

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN VoT WG meeting

21 November 2023, online meeting

Ensuring the well-being of victims/survivors of terrorism involved in P/CVE

Key outcomes

Victims/survivors of terrorism play a significant role in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). Whether sharing their testimonials or playing a part in P/CVE interventions, they are a credible voice in the fight against terrorism and radicalisation. A key focal point of the RAN Victims/survivors of Terrorism Working Group is exploring the various ways in which victims/survivors can inhabit this role as well as how P/CVE practitioners can involve victims/survivors in their work.

There is, however, a risk in involving victims/survivors of terrorism in P/CVE work; the firsthand experience of a terror attack and/or having lost a loved one to terrorism traumatises many victims/survivors and they often carry this trauma with them for many years after the attack – if not forever. Their involvement in P/CVE work risks triggering retraumatisation, which can occur at the most unexpected moments. The question of how to safeguard the well-being of victims/survivors of terrorism therefore underpins all the Working Group's activities. To stress the importance of this foundational topic, the Working Group dedicated a meeting solely to the **prevention of retraumatisation of victims/survivors involved in P/CVE work**. Held on **21 November 2023**, this meeting allowed victims/survivors of terrorism and practitioners working with them, or those wishing to do so, to come together to discuss how to safely involve victims/survivors in P/CVE. The key outcomes of this meeting are as follows.

- Victims/survivors may wish to engage in P/CVE to prevent others from suffering, and their commitment could be so strong that their personal well-being is overlooked. It is a primary responsibility of practitioners involving victims/survivors of terrorism in their P/CVE work to ensure that victims/survivors are provided with a safe framework and that their well-being is protected as a priority, while not affecting the individual agency.
- Retraumatisation can occur at any time, and it can be caused by a variety of internal and external factors. However, certain circumstances (such as anniversaries and significant dates) might trigger retraumatisation.
- The definition of standards and procedures involving victims/survivors in P/CVE encompasses the different stages of the engagement (before/during/after).

Experiencing retraumatisation could also be an empowerment opportunity, if the victim/survivor has the resources and support needed to successfully overcome it.

This paper summarises the discussion at the RAN VoT WG meeting, starting with a short description of the key points and following up with a list of recommendations. Some of the follow-up topics are then defined, and suggestions for further reading and inspiring practices are shared.

Highlights of the discussion

When people go through a traumatic event, it is common for them to seek new meaning in life. When everything they thought they knew and believed is shattered, they feel a need to understand what has happened. Preventing others from going through something similar is often what motivates victims/survivors of terrorism to engage in P/CVE. But sometimes this comes at the cost of taking care of themselves first. Victims/survivors who feel a strong need to help prevent future atrocities will often grasp every opportunity to be part of P/CVE efforts, even though they might not yet be in a position to do so. Practitioners involving victims/survivors of terrorism in their P/CVE work therefore bear the responsibility of doing this in a safe manner and ensuring the well-being of the victims/survivors they work with.

When an individual is involved in P/CVE work as a victim/survivor, the fact of being a victim/survivor is a large part of their identity. This is not necessarily an issue in itself – although it is recommended that victims/survivors develop a sense of identity outside this, especially in the long term – but it does carry the risk that criticism or feedback on the work is taken very personally, as it can feel like a direct attack on a one's identity. For example, when a victim/survivor shares a testimonial (which is a deeply personal story) and the audience does not respond in the anticipated way or the message does not seem to come across, this can affect the speaker's sense of self-worth. Victims/survivors working in P/CVE must be made aware that it is impossible to control how others respond to their message, and it is key for practitioners working with them to intervene, should the response have a negative impact. The recommendations section offers more information on how and when to do this.

The desire of victims and survivors to be involved in P/CVE efforts may also stem from the need to regain control and counter the helplessness they may feel due to the attack. In general, people feel the need to share their story, and often victims/survivors sharing this particular part of their story can help counter the helplessness they're experiencing through making a positive impact and aiming to prevent radicalisation and violence. This (sense of) control should also be provided in the context of the P/CVE intervention in which the victim/survivor is involved. This can be achieved in several ways: the victim/survivor should be well prepared, should have clarity on the aim and set-up of the given intervention, and lastly, should know that the option to opt out is always a given, even at the last moment.

