



# REINTEGRATION COUNSELLING: A Psychosocial Approach



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Embet, a migrant assisted by IOM with her children back home in Ethiopia.  
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# INTRODUCTION

The present guide is intended to provide key information on the importance of a psychosocial approach of post-arrival reintegration counselling, describing the basic counselling and communication skills necessary to conduct a successful and psychologically informed reintegration counselling interview with a returned migrant.

At the same time, it offers some guidance to understanding the emotional complexity and the psychosocial factors that returned migrants might experience upon their return, since these can affect positively or negatively the way they interact with IOM, engage with the programme, and ultimately their reintegration.

This guide is not meant to constitute Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). It is a practical tool to support the reintegration counsellor during the reintegration counselling process. It does not cover counselling of specific cases such as victims of trafficking or torture, children and others whose return counselling requires specific training, attitudes and precautions.

# REINTEGRATION COUNSELLING:

## What is it and what is it for ?

Counselling is used in a variety of situations: psychological counselling, career counselling, legal counselling, etc., and has to do with engaging with people facing a specific problem and helping them solve the problem. There is not a single definition of “counselling”<sup>1</sup> but, as intended by IOM in the context of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes, it usually covers three main aspects:

- The provision of information to the returned migrant on the reintegration assistance process;
- The collection of information on the returned migrant to identify potential situations of vulnerability, needs, skills, motivations and opportunities;
- The provision of first line emotional and psychological support to the returned migrant.

Reintegration counselling is a fundamental step for the establishment of a comprehensive reintegration plan for all returned migrants, which should not just be a business plan but instead a “life plan”.

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<sup>1</sup> “Counselling: This is the provision of assistance or guidance in resolving personal, social or psychological problems and difficulties, (Counselling, 2018). Features that stand out in a contextually sensitive counselling approach include mobilizing suffering persons' resilience, psychological and relational strengths and resources, in order to solve their problems. From a community and systemic approach, counselling can be seen as any interaction or conversation that promotes psychosocial well-being.” (IOM, 2019), *Manual on Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies and Displacement*. IOM Geneva, p. 475).

# PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

The complex, multidimensional process of reintegration requires to consider the various factors impacting an individual's reintegration, including economic, social and psychosocial factors across individual, community and structural dimensions.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore important to have a holistic perspective to understand the psychosocial difficulties linked with return and reintegration, and how one's well-being is affected by their interrelation.

Reintegration is defined as the re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a migrant into the society of his/her country of origin. It is a process that requires adjusting to a new life, reconnecting with family and friends, and making plans for the future. Reintegration "back home" is often mistakenly conceptualized as an easy and unproblematic process since returned migrants re-establish themselves in their "homeland", within their community and family. However, this assumption does not consider the emotional, social and cultural challenges migrants might face as they try to readjust their lives in their country of origin.

Returning home after a migration journey which did not lead to the desired outcome can trigger different psychological reactions and engender various behaviours. These include but are not limited to:

- **Emotional instability:** mixed feelings of shame, guilt, fear, frustration, anger, loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness;
- The **perception of oneself as a failure;**
- A sense of **loss** and **disorientation;**
- **Anxiety** and constant emotional pressure;
- Lack of trust and **low self-esteem;**
- **Isolation** from others and feelings of not being understood;
- Changes in the behaviour and previous habits;
- Focus on the past or the future rather than on the present.

As a reintegration counsellor, you should recognize these psychological reactions as normal consequences of the challenges faced during the return and reintegration process.

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<sup>2</sup> IOM (2017), *Towards an Integrated Approach to Reintegration in the context of return*.

The psychosocial well-being of returned migrants is also influenced by the socio relational and socioeconomic context of their return, especially the quality of the relations with family and community members. Family members may have different feelings about the return. Sometimes these are positive (joy, relief and excitement at the prospect of seeing a loved one back home). Other times, these feelings are negative, as return is viewed as a failure. This is more often true in cases when the family [financially] sponsored the migrant' journey and had high expectations on the migrant but the latter is unable to repay the debts incurred by the family or meet their expectations of success.

“Here in Senegal, it is not in our culture to accept someone who tried to migrate and failed. [...] If at the time, I could have killed myself, I would have.”

Moustapha, Senegal

Consequently, the returned migrant may be perceived (and perceive him/herself) as a problem, a burden, as someone who did something wrong and who is responsible for the debts incurred by the family, for instance.

Community members also play an important role in returned migrants' reintegration. The more time migrants spend away from their communities of origin, the more changes occur, and the harder it becomes to reconcile the different experiences migrants and community members have had.

Migrants are changed by living in a different society and culture and by, for some of them, being exposed to adversity and disturbing experiences during their journeys or in the destination country. While they are abroad, migrants' “homes” (community and family members, services, infrastructures, etc.) change sometimes in fundamental ways, which challenge their memories of how things were when they left.

Therefore, returned migrants are worried about not being easily accepted back into their community and need time to settle back, to feel part of the community again. Resentment among communities may also come from the misperception of the reintegration assistance as an undue reward to returned migrants as opposed to local populations who did not migrate.

The psychosocial difficulties hampering the reintegration process, as briefly mentioned above, can be additionally challenged by the mental health consequences of the exposure to extreme adversity. For instance, migrants from West and Central Africa en route to Europe through the Mediterranean Routes face extremely difficult circumstances and are confronted to extreme stressors. They might have been subjected in some cases to gross human rights violations including torture, slavery, sexual violence, forced labor, detention, exploitation by their captors and traffickers.

