aid
NEW SOUTH WALES

HEALTH SERVICES

These are the two major health services set up to provide physical and mental health care to refugees and asylum seekers



OTHER COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

There are some fantastic community initiatives out there. Here are just a few:



PART 4

HOSTING AN ASYLUM SEEKER

Now that we have an idea of the sorts of things asylum seekers are dealing with, and some of the resources available to them, let's move on to talk about some important things to bear in mind as you open up your home...

MAKING AN AGREEMENT

First things first, it's important for you and your guest to meet each other, before anything else goes ahead.

This is so that you can get acquainted, and also to make sure you're on the same page about what this arrangement will look like.

We'll be suggesting that someone from the agency supporting your guest (usually a caseworker) comes along to facilitate this. And if your guest needs it, a telephone interpreter will be arranged too - just to make sure that everything is clear.

At this meeting it's a good idea to be upfront about what you are willing and able to provide, and to understand what your guest's needs and expectations are as well.

For instance:

- How long are you willing to provide accommodation for?
- How long does your guest expect to stay for?
- Do you expect your guest to pay board or contribute to household costs?
- What are your expectations around cleanliness, or household chores?
- Do you see yourself sharing food, or providing meals?
- Are you happy for your guest to have friends over?
- What if there is an issue or a problem? How will you address it?

It can be a bit awkward talking about some of these things, but it's important to have everything clear to avoid any problems down the track.

FLEXIBILITY

While there are some things that need to be articulated and agreed upon, it's important to acknowledge that it will be an evolving process too.

You might have a picture in your mind about what it's going to be like, or about what your guest will be like – but keep in mind that it may not necessarily be what you expect!

There is no set formula, so be ready to respond to things as they come up, and to work things out along the way.

It's likely that the first few weeks especially will be a period of negotiation, as you and your guest get to know each other, and work out how to live together.

Every arrangement between a host and guest will vary too. You might get to know your guest pretty well over time, and become quite involved in their life. Or, you might have a more independent set up, where your guest is more like a lodger, and you don't interact much at all.

Take home message: Take each day as it comes and be flexible!

SUPPORT

It's important that you've got somewhere to go if you need support, so we've asked that the agency linked to your guest be ready to provide this.

You will have a main point of contact from your guest's agency, and you'll be given their phone number if you ever you should need it.

They might call you from time to time, just to check in and see how things are going, and to make sure the arrangement is working for both of you.

WELCOMING YOUR GUEST

Now your guest might be feeling a little nervous or unsure when they move in (you might be too!), so here are some ideas on how you can help make the process a little easier for **them**.

HELLO!

Even if your guest speaks only a small amount of English, when they first arrive you can make sure they know you're happy to see them by greeting them with a big smile. Hold off on initiating any physical contact (like a hand shake), in case this isn't something they are comfortable with. Help them with their bags, show them to their room, and offer them a cup of tea or something to eat. And if you have the time, learning a few basic greetings from their language could be a nice touch.

ORIENT

Show them around your home and explain how things work - show them where the bathroom is, where the tea is kept, which part of the cupboard they can store their food in, how the microwave works, which remote control goes with what...all that sort of thing.

Orient them to the local area too. Get out a map and show them where important places like the shops and the train station are - perhaps you could print one out for them to keep. You might even like to offer to take them for a drive or go for a walk in the first few days, to show them around.

SHARE

Share a bit about yourself - if they don't speak much English, perhaps you could show them some photos of your family or of some things you are interested in. The more authentic and human you are, the more at ease your guest will be.

EAT

Food brings everyone together! Sit down for a meal together early on, to say an official welcome. Accept hospitality from your guest too. Offering you a meal or something else might be a way of expressing

their gratitude, or it could be a big part of their culture. It could also go a long way in making them feel more comfortable and accepted in your home. Besides, they might not take no for an answer anyway!

CHECK

Check with your guest to make sure they are comfortable and have everything they need, give them the opportunity to ask any questions if they have them.

SPACE

Allow them personal space. Try not to overwhelm them – being welcoming is one thing, but try to follow their lead in giving them the time they need to settle in naturally, in their own way.

These are just a handful of ideas – you will probably have a whole lot more!

