
Case management counselling

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One of the most effective ways to provide tailored assistance to returnees is through dedicated case managers who accompany the returnee through a counselling process. Case management is a standard social work practice used to help beneficiaries meet their needs when they are receiving services from a variety of different providers. In the context of return and reintegration, case management can help returnees navigate what are often fragmented support services.

Though case management is typically implemented at the individual level, case managers need to understand that community level and structural level factors also affect reintegration. Case managers are a link between the returnee and their community of return. They can also oversee reintegration activities at the community level ([see Module 3](#)) by playing an essential role in facilitating integrated reintegration assistance. For more in-depth information regarding case management, please refer to the IOM [Handbook on Protection and Assistance to Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse](#).

This chapter presents an overview of counselling for case managers. This includes:

- **2.1.1 Essentials of counselling for case managers, including in the host country**
- **2.1.2 First counselling session for reintegration: step-by-step**

2.1.1 Essentials of counselling for case managers

Counselling is a fundamental step for the design, development and implementation of reintegration assistance and is typically delivered by case managers. Reintegration counselling aims to engage and empower returning migrants before departure and upon arrival in the country of origin.

Counselling refers to:

- **Communication** between a person with a need and another person who is helping to address it;

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- **Listening** and giving one's full attention to what someone says;
 - **Questioning** as a means for collecting information and showing interest;
 - **Understanding and respecting** as a way of trying to see things from the other person's perspective without judging;
 - **Empowering** by helping the person to look at their strengths;
 - **Giving information** so that the person can make their own choices;
 - Helping a person to make ***their own decision***;
 - **Providing support** by giving help and understanding; and
 - **Helping a person** to face their needs, examine their options and **decide on a course of action**.

The next section provides guidance on counselling for reintegration case management. [Annex 1.A.](#) contains further detailed guidance on counselling techniques for case managers.

Providing counselling in the host country

Reintegration counselling is different from return counselling. Return counselling is focused on helping the migrant make the decision to return to the country of origin or remain in the host country. Reintegration counselling, on the other hand, focuses on how the migrant will reintegrate into their country of origin once the decision to return has been made. Whenever possible, reintegration counselling should begin before departure from the host country to support an informed decision for return and prepare for reintegration. During a reintegration counselling session prior to departure, a case manager should be able to provide country-specific information on the type of assistance available upon return, with materials in a language accessible to the migrant. The content of this briefing should therefore be coordinated between staff in the country of origin and the host country.

Spotlight

To avoid confusion and frustration, the counsellor should use objective and balanced information on the country of origin to raise awareness among potential returnees of the challenges and responsibilities ahead. Counsellors should inform migrants only about reintegration services that are available to them in the country of origin. They should cover both limitations of the assistance and preconditions for obtaining assistance so returnees have realistic expectations about their return and can plan for it. The counsellor should avoid informing them of reintegration activities that they may not be eligible for, as there is a high risk of frustration if migrants find out at a later stage that they cannot benefit from more comprehensive assistance. The counsellor should also try to dispel any incorrect information or rumours the returnee may have heard about the reintegration assistance or process.

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Face-to-face counselling with reintegration staff from the country of origin

In recent years, IOM Iraq AVRR staff have visited migrant reception centres in European countries to carry out group counselling with Iraqi migrants and provide information to relevant institutions in the host country. Migrants, counterparts in host countries and IOM staff have perceived this as very positive. Experience has shown that Iraqi migrants have greater trust in information that comes from an independent organization, such as IOM, than in information from a government source. This is particularly the case because national staff who work and live in Iraq can provide first-hand information. Although virtual counselling is already an important step to a comprehensive preparation of migrants before their return, regular face-to-face group counselling sessions by country of origin staff in the host country have had the greatest impact on beneficiary trust-building, buy-in and preparedness.

2.1.2 First counselling session for reintegration: step-by-step

While reintegration counselling sessions can begin before departure, they become essential after arrival in the country of origin.

For the first reintegration counselling session in the country of origin, the case manager provides basic firstline emotional support to returnees and assesses whether to refer returning migrants to specialized services.

