Supporting Refugee and Immigrant Youth in Schools Using the Core Stressor Framework

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Funding

– SAMHSA Category II NCTSN Treatment Development and Intervention Center Grants (2016-2021; 2022-2026)
  - (PI: Heidi Ellis; I: Jeff Winer)

– Thrasher Research Fund Early Career Award (2018-2021)
  - (PI: Jeff Winer)

– No relevant financial disclosures or conflicts of interest to report

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Building and Implementing WITH Communities

Resilience and Trauma

Forcibly displaced youth and families are amazingly resilient and can make enormous contributions to their communities

AND

Many youth and families understandability suffer the downstream effects of systematic trauma and oppression

(e.g., Abdi et al., 2023; Mares, 2021; Keller et al., 2017; MacLean et al., 2019)

Post-Migration Core Stressors

Resettlement

Acculturation

Isolation

Trauma

Photo credit, *The New Yorker*
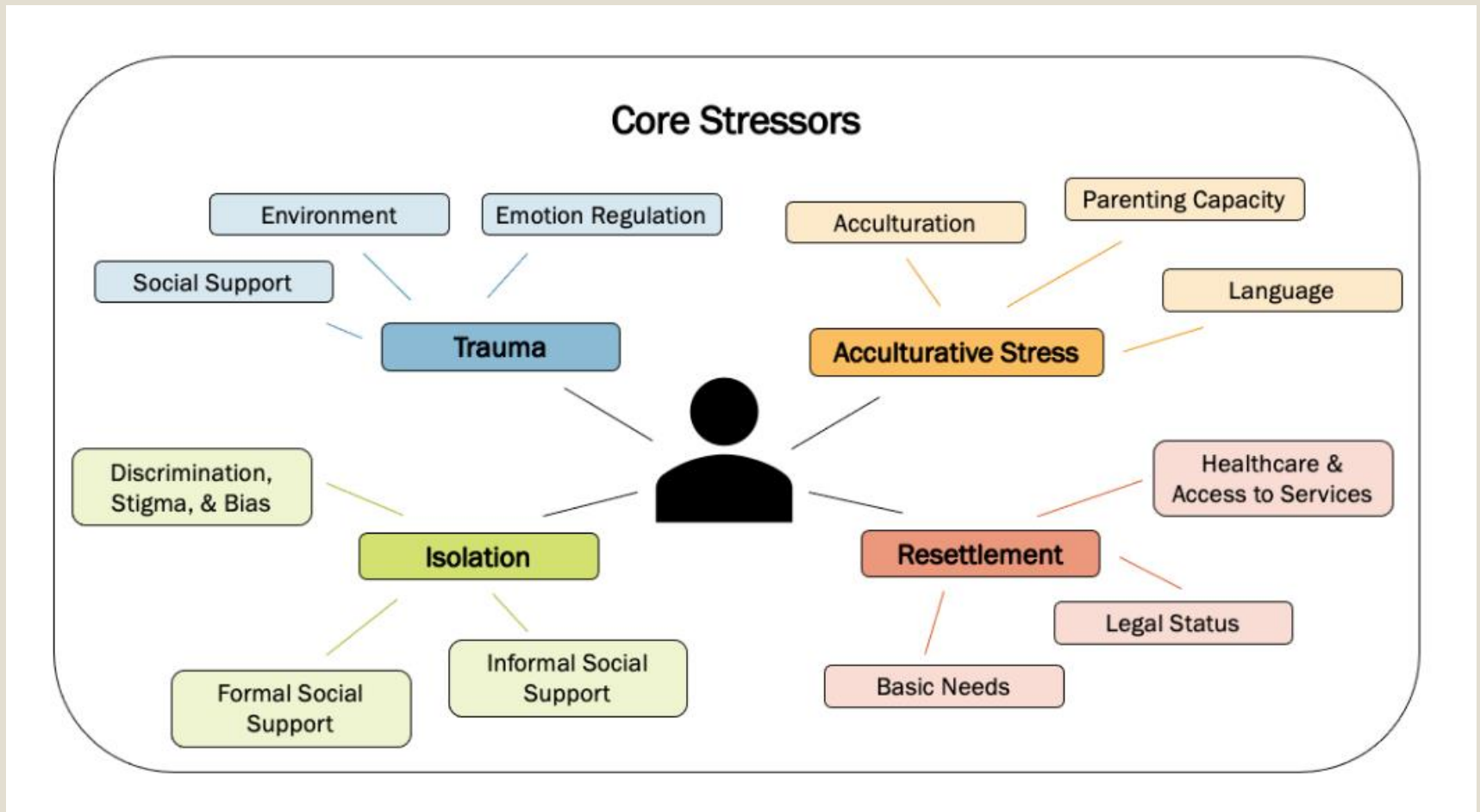
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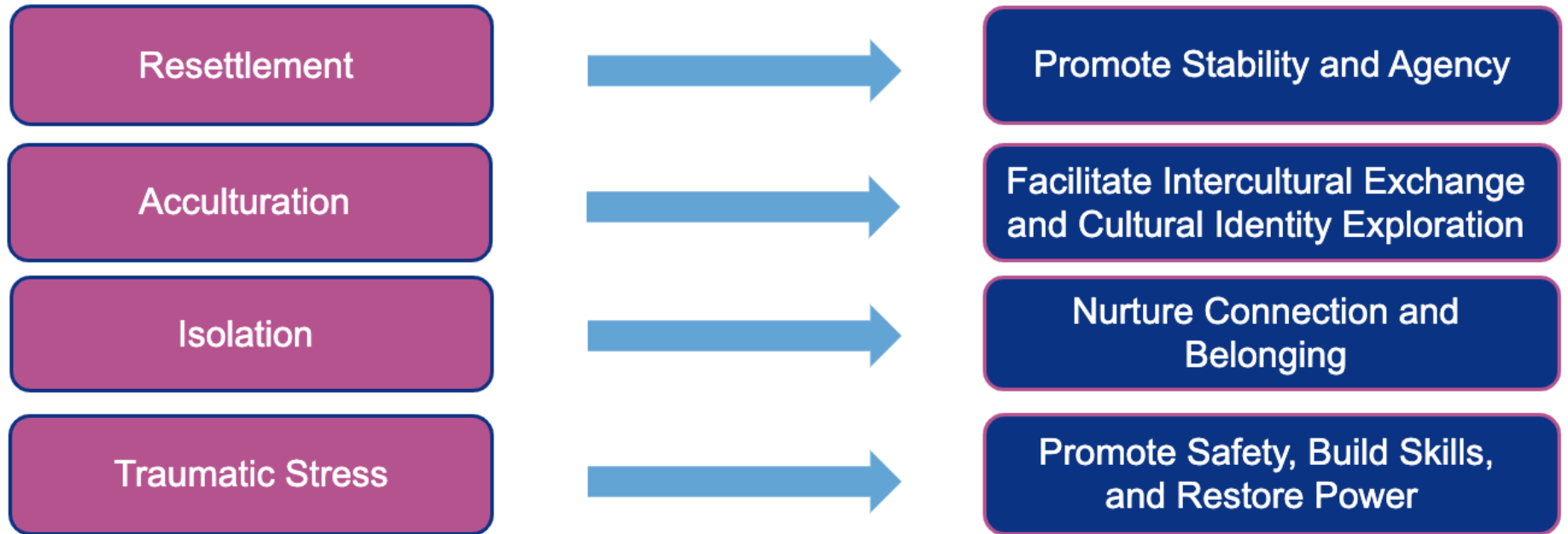Traumatic Stress Network

