WHAT’S LIFE LIKE FOR AN IMMIGRANT?*

All immigrants face stress brought on by loss of: language, identity, a familiar climate and landscape, loss of friends or family (left behind in the old country), a familiar social structure, a habitual way of life, predictability in life, cultural references, and social and professional status. Further, many arrive with the idea of an “American dream” but may find reality very different than what they expected. This is often compounded by a lack of skills required for life in America, and a lack of understanding of US social customs and institutions. This may result in a negative feeling about “American” norms, morals and values. Not surprisingly, many immigrants experience ambivalence about their decision to leave and “abandon” their motherland. This prevents them from adjusting to the new country.

In addition, immigrants may experience changes in family and gender rolls. For instance, role reversals between adults and children can adversely affect a family’s dynamics. Used to being the main breadwinners, financial supporters, authority figures in the families and accustomed to the women running the household and raising children, men may feel their status is diminished in their family.

The realities of immigration often force spouses to face each other during the long days when both of them are not working. Many of the previously concealed conflicts re-surface as a result. In addition, women tend both to learn English at a quicker pace and find work to supplement the family’s income, thus creating further disconnect in the spousal relationship.

Many immigrants face loss of status. For instance, instead of being able to reach their full professional potential, older adults may face unemployment – especially if they do not speak, understand or read English well. Once a skilled professional “back home,” an immigrant may lack the accreditation necessary to practice her or his career. Financial difficulties might replace financial stability. This leads to feelings of confusion, disorientation and incompetence.

Parents struggling to deal with the dislocating effects of immigration may find that it impacts their ability to parent. For instance, their discomfort with or lack of knowledge about the new land may prevent parents from offering credible guidance to their children. Compounding the situation, children generally learn English at a much faster rate than their parents. This also accelerates their acceptance of a culture seen as alien to their parents, creating more distance in the family.

In addition, the effect of social, cultural and technological shocks faced by many immigrants from the former Soviet Union should not be underestimated. For instance,

- They’ve moved from a world of walking and relying on public transportation into a world where owning and knowing how to drive a car is crucial.

* Adapted, with his permission, from a presentation for county service providers created and designed by Aleks Podlubny, M.S., Senior Mental Health Counselor, County of Sacramento, Department of Health & Human Services, June 2007.
They’ve gone from a cash-based economy to a life where using credit and debit cards and checks is the norm.

They’ve arrived in a country where health care is no longer free and state provided but private and for profit.

They’ve left a country where apartments were assigned or provided and now have to learn how to acquire housing on their own.

In addition to linguistic barriers in every day activities, Russian and Ukrainian immigrants’ interaction with service and justice providers are also specifically affected. For instance, because of practices common in the former Soviet Union … they may

- tend to mistrust officials and social institutions but rather rely on friends or church for information and support;
- display passive-aggressive attitudes towards authorities;
- fear that all social institutions share information (“big computer”);
- fear societal interference with their private lives and family;
- be concerned their confidentiality will not be respected;
- fear social repercussions for seeking the help of a therapist or psychiatrist (e.g., being judged by the close-knit local Russian-speaking community as “crazy” or by church members and authorities as not being a “good Christian”);
- not understand that in psychotherapy, “just talking” could be considered a treatment;
- take church authorities as unquestioned experts in the multitude of social, marriage/family, psychological, and substance abuse issues.

As with many native born Americans, religious factors may also play a strong role in immigrants’ life. Though many religions face these same concerns, the strong fundamentalist attitudes within the Russian speaking immigrants have critical implications for their adaptation to life in California. For instance,

- judging between “good” and “bad” Christians
- denial of problems by church authorities because of a fear of outsiders judging them, especially as immigrants
- fear of losing members, especially women (due to their now different position in the U.S. society) and teenagers (fear of American pop-culture, abortion issues, gay/lesbian issues, and use of drugs and alcohol);
- tensions and occasional conflicts between the leaders of different churches within the community composed of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.