People who experienced one or repeated violation of their basic rights and physical integrity are at greater risks of developing psychological and social problems. A small proportion of people may develop different mental health disorders like depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychotic disorders, and need specialized attention and care.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is important not to generalize and to acknowledge that signs of psychosocial distress are in most cases a common normal reaction for returned migrants and that mental disorders are generally very rare.

It is worth noting here that the same events may cause very different levels of psychological distress to different people. Also, the same individual can react differently to the same event at different moments. Factors such as personality, vulnerability, age, educational background, social support, memories of similar events, physical and mental health status, may contribute to different psychological reactions after the same precipitating/significant event.

When conducting a reintegration counselling session, you should be aware of the above-mentioned mental health and psychosocial challenges of the returned migrants as in some cases this may hinder the reintegration process. Remember that a sustainable reintegration can be facilitated only when the psychosocial factors are addressed in parallel with the economic and social aspects of the reintegration.

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<sup>3</sup> Some basic knowledge of common mental health disorders may help reintegration counsellors to better understand the way a returned migrant may behave or communicate and to better support him/her during the reintegration process. More information can be found in IOM (2014), *Returning with a health condition. A toolkit to counselling migrants with a health condition*.



An IOM reintegration counsellor speaks with a returned migrant in Guinea.  
© IOM/Lucas Chandellier 2018

# THE ROLE OF THE REINTEGRATION COUNSELLOR

Your role, as a reintegration counsellor should be to:

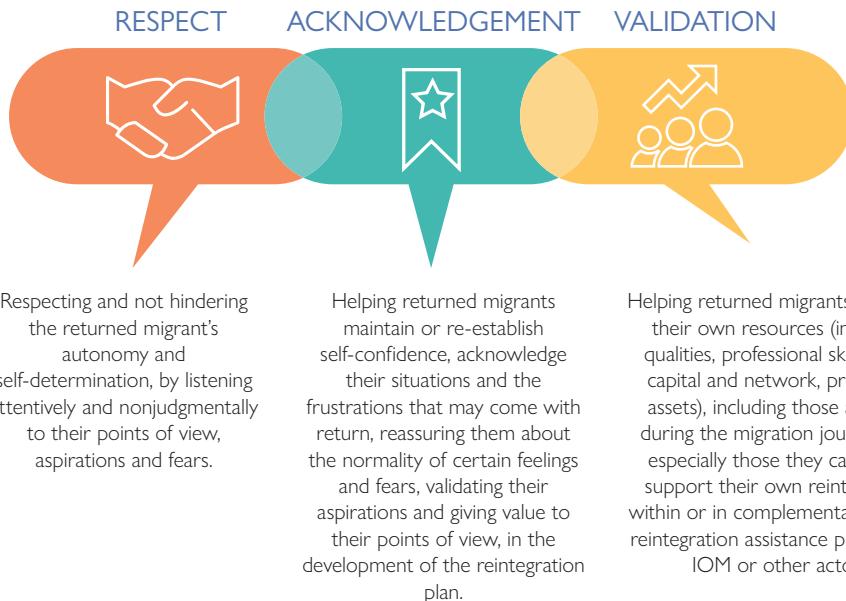
- **Engage** - Engaging with the returned migrant through reintegration counselling to better understand his/her background, professional qualifications, skills and resources that can facilitate a sustainable reintegration, as well as the obstacles that may, on the contrary hinder the reintegration process;
- **Assess needs and resources** - Assessing the returned migrant' specific needs and resources in a holistic manner, by taking into consideration the economic, social and psychosocial dimensions of the reintegration process. The assessment should consider the interaction between the individual psychological level (emotional experience, personal strengths and weaknesses), the professional level (skills, experiences and professional areas to be developed) and the social level (social capital and networks);
- **Support** - Supporting the returned migrant in designing a comprehensive and realistic reintegration plan. Exploring options and mobilizing resources to implement the plan through referrals or direct assistance (when relevant);
- **Follow up** - Monitoring and providing follow-up support.

See yourself as a “coach” and not just an administrator of bureaucratic procedures. Do not see the returned migrant as a passive beneficiary or “victim” to be assisted but rather as an agent of his/her life.

The reintegration counselling process calls for the returned migrants to maintain a sense of self-worth and self-determination, to stop feeling helpless, in case they feel so. It aims at making them more aware of themselves, able to accept their weaknesses and identify their strengths. Through the process, the returned migrant is supported to form a clearer picture of his/her situation and reintegration challenges, to look at the various options open to him/her and to decide on the course of action to be taken.

Your role is to support the returned migrant to maintain or strengthen his/her resilience<sup>4</sup> which is what enables people to deal with problems, and maintain or regain a full sense of self-esteem, self-help and control over one's life.

This means:



See [Annex 1](#) for tips and key messages on how to support migrants during their return and reintegration process.

<sup>4</sup> As defined by Panter-Brick and Leckman (2013), resilience "is the process of harnessing biological, psychosocial, structural (environmental) and cultural resources to sustain wellbeing". Resilience has now emerged as a new paradigm in the fields of development and mental health (Saul, 2013). What is distinctive about a resilience-based approach is (a) an emphasis on strengths, resources and capacities rather than deficits; (b) anticipation of actions that reduce the impact of adversity; (c) attention to multiple levels of influence, ranging from the structural and cultural through to the individual and community; and (d) mapping influences within ecologically nested systems (Ager et al., 2010). Resilience applies not only to individuals, but also to families, communities, organizations and society as a whole. (IOM (2019), *Manual on Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergencies and Displacement*. IOM Geneva, p. 475).