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Post-Migration Core Stressors

(Davis et al., 2021; Brady et al., 2021; Ellis, Abdi, Winer, 2020)

Stressor Responsive Intervention Domains

Resettlement	→	Promote Stability and Agency
Acculturation	→	Facilitate Intercultural Exchange and Cultural Identity Exploration
Isolation	→	Nurture Connection and Belonging
Traumatic Stress	→	Promote Safety, Build Skills, and Restore Power

Resettlement

Foundational needs for health and safety

-Housing

-Nutrition

-Healthcare

-Transportation

-Employment & Education

-Legal & Immigration Services

Image credit, *Center for Victims of Torture*

Resettlement Responsive Strategies:

Promote stability and agency

Promote stability:

-Assess needs and supports

-Ensure access to basic needs

Promote agency:

-Ensure opportunities for learning

-Ensure opportunities for skill development

-Ensure opportunities for voice and choice

Promoting Safety & Stability in School

Promote Learning

- Student welcome materials that attend to navigating the U.S. school experience
- Student specific (culture/language) information on programs and resources

Creating Systems

- Formalized intake procedures
- Screening student and family educational and psychosocial needs

Building Community

- Establish community partnerships with local organizations
- Hosting clothing/food drives

Core Stressors & Strengths Youth School Screener

Practice Example:
Resettlement

01	**Resettlement**	• Basic Needs: Food, Housing, , Transportation, Financial Stress • Legal Stress & Supports • Employment Stress (Student) • Educational Gaps and/or Learning Challenges
02	**Acculturation**	• Language Acquisition • Cultural Learning & Identity Formation • Family Roles & Responsibilities
03	**Mental Health Symptoms / Trauma Symptoms**	• Emotional Distress (Depressed Mood, Anxiety, etc) • Trauma Symptoms (Memories, Regulation, Concentration) • Somatic Symptoms • Environmental Stress (Home & School)
04	**Isolation**	• Experience of Loneliness • Social Connection & Support • Bullying & Discrimination
05	**Resilience**	• Environmental Safety • Help Seeking Behavior (Internal & External) • Healthy Self-Esteem
06	**Open-Ended Responses**	• The hardest thing about school for me is.. • I wish that my school would… • This school year I would like to…

Acculturation

How individuals **change** and **adapt** as a result of longer term, continuous contact with a new culture

How thoughts, behaviors, identities are orientated towards *new cultural context* and/or towards *heritage cultural context*

Assimilation; Separation Marginalization; <u>Integration</u>

Youth often 'acculturate' faster than adults
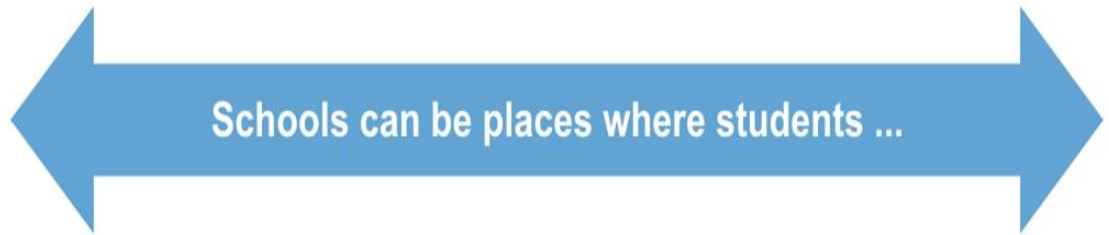
(Berry 2008; Ward & Gaaraert, 2016)

Acculturation Responsive Strategies:

Facilitate intercultural exchange and cultural identity development

Schools can be places where students ...

- Feel pressure to assimilate to mainstream culture
- Internalize racism and view "white culture" as preferred
- Feel unsafe, isolated, and/or misunderstood
- Feel lost in navigating internal and external conflicts
- Experience discrimination from peers, school staff, and/or school climate
- Reject cultural authenticity to fit in, gain approval, or feel "safer"

- Honor ancestral wisdom and cultural and linguistic teachings
- Foster pride in racial and ethnic heritage
- Engage in cultural sharing, exchange, adoption, and resistance to facilitate bicultural identity formation
- Learn to hold complexity of home-school cultural differences and skillfully navigate conflicts
- Value advocating for anti-discrimination at interpersonal and systemic levels

Facilitating Intercultural Exchange and Cultural Identity Development in School

Promote Learning
- Language acquisition and preservation

- Culturally-informed instruction and curriculum

Creating Systems
- Training and sustainable programming on cultural awareness and identity development
- School-level anti-discrimination policies

Building Community
- Hallway displays of ethnoracial diversity represented by students - maps, flags, important leaders & thinkers from country of origin (co-build with students!)