The intrinsic motivation many victims/survivors working in P/CVE have – to prevent others from going through the same traumatic experience – carries a risk: that the motivation may take precedence over their own well-being. A newly regained sense of control and meaning can sometimes leave a victim/survivor little space to take a step back if necessary. It is therefore the responsibility of the practitioner working with the victim/survivor to remain alert and aware of their mental state and well-being, and to make enquiries if the victim/survivor does not appear to be doing well. At the same time, the individual's agency should not be diminished; in the end, the decision whether or not to continue with the work in general or in that particular moment lies with the victim/survivor. Practitioners working with them can only provide the right context and support, helping them to make the right decision.

The risk of retraumatisation is higher at certain times. For example, the anniversary of the attack is often a difficult time, but it is also the moment when victims/survivors are often asked to share their testimonials or are contacted by the media to share their story. Certain settings also create a higher risk of trauma triggers: victims/survivors working in prison, for example, might struggle when encountering radicalised individuals or perpetrators (whether related to the personal experience of the victim/survivor or not). In these settings, extra precautions need to be taken. However, it should be kept in mind that retraumatisation can happen at any moment and in any setting, and the fact this could occur without warning can in some cases lead to a bigger setback. It is therefore essential to

always carry out proper preparation, ensure support during the event and provide aftercare. The meeting participants drew up a list of recommendations on how to safely involve victims/survivors in any type of P/CVE intervention.

Recommendations

General recommendations

- The first step before involving victims/survivors in P/CVE work it is to establish whether they have tried to process and get to grips with their trauma. Healing from trauma can take years – and in some cases might not ever be fully accomplished. Thus the victims/survivors do not need to be ‘fully healed’ before taking part in P/CVE efforts, but they should show some understanding of the trauma they have suffered and of how to deal with setbacks.
- Even when an individual seems to have dealt with their trauma sufficiently for this process, it is still essential to assess whether they are willing and able to do it *at that time*. An upcoming anniversary of the attack, another (related) attack, a recent big life event or any other personal or external situation might lead to a victim/survivor temporarily being more vulnerable to retraumatisation. Have an in-depth conversation with the victim/survivor to assess their current state before any decision is made.
- Practitioners should not patronise or condescend to the victim/survivor, but treat them on an equal footing. They are more-than-capable individuals who are more than ‘just’ a victim or survivor. Practitioners questioning whether a victim/survivor is ready to be involved in P/CVE work should not make the decision for them but instead create an environment in which a good decision can be reached together.
- Practitioners responsible for the well-being of victims/survivors in their P/CVE efforts do not necessarily need to have a clinical background. However, they do need to be adept at trauma-informed work.
- The professionals providing support surrounding an event should have a trusting relationship with the victim/survivor. This cannot be fostered overnight; therefore, a long-term time investment needs to be made.
- Having a close relationship also means that the practitioner knows the victim/survivor well enough to recognise signs of distress. Discomfort can be expressed in visible physical symptoms like heavy breathing, suddenly becoming quiet and turning inwards, fiddling, or starting to ramble. But it can also be seen in more long-term responses such as reckless behaviour or inactivity and neglecting social relations. These symptoms vary per person and can be hard to spot, which is why a good relationship with the victim/survivor is paramount.
- Even when two individuals have a good relationship and have worked together for a while, it can be hard to spot discomfort. It is recommended that practitioners and victims/survivors agree on a sign the latter can make to indicate they are triggered or otherwise uncomfortable, so practitioners can assist them (e.g. help them leave the stage or calm down).
- The victim/survivor should be involved at an early stage in the production and development of the format they will be active in, and there needs to be sufficient space to discuss, in a preparatory meeting, concerns, fears and possible scenarios: this allows them to have control over the situation. Moreover, it must be made clear to the victim/survivor that they can opt out at any stage.
- Victims/survivors can provide valuable peer support for each other and bringing peers together can offer added value. But this should never be the only support provided at any event or project.
- Practitioners should be aware of possible language or cultural barriers. Victims/survivors with a different background or mother tongue to that of the practitioner might have a different understanding of trauma and healing.
- Working with victims/survivors in a prison context can be an especially challenging endeavour, whether with perpetrators related to the experience of the victim/survivor, or with terrorist offenders or radicalised

individuals. However, when well prepared, this work can be valuable for all involved. For practitioners seeking to prevent re-traumatisation for victims/survivors in these situations, it is paramount to prepare thoroughly. Practitioners working with victims/survivors to facilitate dialogue in prison should prepare as follows.

