

# Ulysses Syndrome and the Farmworker Community



People migrate for many reasons. War, chronic violence, poverty, hardship due to famine, drought, and extreme weather cause people to leave their homeland, uproot their lives, and migrate to other countries. **When they are forced to leave their homes and loved ones and make difficult, dangerous journeys in search of a better life, immigrants and refugees experience intense stress, grief, and forced loneliness.**

**The chronic and multiple stresses faced by immigrants and refugees are called Ulysses Syndrome.** Named after the Greek mythical hero Ulysses who left his wife and child and traveled far to fight in the Trojan War, the syndrome occurs when someone experiences prolonged and extreme stress.

**With an estimated 75% of California's farmworkers immigrating here from other countries, it is not surprising that many local farmworkers are struggling with Ulysses Syndrome.**

## Signs and Symptoms

Immigrants and refugees suffering from this may experience intense headaches, be unable to sleep, have gastric pain, and fatigue. The struggles to survive, dangers of the journey, and impacts of separating from one's home and community can lead to chronic conditions that are often hard to diagnose.

Some of these health and emotional conditions may have begun in their homeland but are made worse by migration and adaptation. When someone faces extreme stress in their homeland as well as in the country they migrate to, they can develop chronic health issues. These symptoms are their body's response to the efforts they make to adapt, adjust, and learn new skills and ways to survive.

### Adapting to a new life can be complicated due to:

- fear of the unknown
- insecurity about finding a stable job and making things work
- struggles to survive
- social isolation
- loneliness and grief due to leaving their family and homeland
- fear of failure despite all their struggles
- resistance to changing their ways
- an inability to connect with people and the culture in the new country
- discrimination
- lower social status compared to before

If you or someone you care about is in crisis and needs immediate help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline immediately at: (800) 273-8255 (TALK). This is a toll-free line available 24 hours.

If you need to be connected to mental health services in Riverside County, call the CARES Line at (800) 499-3008. If emergency medical care is needed, call 9-1-1 or go to the emergency room of the nearest hospital.

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## Ulysses Syndrome is Often Misunderstood and Misdiagnosed

Ulysses syndrome symptoms persist because immigrants don't have access to a social support network in their new country, and because they are misdiagnosed, according to psychiatrist Joseba Achotegui with the University of Barcelona, who has studied this syndrome for many years.



Medical professionals in the new country may see the symptoms as signs of depression or other disorders, rather than as the immigrants' reaction to the stressors they have experienced. This is often why they are over diagnosed or misdiagnosed as having mental disorders, instead of being categorized as over stressed.

It's important to note that Ulysses Syndrome does not cause mental disorders, but can increase the risk for depression, and addictions such as alcoholism. Other symptoms include sadness, excessive crying, anxiety, fatigue, memory loss, a feeling that you're observing yourself from the outside, and even suicidal thoughts.

### Tips for managing Ulysses Syndrome symptoms:

- Try to view necessary life changes as opportunities rather than as losses.
- Focus on connecting with people in your local community, become involved in activities and events, and build new traditions.
- Continue to embrace homeland traditions and maintain strong ties with your language and faith to establish a sense of continuity.
- Talk to others who have relocated, learn from their experience and stories, so you know what to expect and how to go about getting things done.
- When possible, stay in touch with loved ones so you don't feel isolated.
- Lower your stress by getting enough sleep, eating well, staying hydrated, exercising daily to get rid of tension, and being mindful.
- Seek help from a doctor to get a proper diagnosis for symptoms or see a psychologist when you need help processing the grief and stress.

Need more mental health tips or resources? Visit [Up2Riverside.org/resources/resources-for-farmworkers](https://Up2Riverside.org/resources/resources-for-farmworkers).

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