- School and community events and activities that facilitate opportunities for cultural sharing and exchange (music; food)

Practice Example: Acculturation

Promoting Resilience in Refugee and Immigrant Adolescents of Diverse Backgrounds

A Group Leader's Manual

Developed at the Refugee Trauma and Resilience Center
Boston Children's Hospital

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Trauma Systems Therapy for Refugees (TST-R) Tier 2 Skill-Based Groups

Who:
- Refugee and immigrant youth
- Elementary; Middle School; High School
- 6-8 youth per group
- Co-facilitated by clinician and cultural broker

What:
- Multiethnic; Central American, Somali, Nepali-Bhutanese; and many tailored adaptations
- Training + Consultation + Fidelity Monitoring

Where:
- Schools, Outpatient Clinics, Resettlement Agencies, ECBO & non-profits

(Winer et al., Under Review; Ellis, Abdi, & Winer, 2020; Miller et al., 2022)

Isolation

Refugee and immigrant families are vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness

Social Isolation (objective)

- Objectively having few social relationships, few social roles, few group memberships, and infrequent social interaction

Loneliness (subjective)

- A subjective distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections, where inadequate refers to the unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience

(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)

Isolation

Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Mortality Comparison: Odds (lnOR)

- Lacking Social Connection
- Smoking up to 15 cigarettes daily
- Drinking 6 alcoholic drinks daily
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity
- Air pollution
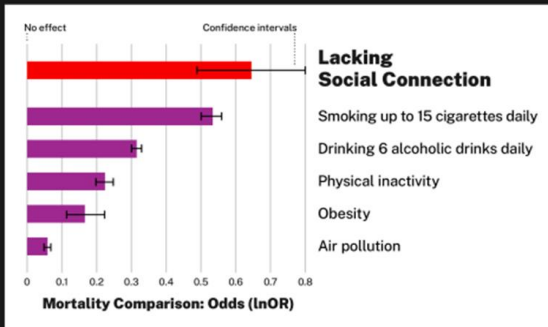
Comparison groups: Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

Source: Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. American Psychology. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

Social isolation and loneliness

-Strongly associated with increased risk of mental health problems

-Can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities to other health outcomes

-Common Isolation Stressors
-Low sense of social belonging; belonging uncertainty
-Lack of formal and informal social supports
-Loss of social/professional status
-Discrimination & identity-based othering
-Structural oppression

(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)

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Isolation:
Nurture connection and belonging

Nurture Connection

-Create opportunities for Bonding, Bridging, and Linking

Nurture Sense of Belonging

-Genuine connection building vs fitting in

-Community building and support across school ecosystems

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Promoting Belonging

Bonding → A connection with someone who has similar sociocultural identities and experiences to you (e.g., speak the same language, same country of origin, same ethnicity)

Bridging → A connection with someone who has different sociocultural and experiences identities than you (e.g., students from different countries)

Linking → A connection with someone (outside of your family) who is in a position of more power than you (e.g., teacher, coach, counselor)

(Baillot et al., 2023; Poortinga, 2012)

Nurturing Connection and Belonging in School

Promote Learning

- Social and emotional learning curriculum for all students

- Peer Mentoring programs

Creating Systems

- Class schedule that maximizes inclusivity

- School bullying and discrimination policies and procedures

Building Community

- Youth and parent/caregiver led advisory councils

- Create and sustain a student alumni network

Practice Example: Isolation

Strong and Belong Program

Brief, universal school-embedded intervention program for the transition to high school (a time of stress and belonging uncertainty)

Fosters growth mindset; skill-building, connections between students of different backgrounds; connections with school staff/leadership

Effectively integrated into MA high school across three academic years; school-specific tailoring

(Winer et al., In Prep)

What is Belongingness?

Trauma & Displacement

A trauma is an experience that is distressing and painful; one that **overwhelms** a person's ability to cope - an injury to the soul

Healing from trauma often means that one is not consumed by trauma reminders - they have made sense of their traumatic experiences and integrated what has happened into a coherent narrative that allows for moving forward

Healing with Forcibly Displaced Populations

- Take into account social and cultural context

- A culturally sensitive, community-based and family-based approach to trauma recovery is needed.

- Focus is on strengthening resilience of families and communities, in addition to treating individual trauma symptoms.