# BASIC COMMUNICATION AND COUNSELLING SKILLS

Counselling differs from daily one-on-one informal communication. Basic counselling skills, which include positive communication skills, are fundamental during the reintegration counselling process with a view:

- To create a safe environment;
- To establish a trusting relationship between the reintegration counsellor and the returned migrant;
- To understand if and when the returned migrants' needs, resources and aspirations in relation to their reintegration, at the individual, family and community level;
- To provide basic first-line emotional support to the returned migrant;
- To establish a participatory and realistic reintegration plan;
- To understand when to offer the returned migrant the services of a mental health specialist (if feasible).

See [Annex 2](#) for a list of values that usually characterize the most effective communication styles.



With many migrants returning home to uncertainty, the immediate identification and addressing of psychosocial needs is vital. © IOM 2019/Assan JOBE

# COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND COUNSELLING TECHNIQUES

Good and effective communication leads to a better counselling experience. It helps the returned migrant to accurately describe his/her situation and resources, to clearly understand the reintegration opportunities, and to facilitate the establishment of a more effective reintegration plan.

## Good communication

Good communication is a dynamic two-way dialogue in which each person pays attention to what the other is saying, how s/he reacts, and makes a sincere attempt to understand and appreciate the other.

Good communication skills will help you identify the returned migrant' concerns, obstacles, skills, and resources that can hamper or facilitate the reintegration process, thus allowing you to better tailor the reintegration counselling and assistance. With good communications skills, you will be able to clearly present the returned migrant with information on the opportunities and the process of reintegration assistance so that s/he can make an informed decision.

Good communication skills ensure that there is no misinformation or information gap between you and the returned migrant. Clarity, straightforwardness and honesty creates mutual trust and understand which can increase the returned migrant' confidence.

It is impossible not communicate. Even if we do not want to, we communicate through our attitude and our body language.

We often think that good communicators are born. The reality is that they are made. Below, we share with you some techniques to improve your ability to listen more effectively. Applying these techniques will have a strong impact in your reintegration counselling experience.

# Effective listening

Effective listening allows you to focus your energy on the “here and now” moment as the returned migrant attempts to express him/herself.

There are three components in effective listening:

**Attending behaviour :** To establish a positive relationship with the returned migrant, you should demonstrate him/her your positive unconditional attention, show empathy<sup>5</sup> and genuineness. Everyone feels good when they are given attention. You should show **attending behaviour** which include first and foremost giving the returned migrant undivided attention and respect. Do not multitask during the reintegration counselling session. For instance, do not look at your emails or your phone, or attend to other tasks in parallel when you are with the returned migrant.

Show the returned migrant that you are listening, for instance by nodding the head or saying “Yes”, “Yes, go on”, “I’m with you”, “Uh-huh”, “Mmm-mm”, “I see”, “Of course”.

**Non-verbal communication :** The non-verbal aspects of communication include: body language, socioemotional presence, and silence (see [Box 1](#)).

**Active listening :** Effective listening requires that you play an active role in the listening process. Your posture should not show that you are too busy or in a hurry. Do not fill forms during the interview but instead leave this for the end of the session as a summary with the returned migrant. If a specific form must be filled during the interview, do not do it too brusquely or in a way that distracts the returned migrant (e.g. typing frantically on a laptop or a phone).

When asking questions or giving verbal reactions, do it slowly, keeping visual contact with the returned migrant. Avoid switching quickly from one topic to another.

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<sup>5</sup> Empathy simply means imagining what it must feel like to be in another person’s place. Understanding the returned migrant’ situation and reintegration challenges s/he might face will help you be more sensitive and will help the person feel more comfortable in talking to you.

Non-verbal attending sets a comfortable tone to the conversation. It encourages the returned migrant to keep talking and demonstrates the reintegration counsellor's concern and interest in continuing the conversation.

You should facilitate the discussion and encourage the returned migrant to provide complete information by using specific interviewing techniques (see [Box 2](#)). When listening to the answers, feel free to often paraphrase (e.g., “**So you are saying that... did I understand correctly?**”) and clarify (e.g. “**I am not sure what you mean. Can you explain a bit more?**”).

Ideally in active listening, the reintegration counsellor should glean the returned migrant's feelings from what s/he is saying.

Do not offer opinions, advise, analyse or interrogate, and be careful not to misinterpret the returned migrant. By listening actively, you show support, understanding and empathy for the returned migrant' feelings (See [Box 3](#)), and at the same time, you allow him/her to retain leadership and agency over the process.

## BOX 1 - NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Non-verbal behaviour/body language. Often, we can notice the changes in expression on another person's face. Similarly, the returned migrant can see the expressions on your face and observe the tensions you may show. This can be a sign of positive or negative attending. **Be aware of your body as a source of non-verbal communication.** During the reintegration counselling process, follow the SOLER approach.

**Caution:** Always consider the cultural differences (e.g. the acceptability of some forms of courtesy such as shaking hands with someone, looking the other person in the eyes and the degree of distance/proximity in interpersonal relationships which may vary greatly from one culture to another).



Face the returned migrant **square** on, with your shoulders parallel to those of the migrant.



Keep an **open** posture, especially with your arms.



When sitting listeners who **lean** slightly forward engender a greater sense of intimacy than listeners who lean back in their chairs.



**Eye contact** is an important part of attending. People are less likely to communicate freely with us if we avoid eye contact with them. However, intense eye contact can also make communication difficult for the returned migrant. Engage in soft, regular, gentle eye contact that neither avoids direct gaze nor stares too intensively.