And remember that everyone is different – so use your common sense and best judgment to work out how to help your guest settle in, and respond to their individual needs.

THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

Language may not be a problem – there are some asylum seekers who speak English very fluently, and others who have enough to get by. But of course, there will be lots that have only a small amount, and some that don't speak any at all.

Before you start panicking, try to place yourself in their shoes – being in a situation where everybody else speaks a different language to you can be a very isolating feeling.

Here are some tips for managing the language barrier:

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Speak simply – don't use jargon, slang or complex sentences
- Use body language – put your acting skills to the test, be animated!

- Repeat or reform sentences when not understood
- Be patient, understanding and encouraging
- Smile and be aware of your tone – even if they can't understand your words, you can communicate a lot with your facial expression and your tone of voice
- Have a sense of humour – be prepared for some awkward moments, and laugh at yourself!
- Use pictures, Google translate, download a language app, or pick up a bilingual dictionary from [Abbey's Language Book Centre](#).

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

If you've grown up in different cultures, there's a good chance that you and your guest are going to be very different from one another!

You might have different ways of understanding the world, or you might hold very different values. You might dress differently, eat differently or relax differently. You might have different social conventions and different ways of expressing yourself.

Take for instance, greeting someone of the opposite gender. You might find it perfectly normal to shake their hand or to give them a hug or kiss on the cheek. But your guest might come from a culture where this sort of contact between genders isn't appropriate, and it could make them feel quite uncomfortable. On the flipside, maybe in their culture friends of the same gender ordinarily use more physical contact than you do – and this might make *you* feel quite uncomfortable!

Now, there's no instruction manual when it comes to interacting across culture. But misunderstandings occur when we assume that our way of doing things is the only way or the right way, and when we apply our own logic to other people's behaviour.

Depending on how long they've been in Australia, your guest might have more of an understanding of your culture than you do theirs – so they might have a head start on this whole cultural sensitivity thing.

But what's helpful is to be **aware** of the influence of culture, to **question** our assumptions, and to **be sensitive** and **respectful** of cultural difference.

And if you're unsure of something, and don't want to offend – why not simply ask!

MENTAL HEALTH

Given the immense stress that asylum seekers are under, and the trauma they may have experienced - it's quite possible that your guest could be dealing with mental health issues while they are living with you.

Even if they appear emotionally healthy when they first move in, the tumultuous journey of an asylum seeker is such that a piece of bad news from home, a set back in their case, or a visa rejection can come at any time – and this can have a serious impact upon their psychological wellbeing.

And as we mentioned earlier, living in a state of uncertainty and stress for a prolonged period of time can see mental health deteriorate gradually too.

It's important to take this seriously – to be prepared for the sorts of mental health symptoms your guest could be experiencing, and to know how to support them if they do.

For instance, maybe your guest is experiencing depression, which means they might find it hard to get out of bed in the morning, or they might be quite socially withdrawn.

Or maybe they are struggling with the impact of trauma, which could mean they are constantly tired due to poor sleep, they might experience flashbacks to traumatic events, or they need to avoid certain sights, sounds and smells that remind them of their past.

These behaviours could well be challenging to live with, and it's important to recognise this before you begin. But it's going to help your guest a great deal if you are patient and understanding, and if you're supportive of them in the midst of their struggles. Let's take a look now at what you can do...

SUPPORTING WELLBEING

EDUCATE

Equip yourself with information and increase your understanding of mental illness. There are lots of great resources out there – you can start [here](#), by exploring the Beyond Blue website (focus particularly on resources that talk about depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder). Another good one is [SANE Australia](#).

CONNECT

Build a relationship with your guest, and help them to build relationships with others. The more connected we feel the stronger we are, and the more resources we have to draw upon for support. You might like to help your guest meet other people in the local community, or introduce them to friends and family. And if they're interested, you might help them get in touch with people from their own ethnic community too.

ENCOURAGE

Try and be a positive presence for your guest. Encourage them to look after themselves, and to engage in activities that they enjoy and that are good for them – exercise, socialising, getting out and about, hobbies, eating and sleeping well etc. You might like to do some fun things together – take them to see some sights around Sydney, invite them to events that you are going to.

If they seem to not be coping well, encourage them to seek help by talking to someone they trust, or calling their case worker or their counsellor. If they don't have a counsellor, encourage them to take some steps towards talking to a mental health professional.