- Be very clear about the set-up and aim of the meetings, so the victims/survivors know what to expect (to the extent this is possible).
 - Help the victim/survivor achieve a clear picture of their own expectations and manage these if they are too high.
 - Help the victim/survivor realise that it is not possible to control another person's behaviour, meaning it is impossible to predict exactly how the encounter will go.
 - Warn the victim/survivor that the inmates may consider themselves victims (of a troubled youth or societal exclusion, for instance) and might express this, which could be specifically triggering.
 - Cooperate closely with the prison practitioners preparing the prisoner meetings, so expectations on both sides are well managed.
 - Start first with dialogues with prisoners who are not radicalised, then move on to a one-on-one conversation with a radicalised or terrorist prisoner, and only after that, move on to discussions with a group of terrorist offenders. Through gradually building up the intensity of the meetings, the victims/survivors will slowly get accustomed to the process – this limits the risk of unexpected triggers.
- In any situation, aftercare is as important as good preparation and support during the event or project. Practitioners should check in regularly with victims/survivors after the project has ended, to observe how it has affected them and whether any additional support is needed.

Delivering testimonials

- If delivering a testimonial in person is too challenging, prerecording a testimonial – whether to share to an audience or to publish online – is a good alternative. This allows the victim/survivor more control over the end result.
- When presenting a testimonial in front of an audience, the guiding practitioner can provide support to manage negative responses, and it is possible to have an exchange or dialogue with the person sharing the negative response. However, in an online context, no (real) interaction is possible, and negative responses are harder to manage and can be very damaging. Therefore, when publishing a testimonial online, it is advisable to turn off the comment option.
- Although publishing a testimonial online reduces the risk of negative interaction with an audience and it doesn't have to be delivered live, there is less control over a testimonial once it's published online. Even when the commenting option is turned off, the video could still be posted elsewhere where it is subject to abuse. In addition, in the future the speaker might have a different outlook on their experience and want to change the testimonial. But once it's published online, it's unlikely that all records of this previous testimonial can be deleted.

Families and loved ones of a victim/survivor wanting to share a testimonial are sometimes hesitant, fearing the public response for themselves or their loved one(s). This is especially the case in countries with a history of violence affecting the whole community, such as in Spain or Northern Ireland. Practitioners can facilitate conversations among family members to assess the source of the hesitation. Often, families do not talk to each other about the attack for fear of triggering trauma, but they benefit from conversations on how everybody deals with trauma differently. Such conversations can help the victim/survivor who wants to share their story understand why their family members are objecting, and it can also help the family understand why the victim/survivor wants to do so and support them. Involving the affected family members whenever a public appearance is scheduled can help foster understanding as well.

Relevant practices

1. The German National Committee on Religiously Motivated Extremism, known as BAG RelEx, was set up in November 2016 as a joint initiative of several civil society organisations (CSOs) to counter religiously motivated extremism. In 2019, the CSOs involved in the Committee developed a set of shared standards to be followed while working in P/CVE, including steps to be followed before, during and after the involvement of any individual (including victims/survivors) in P/CVE activities.
2. The Israel Trauma and Resiliency Center (NATAL), located in Tel Aviv, Israel, relies on over 25 years of experience in the fields of resiliency building and trauma treatment. Professionals working at NATAL have specialised knowledge on the involvement of victims/survivors in P/CVE. They work to identify signs of distress to prevent retraumatisation, involving family members when applicable, and recognise the importance of the victims'/survivors' agency while making them aware of the possible risks of retraumatisation in P/CVE.

Follow up

First and foremost, safeguarding the well-being of victims/survivors involved in P/CVE remains the foundational focus of the RAN Victims/survivors of Terrorism Working Group activities. Additional follow-up topics that were discussed include the following:

- How to deal with victims' voices being politicised against their will?
- How to evaluate the impact of P/CVE efforts involving victims/survivors of terrorism?

Further reading

[Ethical Principles – Storytelling and Narrative Work Relating to the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland](#). Healing Through Remembering, June 2009

[From Victims of Terrorism to Messengers for Peace – A Strategic Approach](#). UNODC, in collaboration with ICCT, 2020

[Involving Victims/survivors in P/CVE](#). RAN VoT WG Conclusion paper, September 2022

[Supporting the Voices of Young Victims/survivors of Terrorism](#). RAN VoT WG Conclusion paper, June 2021

[How to Involve Victims of Terrorism in a Prevention Campaign](#). RAN VoT and C&N WG Conclusion paper, June 2020