Speakers are more likely to feel comfortable with listeners who are calm and **relaxed**. Being relaxed is a state of mind that is shown in the body.



**Socioemotional presence.** This refers to the quality of your presence to the returned migrant during the reintegration counselling session. Both the verbal and non-verbal behaviour should show the returned migrant that you are willing to work with him/her. There should be no distinction between the two, as this might indicate a lack of genuineness and interest in attending. Some examples of negative attitudes when someone is talking to you that should be avoided are: *looking around the room distracted, talking to someone else on the phone, tapping your pen on the table, looking constantly at your watch or your phone.*



**Silence.** Silence gives the returned migrant a chance to think things through. Occasionally it may indicate embarrassment or resentment. Many people feel uncomfortable with silences and tend to chip in with the first thing that comes to mind, which is usually irrelevant. This must be avoided. Leave pauses, even at the beginning of the reintegration counselling session before the returned migrant has spoken. If s/he stops talking, but you feel s/he is not really finished, do not let the silence make you nervous. S/he may be thinking through something important. After a while, you can say something like, "you seem to be thinking hard"; this will let him/her know that you are with him/her and can facilitate the dialogue.

## BOX 2 - INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

- A) Open-ended questions: those are questions that can bring out different answers and that cannot be answered in few words or, sometimes, even in a single session. They encourage the respondent to share and provide maximum information. In open-ended questioning, it is usual to begin with “**What**”, “**How**”, “**Why**” types of questions. “**What**” questions serve to solicit facts and gather information; “**How**” questions are related to sequence and process of emotions (e.g. **How do you feel about ...? How can you move forward with your strengths?**). “**Why**” questions tend to focus on reasons and intellectual history. These questions encourage sharing and give the respondent the possibility to express his/her view in their own language. It is important to encourage your respondent to speak freely about whatever s/he wants related to the question asked.
- B) Closed-ended questions: those questions leave the respondent only few possibilities to answer, like “**yes**” or “**no**”. Those questions should always be complementary to open-ended questions.
- C) Paraphrasing: paraphrasing is a brief rephrasing of information provided by the respondent. It provides a restatement of the essence of the information in your own words. The use of paraphrasing demonstrates you are listening, and it helps you make sure your understanding is correct. It is not uncommon for people to be somewhat vague or have trouble coming to the point when discussing. By restating the respondent's main points in your own words, you not only understand better, but also help him/her to clarify his/her main points and concerns. If your restatement is not quite on target, the person will usually clarify what s/he has just said. E.g. “**It sounds like... Let me see if I heard you right... Are you saying that... In other words, what you mean is...**”.
- D) Clarifying and summarizing: clarifying means asking questions until you are both confident that you have understood the essence message. E.g. “**I am not sure what you mean. Can you explain a bit more?**”. Summarizing is pulling together, organizing and integrating the major aspects of your conversation, going over it together, agreeing on the next step of action.

**E) Restating:** restating what you have just heard often helps to continue the discussion without distracting the train of thoughts.

E.g. Returned migrant: "...and I do not know what to do now."

Reintegration counsellor: "You do not know what to do?"

Returned migrant: "No, I just do not see any solution to my current situation..."

**F) Invitations to talk:** Sometimes it is useful to make encouraging remarks like:  
"Would you like to talk more about that?"

"Could you tell me more about your situation?"

### BOX 3 - EMPATHY, SYMPATHY AND APATHY

As a reintegration counsellor, you should try to show empathy rather than sympathy or... apathy. Below are some examples.

### EXAMPLE

### EMPATHY

	SYMPATHY	APATHY
1	The migrant is talking about his grief for the loss of a friend during the travel	I can understand what you are going through.
2	The migrant expresses his/her anger in relation to mistreatment from authorities	I can understand that you are feeling angry at what has happened to you.
3	The migrant expresses his/her fears of not being accepted back in the family	I accept that you are very scared.
4	The migrant starts crying	Simply sitting in silence while the person expresses his/her feelings or weeps.

**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

# CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

A supportive environment is important because it ensure that the communication setting is comfortable, free of distraction or interruptions and one in which the returned migrant feels safe and secure. Several recommendations on how to create a supportive environment during the reintegration counselling process are listed below.

1. A reintegration counselling interview must not harm the returned migrant emotionally. Do not force him/her to talk about what happened in the past or during the migration journey. Also, be careful not to display judgmental behaviour about what he/she is saying.