Be sure to **encourage gently** – don't confuse encouragement with pressure!

LISTEN

You may feel frustrated that there is little you can do to help or change your guest's situation, but listening is a powerful way to help. Listening shows you care, it helps to build trust, and it helps your guest to feel valued. If your guest shares their struggles with you - let them talk, acknowledge their feelings, and convey that you care.

Bear in mind that it's important *not to ask your guest to tell their story, or to talk about their trauma*. Steer clear of asking them anything of a very personal or sensitive nature. Let them make this choice, and share with you in their own time and in their own way.

If they do share personal details or experiences with you, *respect their privacy* and don't tell others. The only exception is if they say something that indicates they are at risk of harming themselves or others. In this instance you'll need to tell someone, and we'll go into this in a minute.

BE SENSITIVE

Be sensitive to your guest's needs and feelings. If you're aware that they're having a particularly bad time or they're feeling a bit down, be sensitive to this, and respond in ways that do not alienate them or make them feel worse. Try not to judge, but be supportive. If you sense they need space, give them space. If you're not sure if they are ok, ask them how they are. If you know of certain things that can trigger a trauma response (e.g. sudden loud noises), take care to minimise this wherever you can.

EMPOWER

While there is a lot in their life that your guest can't control, wherever possible try to help them to be *in* control. Allow them to make their own choices, and respect their autonomy.

Don't do everything for them and make them dependent on you, but encourage them to grow in their own capacity to deal with challenges

and navigate life in Australia on their own. For example, you might show them how to get around town themselves by using the bus or the train, rather than driving them around everywhere.

Help them to focus on their strengths and their resources, and on what motivates them. For example, if they are good at art or they enjoy creativity, encourage them to pursue this, or put them in touch with a community initiative like the [Refugee Art Project](#).

WHAT IF THERE'S A CRISIS?

If your guest's mental health starts to decline and you are worried about their wellbeing, there are a number of things you can do:

- You can encourage or assist them to contact their agency or their counsellor to seek support
- You can encourage or assist them to see a GP to get some mental health support
- You can encourage or assist them to call Lifeline on 13 11 14 to talk through their issues
- You yourself can call Lifeline or another mental health telephone support service
- You yourself can contact your guest's agency to raise your concerns or get some advice

If there's a crisis and you think your guest is at immediate risk of harming themselves or someone else, it's important to do something straight away.

For a mental health or other type of emergency, call 000.

Some other numbers you or your guest can all in a crisis are:

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Mental Health Crisis Line: 1800 011 511

You can also call your local mental health crisis service, or go straight to your local hospital emergency department.

- Read more about what to do in a crisis [here](#).

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

It can be very rewarding getting to know and supporting asylum seekers, and no doubt you'll be inspired by their courage.

It's natural to care and to feel strongly about what they are going through, but this can also take a toll on you, and so it's important to know how to look after yourself.

'Vicarious trauma' is sometimes referred to when talking about this impact, and it can happen to all of us who care for those who have experienced trauma, when we start to take on their pain.

Over time, it can have a detrimental effect on our wellbeing, and we may even start to experience symptoms of trauma ourselves.

Learn more about vicarious trauma [here](#).

BOUNDARIES

It's your decision as to how involved you become in your guest's life, but it can be easy to get over involved – to feel as though it's our responsibility to 'rescue' or to solve our guest's problems, and to put all of our energy into their cause.

But this sort of approach isn't healthy or sustainable, and it can quickly lead to burn out. It could also cause harm to your guest, as you set up a relationship where they are dependent upon you, and they may come to expect things from you that you simply can't provide.

Don't go beyond what you are capable of, for example, by offering your guest legal advice or by playing the role of a counsellor. Be supportive in offering general encouragement and a listening ear, but leave the skilled advice and intervention to those who are trained to provide it.

Be careful not to breach your guest's boundaries with unwanted physical contact or by asking them probing questions. Respect their autonomy and do not to push your own beliefs or ideas onto them. Be mindful of not making them feel indebted to you – gifts and acts of service might be their way of saying thanks, but be aware of your power in the relationship, and do not abuse it.