The first counselling session should cover three main aspects:

- **Providing first line psychosocial support** to the returnee;
- **Collecting information** on the returnee, including a new assessment of potential situations of vulnerability and identification of immediate needs; and
- Informing the returnee about the reintegration assistance process.

Below are the steps recommended for conducting a successful first counselling session:

Case managers can refer to [Annex 1.A](#) for tips on counselling techniques appropriate for the initial meeting with a new returnee or if a beneficiary is in distress.

Furthermore, counselling with the family may also be needed. [See section 2.6.2 for further information.](#)

Step 1: Prepare for the counselling session

To prepare for the counselling session, the reintegration case manager should review the information received from the host country, if available. This includes facts and observations about the returnee, information on possible vulnerabilities, main points for discussion and the development of a reintegration plan prior to departure. The case manager should focus on specific actions with the returnee as well as on an action plan with clear, attainable goals. It is recommended that the case manager keep in mind active listening techniques ([see Annex 1.A](#)) and allowing for sufficient time for a discussion and to answer any questions the returnee might have.

- **Select a suitable place.** Counselling should be carried out in an environment that minimizes interruptions and is free from distractions. It should be a place where privacy and confidentiality can be maintained. It should be welcoming, comfortable and non-threatening, with good air and natural light. If conducted online, case managers should remove all distractions in the office and ask the returnee on the other end to do the same, inviting them to be comfortable and alone in the room.

If the case manager visits returnees in their homes, it is recommended to sit somewhere comfortably and quietly, away from other family members and to minimize distractions by switching off radios or televisions.

- **Schedule the time.** The length of time required for the reintegration counselling session depends on the complexity of the returnee's situation. If the returnee needs more time or is fatigued by the counselling itself, successive meetings should be scheduled. The case manager should select a time free from competition with other activities and remember that important events can distract the person from concentrating on the counselling.
- **Notify returnees in advance and give information about the session,** so that they can prepare. Information should include logistical instructions, such as how to reach the location, as well as why, where and when the counselling takes place.
- **Secure an interpreter if necessary,** to facilitate communication and information exchange with the returnee. Brief the interpreter on the session and confidentiality requirements.
- **Collect and store information.** The case manager should have a system to note down important information and store any documentation of the reintegration counselling in a confidential and secure manner.¹⁷

At the beginning of the session, case managers should greet returnees and welcome them, and introduce themselves, their professional role and that of the organization they work for. Some returnees may be confused or suspicious, particularly in the case of forced returns. It is of paramount importance to be clear about the purpose of the counselling session: to talk about reintegration assistance and explain that they can choose to reject this assistance at any time.

Case managers should explain that this is a confidential meeting and that only specific information necessary for the reintegration process might be shared with other professionals, always with the returnee's consent. Case managers should allow the returnee to introduce themselves and to ask questions. The duration of the counselling session depends on many factors, among them the

mental condition of the returnee, their fatigue and their capacity for concentration. By observing the returnee's non-verbal communication, the case manager should be able to understand when to propose a break or interrupt the session to schedule the next one.

Step 2: Establish a climate of trust

The first minutes of the encounter are fundamental for establishing a relationship of trust. The reintegration counselling session may begin by the counsellor asking generic questions about how the returnee is feeling and engaging in brief small talk ("How do you feel? Were you able to find this location easily?"). Avoid beginning with questions about the recent steps of their migration journey. Showing respect helps build trust, which is key to encouraging dialogue and productive discussion. From time to time during the session, it is good to reassure the returnee about what is being done and what will be done to support them, without raising expectations that the organization will not be able to meet. Case managers should be prepared to respond appropriately to disclosures and avoid exacerbating any distress. The case manager should facilitate the discussion and encourage the returnee to provide complete information.

If needed, the case manager can offer first-line psychological support to the returnee. This can include providing empathetic and supportive reintegration counselling ([see Annex 1.A](#)), psychological first aid to a returnee who is particularly stressed during counselling ([see Annex 1.C](#)) or a referral to psychological counselling or other psychosocial and specialized mental health services ([see section 2.6.3](#)).

