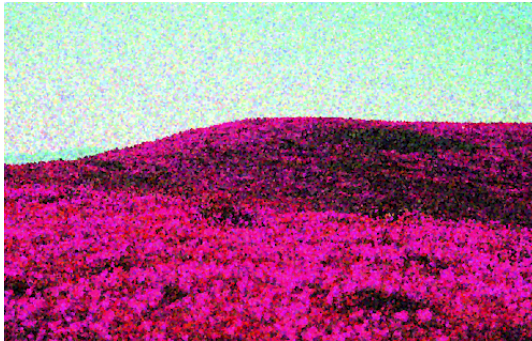


## **Therapy Session: A Panel of Expert Mental Health Clinicians Providing Guidance**

*By Nirupama Madduri, M.D*



The last six months have been a time in Southern California when our strength, faith, and motivation has been tested. We began the year with destructive wildfires, resulting in devastating loss.

As the year progressed into the halfway mark, we discovered the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) descended upon the city, causing disruption, fear, and frustration. Our patients are all exposed to this information, as there is a plethora of sources and media. It is important to understand how we can best support our patients as well as maintain our own wellbeing during this troubling time. This new feature, “Ask the Therapists”, addresses the concerns we may have.

Robert Casas, LCSW, who is the Lead Clinical Supervisor at the Heredia Therapy Group, emphasizes the importance of being present with our patients and families. He indicates that we may not have a similar life experience, but we bring our own gifts to any interaction, such as education and training. In his practice, he has noticed many individuals he serves expressed fear and instability most commonly. Yesenia Orozco, LMFT, and the Mental Health Specialist at the San Gabriel Pomona Regional Center, mentions that many individuals may fear leaving their homes as well. As our focus is children, the fear of separation from caregivers affects them differently. Orozco advises incorporating play therapy, particularly with younger children as available.

People who are impacted by this feel a sense of disruption, resulting in anger. The fear and interruption of normalcy produces the “fight or flight” response, and people become more vigilant. Casas also stresses the importance of approaching our patients and families who are impacted with a trauma-focused lens. He highlights *cultural humility*, based in self-reflection and self-critique, encouraging us to evaluate our own cultural biases and work towards understanding and welcoming all of diverse backgrounds. We can be a safe space for families who are experiencing the trauma and fear of I.C.E. potentially removing a loved one. Orozco adds that the need for preparation is key, and families should be encouraged to develop an action plan, with emergency contacts should a caregiver be taken into custody.

Adriana Avila, LMFT, is certified in grief yoga and trauma yoga and is a mental health therapist at Soul Tenders, a therapy provider in the San Gabriel Valley. Trauma can manifest in many ways, including changes in appetite, sleep, and participation. Physical symptoms such as headaches and abdominal pain are common, as well as irritability, depression, and anxiety. Casas states, “It is not a time to try to enforce further diagnosis or treatment goals, it is a time to sit with clients in their fears and support them through safety plans, encouraging engagement with their family/friends, and increasing resources/community.” Orozco also mentions, “It can be helpful to identify who is part of your support network and who may be able to help with things like accessing essentials, picking up groceries, or even being able to offer you emotional support. For those families who may not have support, there are many community organizations that have stepped up to offer help.”

To create a safe space, Avila provides the following suggestions:

- **Notice individual needs:** Tailor your approach to each patient.
- **Ask questions:** Actively listen and seek to understand their experiences.
- **Create a welcoming environment:** Foster a sense of safety and comfort.
- **Offer choices and control:** Empower patients by involving them in decisions.
- **Be transparent:** Clearly explain procedures and what to expect during their visit.

We also can educate ourselves and our families on what their rights are. Orozco

provided the following resources:

- **LA County Office of Immigrant Affairs,**  
CARECEN- [https://www.carecen-la.org/know\\_your\\_rights\\_english](https://www.carecen-la.org/know_your_rights_english)
- **LACDMH** is also offering several support groups to help community members process what's happening and to connect with others regarding recent ICE activity in our community
- **211** can provide resources within LA County for a variety of needs

We have the gift of not only living in Southern California, which, in spite of the different neighborhoods, we are a very unified community. Our diversity binds us, and it is that bond that motivates us to continue our work. The support we all have for one another is invaluable. With our continued connectedness, we can strive toward a peaceful and abundant community where everyone benefits.