Here are some red flags to watch out for, which could be an indication that you are blurring the boundaries:

- Thinking 'I'm the only one who can help' or 'I know what's best'
- Making unrealistic promises
- Doing things for personal gain
- Seeing yourself as above the rules
- Feeling the pressure to fix your guest's situation
- Feeling responsible for what happens to your guest
- Feeling constantly drained, tired, or unable to cope
- Disconnecting from friends and family, or ceasing hobbies or other things you enjoy

SELF CARE

Here are a few tips for looking after yourself, and guarding against vicarious trauma and/or burnout:

REST

Make sure you get enough sleep, and allow time to re-charge. Relax, read a book, sip a cup of tea. Maintain your spiritual health and restore your energy in whatever way works for you.

PLAY

Spend time doing the things you enjoy. Make time for your interests and hobbies, be creative, be active, laugh and have fun.

CONNECT

Connect with others, invest in relationships, enjoy socialising, and share what you're going through with those you trust.

NOTICE

Be aware of your own reactions and emotions. Notice when you are feeling down, or angry, or exhausted – don't push these emotions away, but try to consider what's contributing to you feeling that way. Ask your friends or your family to look out for you too, and to let you know if they notice a change in you and how you are coping.

FOCUS

Focus your energy and your thoughts on your guest's capabilities and strengths, notice what's going well and celebrate when goals have been achieved.

SEEK

Seek extra support if you need it. Contact your guest's agency, or make an appointment with a counsellor. Seek out someone that you trust and ask for help.

WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

If something goes wrong, for instance, you and your guest are not getting along, or something's happened and you are no longer comfortable with the arrangement – then that's ok, and there are steps you can take.

TALK TO YOUR GUEST

It's always good to try and resolve any issues yourself first, by talking things through with your guest, and addressing things directly with them.

TALK TO YOUR SUPPORTING AGENCY

If you've given it a good go and things still aren't resolved, or if you are not comfortable in managing the situation yourself, then give your main contact a call, and seek assistance from them.

END THE ARRANGEMENT

If after accessing some support, things still aren't going well, then it's ok to decide that you'd like to cease the arrangement.

Unless there are extenuating circumstances, please give your guest plenty of notice (at **least** 2 weeks), and allow them the time to sort something else out.

It will be your guest's responsibility (with the support of their case worker) to find alternative accommodation, but you are more than welcome to assist them if you can.

COMPLAINTS

If you have a serious concern about your guest that you feel is important to report, or if you have a complaint about something they've done, then please don't hesitate to get in touch with your supporting agency.

Likewise your guest will be advised to report any concerns or complaints regarding hosts, to their case worker or other person from their supporting agency.

The agency will follow up on these matters with Enough Room, and a decision will be made as to what actions to take. Serious complaints or concerns may result in a host or guest being disengaged from

Enough Room, and if necessary, further steps will be taken to alert authorities.

If you have reported a concern or made a complaint, but you feel that the agency's response is inadequate, then please get in touch with us by emailing: feedback@enoughroom.org.

WRAPPING THINGS UP

If you had made an arrangement to accommodate your guest for a set period of time, but at the end of this time they haven't found anywhere else to live, then it is up to you as to whether you're happy to extend your offer of accommodation.

If you are unable to continue accommodating them – that's ok, speak to your supporting agency and they will manage this situation. Again, it will be your guest's responsibility to sort something else out with the help of their case worker – but you are more than welcome to assist them to find an alternative solution if you can.

It's good to be in constant communication with your guest about this throughout their stay, so you know where they're up to in their search, and they know what to expect at the end of the time period.

Of course, your guest might decide to move out themselves at any point – they might find their own rental accommodation, or maybe another option has come up – and this is a good outcome! Ideally your guest will not need to rely on your generosity forever, and they will move on to independent living.

Your provision of a home for however long you have been able to provide it will have played a crucial role in helping your guest to become more established and settled within the Australian community.

And if you and your guest would like to stay in touch after they leave, then by all means do so!

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THANK YOU!!!

Thank you for taking the time to read through this handbook, and more importantly, for your generosity in opening up your home.

We trust that it will be an enjoyable and fulfilling experience, and we wish you all the best.

If you have any feedback for us, please let us know by emailing us at info@enoughroom.org

Happy hosting!