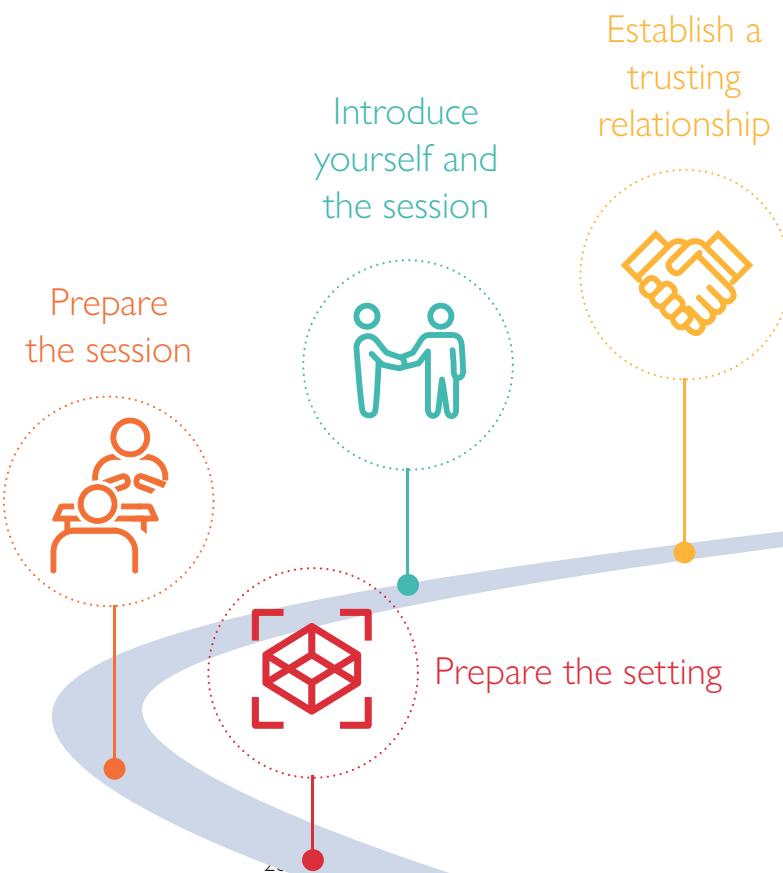


*In contexts where gender issues are culturally sensitive and may have an impact on the reintegration counselling, option should be given to the returned migrant to decide whether to talk with a female or male counsellor (whenever possible in terms of resources).*

2. The emotional challenges the returned migrants may face upon return should always be acknowledged, this means not to diminish or minimize those challenges when they are expressed. It means also to reassure him/her on the fact that those challenges are normal and not a sign of weakness in the return situation, while recognizing that the fact that they are normal does not diminish the burden on the returned migrant.
3. Reintegration counselling should preferably be done individually, as group counselling may not provide the best environment, particularly in the case of people in vulnerable situation among the returned migrants.
4. Show respect by accepting the returned migrant. This means accepting his/her emotions, feelings and thoughts without trying to push them away or downplaying them. Keep in mind that returnees may have suffered extreme experiences in the country of origin as well as during the journey. His/her ability to survive and to overcome adversities should be recognized and merits full respect.
5. Consider the returned migrant a peer subject in the conversation and not only the recipient of information. Do this by paying attention to any signals during the interaction, for example, indicating the wish to stop talking for a while, to take a little break or to change environment.
6. Establish a relationship of trust before attempting to collect information (such as profile assessment and vulnerability screening).
7. Provide factual information and be honest about what you know or not, what can be done or not within the reintegration assistance. For example, say, “I do not know but I will try to find out”.
8. Acknowledge the returned migrant’s feelings, his/her strengths and how these have helped so far.
9. Respect privacy especially when the returned migrant discloses very private information.
10. Do not comment or give opinion on the returned migrant’s situation. Just listen.
11. Be non-judgemental.

# REINTEGRATION COUNSELLING:

## STEPS AND KEY MESSAGES



Follow up

Conclude on a  
good note



Explain the  
reintegration  
assistance  
process



Assess the  
returned  
migrant's  
vulnerabilities



Establish a  
comprehensive  
reintegration plan



# REINTEGRATION COUNSELLING

## STEPS AND KEY MESSAGES

Reintegration counselling is a key component of the IOM Integrated Approach to Reintegration. Below, we detail the steps you, as a reintegration counsellor should ideally follow when organizing a reintegration counselling session. You should keep in mind that it may not be possible to cover all these steps in a single session. Indeed, several meetings and conversations with the returned migrant may be needed to develop a strong and comprehensive reintegration plan.



### Step 1 - Prepare the setting

The reintegration counselling session should take place in a quiet, warm and comfortable place (with good air and light, positive pictures on the wall, adequate furniture) to minimize distractions, build a supportive environment, offer privacy and confidentiality. Arrange the chairs to facilitate a direct interaction between you and the returned migrant (it is preferable to avoid sitting behind a desk but rather to choose a more informal sitting arrangement). Before the session, review and practice the active listening techniques mentioned above. Turn off your phone or put it in silence mode and put your computer/laptop away to minimize distractions. Do offer water, tea or coffee to help the returned migrant feel comfortable.



### Step 2 - Prepare the session

Make sure you are well prepared before you start the reintegration counselling session. Review the migrant's case file before the interview to avoid asking redundant questions. Identify the most important information you need for the profile assessment and the vulnerability screening and try to memorize the key questions so that the conversation is as natural and fluid as possible. Schedule sufficient time for the session: you must not appear pressured by time.



## Step 3 - Introduce yourself and the session

When you start the interview, you should **always** introduce yourself. State your name and your role to the returned migrant. Remember that it is normal for someone who is not familiar with IOM to be confused or even feel suspicious about the Organization and what we do. It is thus paramount that we are transparent about our intentions and motives. Clearly state your professional role, mentioning that you wish to talk about the reintegration assistance. Explain that this is a confidential encounter and that everything that will be discussed will stay between you two. Negotiate the duration of the session with the returned migrant and give him/her the possibility to ask you questions and to introduce him/herself as well.



## Step 4 - Establish a trusting relationship

The first minutes of the session set the tone for the rest of the session and help establish a relationship of trust with the returned migrant. Before the session properly begins, engage in brief small talk by asking some light personal questions. Reassure the returned migrant, if you think it is necessary: "**You are not alone, we will support you to the possible extent**", and covey some of the messages listed in [Annex 1](#). This will help build trust and a supportive environment, which are key to encourage dialogue and make sure the conversation is effective. Remember to make eye contact with the returned migrant during the conversation, unless this makes him/her feel uncomfortable (for cultural or other reasons).