(Summerfield, 1999)

Trauma & Displacement:

Promote safety, build skills, and restore power

Being in a state of vigilance & scanning the environment for threats → We can't promise safety, yet we can **promote safety** through: predictability, transparency, consistency, relationships

Mind and body responding with protective strategies – what was previously adaptive is now nonadaptive → Instead of problematizing or punishing survival responses, we have an opportunity to support students in **building self-regulation and coping skills**

Power and control has been taken away from you → School personnel and systems typically hold "power over" students; we can shift to a "power with" model, such that students can begin to **restore power**

Promoting Safety, Building Skills, and Restoring Power in School

Promote Learning
- Practice routine, rituals, and predictability in the classroom
- High Support X High Expectations

Creating Systems
- Implement trauma-informed discipline policies and practices
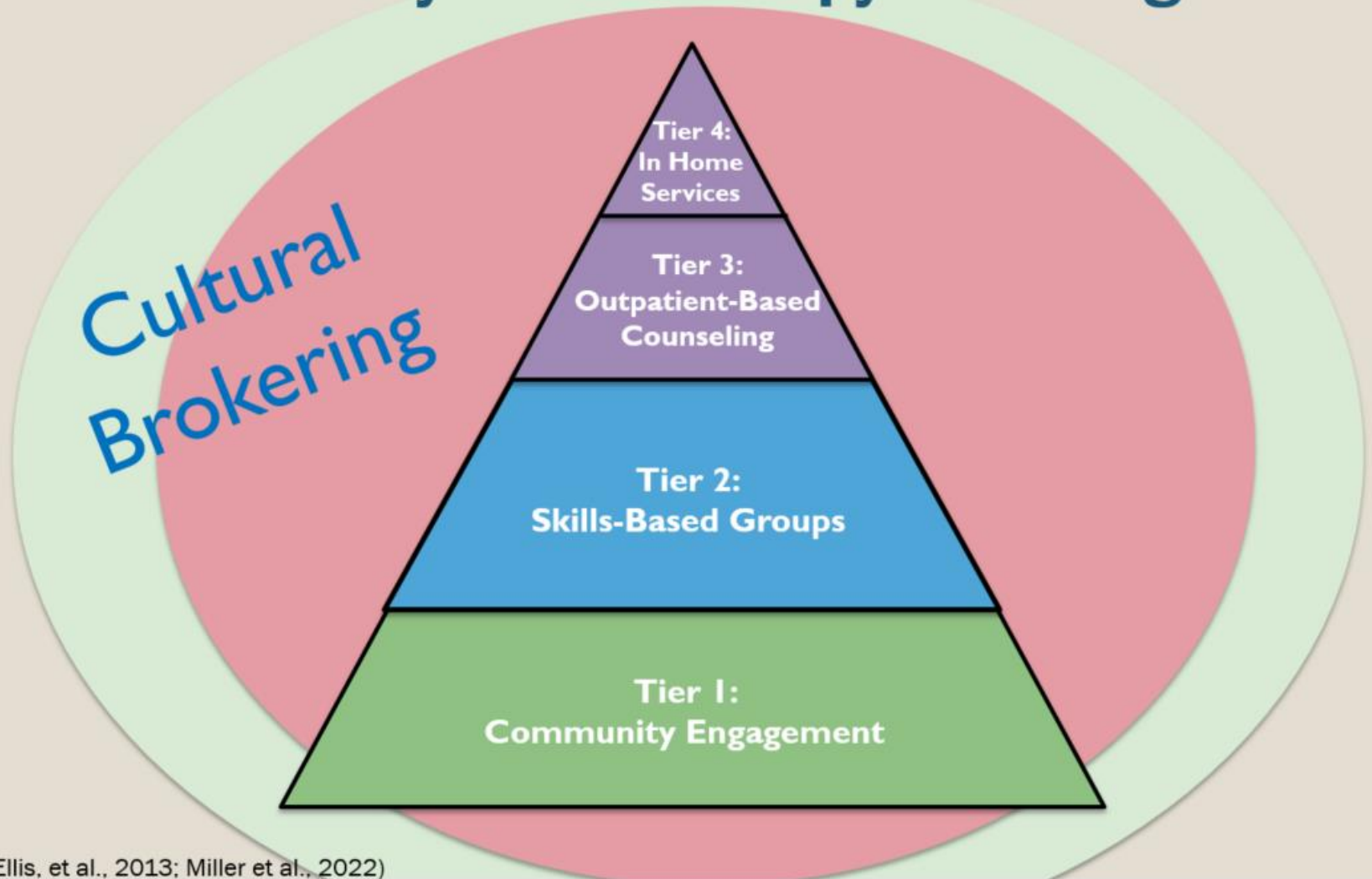- Staff professional development on trauma-informed approaches

Building Community
- Learn about family & community practices for healing and wellness
- Form partnerships with community behavioral health centers

THANK YOU!

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