Step 3: Explain the reintegration assistance process

Case managers should explain the process of reintegration counselling and how reintegration assistance works in general terms. They should also ask returnees if they understand what is being explained and whether they agree and consent. Case managers should remind returnees that they can stop them whenever they have a question. This empowers returnees to make decisions. The interview can evoke emotional reactions and case managers should periodically ask returnees how they feel and whether it is acceptable to proceed to the next point or if a pause is needed.

While details about the reintegration options will be given later, it is important that returnees have a broad understanding of the process. Case managers should give returnees a realistic idea of available options and possibilities. They should not raise unrealistic expectations that could be detrimental to the effective reintegration of the returnee possibly creating frustration and even feelings of anger.

Step 4: Assess vulnerabilities

Case managers should have received information about a returnee's vulnerabilities and needs prior to their return. However, because this information may not be complete or new vulnerabilities and needs may arise upon arrival, a returnee's immediate needs, vulnerabilities and risks should be (re)assessed as soon as he or she arrives at the country of origin.

Identifying possible situations of vulnerability is essential as this determines the nature and timing of the assistance needed in the country of origin. Urgent referrals should be made following disclosure

of any information that is life-threatening or otherwise requires emergency attention. Detailed information on assessing a returnee's vulnerabilities, capacities and needs is included in section 2.2.

Step 5: Design the reintegration plan

The aim of this part of the counselling session is to help returnees envisage their future in a positive and proactive way. The reintegration plan is not limited to the assistance provided (if any) but should be broader, encompassing different aspects and factors of reintegration – a sort of “life plan” that includes the objectives of the returnee and the actions to be carried out both by the returnee and the assisting organization.

The reintegration plan should highlight strengths and resources as key elements that can facilitate the reintegration process. At the same time, it is important that the returnee be open about the challenges, issues and obstacles related to return so that these can be addressed, when feasible.

Case managers can find more specific guidance on how to approach these areas and questions to ask in [Annex 1.F](#).

The reintegration counselling session should not only collect information vital for tailoring a reintegration plan, but also to help the returnee create the right balance between expectations and reality. Managing returnees' expectations requires the case manager to be open and transparent about available reintegration support and about eligibility requirements and limits, throughout the entire counselling process.

Case managers should invite returnees to articulate their aspirations and expectations while also providing information on their existing skills and interests. Returnees should be encouraged to reflect on how their migration experience could benefit them upon their return to their country of origin.

Step 6: Close the first session and plan follow up

The creation or review of an individual reintegration assistance plan may initially be time-consuming. If time allows, case managers should carry out the assessments described in the next section ([2.2](#)) and develop a reintegration plan (covered in [section 2.3](#)) before closing the first counselling session. Section 2.3 provides guidance for developing or reviewing specific, practical reintegration plans for returnees and their families.

Sometimes, though, creating a reintegration plan requires a separate counselling session. If the case manager together with the returnee decides to schedule a separate meeting to develop the specific reintegration plan, the case manager should close the counselling session by summarizing the most important points and scheduling a follow-up session.

If, as recommended, a returnee has developed a reintegration plan prior to departure, the plan should

be reviewed and discussed again at the first post-arrival counselling session, as there may have been changes in the returnee's situation since return.

The first counselling session might require an immediate life-saving referral of the returnee to appropriate health - including mental health - care. ([See section 2.6.2 for a list of cases to refer immediately for specialized follow-up.](#))

Reintegration counselling is not a one-time activity but a continuous process. Even after a reintegration plan has been created and its points are being acted upon, case managers should be in regular contact with the returnee to check whether the reintegration process is proceeding according to the plan, mitigate possible challenges or moments of difficulty and leverage new opportunities. ([See section 2.3.3 for more information on reintegration follow-up.](#))

¹⁷ Conducting a risk-benefit assessment and a sensitivity assessment when processing personal data as well as ensuring transparency towards the returnees on the processing of their personal data is particularly important. Reasonable and necessary precautions must be also taken to preserve the confidentiality of personal data.

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