## Step 5 - Explain the reintegration assistance process

During the session, make sure you clearly explain the reintegration assistance process: the steps and importance of the reintegration counselling session, the types of assistance available, the various documents and forms that will need to be filled, and importantly, the time it could take from the first reintegration counselling session to the reception of the reintegration assistance. Make sure you specify that the reintegration assistance will be provided in goods and/or services, and not in cash. More details about the reintegration options will be given later but the returned migrant should have a realistic idea about the process itself and the opportunities available. This helps avoid unrealistic expectations which could be detrimental to the sustainable reintegration and create frustrations and anger. You can use the project information sheet or flyer as support document when speaking about the project and the reintegration process.



## Step 6 - Assess the returned migrant's vulnerabilities

Identifying possible situations of vulnerability is important as it helps tailor the reintegration assistance provided. As a reminder, returned migrants in vulnerable situations should receive immediate assistance specifically tailored to their needs, i.e. medical assistance, psychosocial counselling, etc.

Remember that survivors of distressing events may show different distress reactions and they can be afraid that they might go crazy and that nobody is able to understand them. They need someone who does not think they are “wrong”. (See [Box 4: How to recognize signs of distress](#)).

Your role in such a situation is to provide first line emotional support. Show empathy with verbal (active listening) and non-verbal gestures (hug **if appropriate**, touch the shoulder, smile) that reflect and validate the feelings the returned migrant may express while going through this part of the session (See [Box 5: How to help people feel calm](#)).

If you think the returned migrant is too distressed to continue the session, take a break or adjourn the session until a later date. Likewise, encourage him/her to interrupt the session if s/he feels doing so.

Three main forms are typically used to support IOM reintegration counsellors collecting this information: the registration form, the profile assessment form and a set of vulnerability assessment forms. When administering them, focus on the returned migrant, not on the forms and use the above-mentioned techniques.

#### **Related documents:**

- Registration form
- Profile assessment form

If there are indications of vulnerability:

- Rapid screening form,
- CT screening form,
- MiVS screening form as relevant.
- Reintegration Sustainability Survey and Scoring System

## **Step 7 - Establish a comprehensive reintegration plan**

Use the opportunity of the session to explore the abilities, resources and motivations of the returned migrant, including his/her skills and the experiences, social networks and economic resources s/he has at their disposal. The aim of this part of the session is to help the returned migrant think about his/her reintegration plan which should be considered a lifeplan containing the returned migrant's goals and objectives now that s/he is back home, and how s/he is planning to meet these goals.



As the discussions on the reintegration plan progress, give the returned migrant a realistic overview of the available opportunities. Be mindful not to create unrealistic and false expectations. The reintegration approach described in the SOPs of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative does not envisage fixed packages of assistance. Reintegration assistance is primarily needs based and decided based on the potential sustainability and impact of the assistance provided. The type and value of the assistance is thus an evolving process where each step allows refining the reintegration plan.

At the end, decide jointly on the next steps: what the returned migrant should do/is responsible for and what IOM shall contribute to, within the limits allowed by the project (budget, timeline, parameters of assistance, etc.). Once these are done, draft a timeline/action plan or roadmap. (See [Annex 3](#)).

While collective and community-based reintegration assistance may be difficult to promote in the context of individual reintegration counselling, you should highlight some of the advantages of this type of assistance (larger project, availability of more resources and support from peers, breadth of skills and experience which can be useful to the project, better chances of acceptance from the community, etc.).

Collective and community-based activities can also be encouraged by describing the selection criteria reintegration plans will have to pass through: if a project is presented by a group of returned migrants, if it involves the community or addresses its needs, it is far more likely to be selected and funded than individual projects. Finally, training sessions organized under the project may constitute very relevant occasions to foster engagement around collective projects. Retuned migrants from a same region can indeed meet and discuss their reintegration ideas with their peers which may encourage some of them to join forces naturally.

# Remember

**Referrals:** In each country, government agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations implement programmes in a variety of fields. If the needs and perspectives of the returned migrant can be addressed through these programmes, IOM should not duplicate the services available and should refer the migrant to them.

**Training and general support:** To address common needs of returned migrants , IOM and its partners should organize training workshops, focus group discussions or other types of activities such as job fairs or meetings between returned migrants and microfinance institutions (each IOM Mission should consider types of support that are relevant to their context and to the profile of their beneficiaries). During the reintegration counselling session, the relevance of inviting the returned migrant to a specific training or event should be assessed. For instance, many returned migrants will eventually set up a business. Following a training in financial literacy and business management may thus be very relevant, regardless of the fact that IOM will then support the setting up of the business or not.

**Additional / complementary reintegration assistance** can be provided in three situations:

- i. in case the returned migrant is assessed to be in a situation of vulnerability;
- ii. in case a returned migrant returns to a community where a community-based project is implemented and
- iii. in case a returned migrant's reintegration plan is selected by a selection committee based on several criteria.

**Reintegration assistance is provided in-kind**, i.e. through the direct provision of goods and/or services, and can include medical assistance, psychosocial support, training, education, job placement, the creation or strengthening of income-generating activities (including at community level), housing and basic needs such as food and clothes.

Assistance can be either **individual or collective and can have a community- based focus.**

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A drawing by a displaced child in Maiduguri, Northern Nigeria. As part of psychosocial activities, children are invited to draw things that make them happy.  
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## Step 8 - Conclude on a good note

Conclude the session on a positive note. Briefly re-explain what the next steps are and agree on when the next contact should take place. Ask the returned migrant if s/he has any questions or need a clarification. Insist on the following points when relevant:

- The returned migrant should keep in touch and inform you about any possible change in their contact details;
- S/he should openly discuss his/her reintegration plan with his/her family (and potentially important for the family to be involved in counselling sessions), and possibly more largely to members of his/her community.



