



Case Study: Iryna*

Iryna is 14 years old and in Year 9. She fled her hometown Kharkiv, Ukraine, in March 2022, three weeks after the Russian invasion with her mother and younger brother amidst “constant bombing, constant alarms”. They left Ukraine without her father, who was of fighting age and was required to stay to defend their country.

The family abandoned their apartment and drove for five days to reach the border with Poland, where the queue was so long that it took two days to cross. They had to abandon their car and belongings, except for a plastic bag that held their paperwork. They stayed in Poland for a short time until flights could be organised to Australia.

Upon arrival in Melbourne, they stayed in temporary dormitory-style accommodation with access to a group kitchen and communal living areas. The accommodation was strictly monitored with no one allowed in or out without authorisation.

Iryna and her younger brother were enrolled in the local school close to the accommodation where the teachers had set up a comfortable space for the newly arrived students to meet and play games together. Prior to arriving in Australia, Iryna was completing Grade 9 of her Basic Secondary Education (Grades 5-9). Iryna has found it difficult to get used to school in Australia. Her schooling in Ukraine was very strict and formal, whereas here it seems to her there is not much of a routine and the work is too easy.

After moving into a rented flat in the south-east suburbs of Melbourne, Iryna enrolled in a closer school. Whereas lots of the other Year 9 students are talking about subject selection for their senior school years, Iryna does not want to be in Australia at the end of the year. As she puts it: "I would like that everything [the war] will finish as quickly as possible and we will be able to return back home." She does not want to be in Australia without her father or friends.

Late at night, Iryna can hear her mother talking to her dad on the phone and crying. It feels like her mother is overwhelmed by the war and the loss of their father and is unable to cope. She also watches a lot of news from Ukraine on her phone. Both Iryna and her mum still receive air raid alerts on their mobile phone apps.

Over the last couple of months, Iryna’s teachers have noticed that she appears disinterested in forming attachments to the others in her class and is increasingly withdrawn. They have found that she excels at times in her schoolwork, but when it comes to activities that require group interaction she tends to drift off into her own world.

With the separation from her father, Iryna is angry toward her mother, whom she blames for leaving Ukraine and bringing them to Australia. Iryna questions the injustice of it all: “Why me? Why my family? Why my country?”

Discussion Questions:

- *What are Iryna’s strengths?*
- *Where in the window of tolerance is she presenting?*
- *What might be triggering a trauma response/state?*
- *What strategies could you use to support her to shift back into the learning zone?*

*This fictional Case Study is an amalgamation of real characters and scenarios to facilitate professional learning.