## Step 9 - Follow up

Reintegration counselling is not a one-shot activity. It is a continuous process. You should ideally have regular contacts with the returned migrant to ensure that the reintegration process is going well, readjust the reintegration plan if needed and when possible and relevant add additional support.

## BOX 4 - RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF DISTRESS

### What to look for during the session

- Facial expressions of sadness or fear;
- Restlessness i.e. unable to sit relaxed;
- Strange movements;
- Irrelevant answers to questions;
- A very fast rate of talking or conversely, a very slow rate of talking;
- The person's general hygiene and self-care'.

### Common signs of distress reactions

**Physical:** shaking, headaches, extreme fatigue, loss of appetite, aches and pains, nausea, dizziness, having breathing difficulties, complaints of sleeping problems, looking pale.

**Emotional and psychological:** being tearful, sighing frequently, appearing vague and confused, feeling hopeless, experiencing high levels of anxiety, irritability, unpredictable outburst of anger, sustained low mood, frequent expressions of negativity, feelings of guilt, shame and feeling confused, emotionally numb.

**Behavioural:** poor self-care and neglected personal hygiene, withdrawing socially, being on guard or jumpy, violent act towards self and/or others, eating and sleeping too much or too little, taking drugs or alcohol to reduce tension, pulling away from others or usual activities.

**Cognitive:** feeling unusually confused and forgetful, inability to concentrate, constant worrying, seeing only the negative, reduced activity and low energy.

## BOX 5 - HELPING PEOPLE FEEL CALM

- a. Stay close to the person
- b. Do not pressure them to talk
- c. Listen in case they want to talk
- d. If they are very distressed make sure they are not left alone
- e. Keep your tone of voice soft and calm
- f. If someone feels “unreal”, help them to enter in contact with :
  - i. themselves (feel feet on the floor, tap hands on lap)
  - ii. their surroundings (notice things around them)
  - iii. their breath (focus on breath and breathe slowly)

# RETURNED MIGRANTS

## REQUIRING SPECIAL ATTENTION

During the reintegration counselling session, watch out for the signs that may point to needs for special attention.

Returned migrants should be immediately referred for medical or specialized mental health care should they:

- attempt announce or have attempted suicide, or are self-harming;
- be particularly violent against the others;
- not be able to remember very simple facts of their life (e.g. their name), attend to basic routines (waking up, eating);
- report having been recently victims of rape, torture, personal violence;
- have been trafficked and/or witnessed tragic situations;
- report using drugs;
- report pre-existing psychiatric conditions, especially if they did not have access to medicine for a prolonged period of time.

In addition, psychological counselling, if available, can be offered, **but NOT imposed** to returned migrants who:

- are seen to remain isolated/withdrawn most of the time and show no overt interest in the activities happening around them;
- are easily irritable or visibly emotionally unstable;
- are reluctant to communicate when approached;
- appear extremely distressed (see [Box 4](#));
- are grieving, or communicate during the interview they are having intrusive thoughts of past events;
- report having experienced protracted detention, personal violence and/or witnessed tragic deaths.

You should be ready to provide basic first-line emotional support to the returned migrant who may need it (see [Box 5](#)), but also be aware of your professional limits.

A referral mechanism or system should be established in advance and returned migrants in need of specialized support should be referred to mental health and psychosocial support professionals. In this case, explain to the returned migrant, in simple terms, the reasons for the referral and the kind of support they can receive. Ask them him/her whether they are happy with the referral (keep in mind that psychological and mental health issues are often followed by stigma).

# CONCLUSION

This guide highlights how mental health and psychosocial support is a cross-cutting issue which should be mainstreamed in all reintegration assistance interventions, including the economic support measures.

As a reintegration counsellor, you have a fundamental role to play in integrating a psychosocial approach during the reintegration counselling which constitutes one of the key interventions that can contribute to the success of a sustainable reintegration assistance of returned migrants.

We believe that after reading this guide and putting some effort to implement this approach most of the guidance provided will become quite automatic and will allow you to significantly improve your counselling skills and, hence, the quality of the assistance provided.





An IOM staff and a migrant at one of the IOM transit centres in the Niger. © IOM 2016/Amanda NERO

# RECOMMENDED READINGS AND RESOURCES

IOM

2014 [Returning with a health condition, A toolkit for counselling migrants with health concerns](#)

IOM

2019 [Reintegration Handbook - Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance](#)

World Bank Group

[Restoring Livelihoods with Psychosocial Support](#), 5-part video series, which lays out the reasons it is important to consider psycho-social and mental health needs when designing livelihood programs.

Samuel Hall/IOM

2017 [Setting standard for an integrated approach to reintegration](#), report commissioned by IOM and funded by the UK Department for Foreign and International Development.

## ANNEXES

# 1. Key messages to support returned migrants during their reintegration process

Here are 10 key messages to help returned migrants deal with the psychosocial challenges associated with return and reintegration and move on with their lives.

1. **Be positive about your abilities.** Self-esteem helps to cope with stress. Remember your own strengths and achievements. Be confident in your own ability to deal with problems.
2. **Be prepared** but also be open to unplanned opportunities. While you may have ideas about what your future will look like and what you want to do next, having an open and flexible approach to your expectations will let you recognize and benefit from opportunities when they arise. For instance, you may want to be a self-employed entrepreneur. However, your skills may be a perfect fit for a new company that is opening in your city. Balance your wishes with your needs and be ready to consider all your options.
3. **Change takes time**, so give it time. Dealing with change is part of life. At some point, everyone experiences challenges and setbacks. The road to change has ups and downs, twists and turns. Set small goals of change so you can go forward step by step.
4. **Find a sense of purpose in your life.** This might mean becoming involved in your community or participating in activities that are meaningful to you.
5. **Develop a strong social network.** Having caring, supportive people around you will help protect you in times of crisis. It is important to have people you can talk to honestly. Talking about your situation will help you get support, and come up with possible solutions to problems you encounter. Find support groups and peer groups where you can connect with people who have similar experiences and interests. If you have difficulties with your own community after your return, these groups may provide support.

6. **Share your experience.** Your own attitude may influence the way people around you respond to your return, especially those in your family and in your community. Try to help people around you to understand why you decided to return, using positive and reassuring language. Share things from your journey with your community, bring information and talk to them about your experiences.
7. **Be accepting of changes.** Be flexible. By learning to adapt you will be better able to face life's challenges.
8. **Be optimistic and realistic.** It is normal to feel guilt, sadness, regret, uncertainty, disappointment, anxiety and fear. Your attitude will determine how you move through these feelings. Being optimistic can be difficult when times are hard, but positive thinking does not mean ignoring problems – it means focusing on positive outcomes. It means understanding that problems are not forever, and that you have the skills to deal with challenges. It is important to be hopeful and positive about the future. Try to focus on the options you have now and how you can move forward with your strengths.
9. **Do not feel guilty.** Many people perceive the return as a failure and are ashamed about it. Your family may have supported you to travel but you will not be able to repay the debt. People may have expectations for your time spent in another country, but you did not meet those expectations. You may have described the situation elsewhere as good as it was and now the true story has emerged. You do not have to be ashamed, since what happened is not your fault. You did what you had to do. Now it is time to focus on the future.
10. **Develop your problem-solving skills.** When you have a new challenge, make a quick list of ways to solve it. By practicing problem-solving skills regularly, you will be better prepared to cope when a serious problem arises.

## 2. Set of values for effective communication

Empathy	The reintegration counsellor should communicate an ability to see and feel from the returned migrant's point of view. This usually includes a quality of personal warmth, as opposed to someone who is aloof, mechanical, or all business.
Respect	The reintegration counsellor should communicate sincere respect for the dignity and worth of the returned migrant.
Genuineness	This is about more than factual honesty or sincerity. When working with people who may find it difficult to trust others, the reintegration counsellor should must be a very genuine person who can earn trust under difficult conditions. This means saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Anything less can lead to a sense of betrayal.
Positive concern	The reintegration counsellor should demonstrate a sincere concern for the welfare and worthiness of the returned migrant. Such people may struggle with a sense of being unworthy and flawed. The reintegration counsellor's positive concern for them is often the seed of a renewed sense of self-esteem.
Non-judgemental stance	People are often concerned that they will be judged by others to be at fault for the crisis that befell them. The reintegration counsellor can and should relieve this tension by carefully avoiding judging the returned migrant. Otherwise, empathy, respect, and positive regard may be undermined.
Empowering	The reintegration counsellor is temporarily in the returned migrant's life. Therefore, it is crucial that you leave the person feeling more resilient and resourceful than when you met him/her.

<b>Practical</b>	Being practical about what can and cannot be accomplished for a person is necessary, if we are to succeed in leaving behind a strengthened and functionally whole person even after support is withdrawn.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	The reintegration counsellor has the professional and moral duty to keep private those things that are shared by the returned migrant.
<b>Ethical conduct</b>	<p>Ethical codes of conduct vary from one context to another. They also, however, have certain principles in common:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Do not harm;</li> <li>b. Be trustworthy and follow through on your words with appropriate deeds;</li> <li>c. Never exploit your relationship;</li> <li>d. Respect a person's right to make his/her decisions;</li> <li>e. Never exaggerate your skills or competence;</li> <li>f. Be aware of your own biases and prejudices.</li> </ul>

### 3. Key questions to help people prepare their reintegration

#### Your skills

- a. What skills do you have?
- b. What new skills have you gained while living abroad?
- c. Which skills do you think will be most useful for you (and to your family and community) now, upon your return?
- d. What can you build on to contribute to your family and community?

#### Your priorities

- a. What is it most important for you? Think first about what you “need”, then about what you “want”.
- b. You should consider having a back-up plan. Which alternatives could be an option for you in the future?

#### Your resources

- a. What are your resources? Can you make a list? Keep in mind that resources are not just money or goods, but also skills, ideas, and people you know who can give you psychosocial support as well as other kind of support you may need;
- b. How can you use your knowledge, skills and contacts to find or create new opportunities for yourself?
- c. Can you look for new opportunities and then see where they match your skills and resources?

#### Share experiences with family and friends

- a. What do you think about the possibility to share the experiences you lived abroad with your family members? What do you wish they knew about your experiences?
- b. Can you share your difficulties (if any) in readapting with family members or friends?
- c. Do you have the possibility to talk with others who have returned?

### **Questions you can ask your family and friends**

- a. How have things changed since I have been away?
- b. Have there been family changes, or changes in our social community?
- c. Are there new support organizations (for housing, medical treatment, education, etc.) that I can get in touch with?
- d. Has the local economy changed?
- e. What are the local sources of employment now? Have they changed?

## NOTES



The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders.



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