

**RAN HEALTH****CONCLUSION PAPER**

*RAN Mental Health Working Group meeting  
19-20 March 2024, Lisbon, Portugal*

# The impact of incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments on mental health and P/CVE

## Key outcomes

Incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments can significantly impact individuals, communities and societies, through direct exposure to an event or indirect exposure via (social) media. Such exposure can impact individuals, leading to poor mental health and well-being (e.g. emotional distress, anxiety, anger, vicarious trauma, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)). To explore how individuals, communities and societies are affected by incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments and how this might lead to radicalisation, the RAN Mental Health Working group invited mental health professionals to meet in Lisbon (PT) on 19 and 20 March 2024. During this meeting, participants also discussed how the work of mental health practitioners might be affected.

The meeting's key outcomes are as follows.

- Historical collective trauma can be transmitted over generations, causing trauma and grievances in children who have not experienced the event itself. Narratives focusing on historical collective trauma can be utilised by leaders or extremist groups to suit their goals and mobilise in-group members.
- Incidents of mass (extremist) violence and geopolitical developments can cause polarisation by marginalising affected groups as well as provoking conflicting opinions on the conflict and fostering feelings that one should take a stand.
- They can also cause individuals to experience feelings of anxiety, depression, re-traumatisation, and feelings of helplessness and loss of control (reduced sense of safety, stress or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep problems, feelings of guilt and shame, and increased risk of misusing of alcohol and other substances).. This can create the need to gain or regain control, with individuals eventually acting out in violence.
- Not all individuals are equally affected by incidents of mass (extremist) violence and geopolitical developments. Some factors, such as re-traumatisation or historical trauma, can make a person more vulnerable. By contrast, protective factors, such as resilience or the ability to regulate one's emotions, have the opposite effect.

This paper summarises the main takeaways of the discussion, including the impact of incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments on society, community and individuals, as well as the factors that influence this impact. This is followed by recommendations on how to work on these factors, and a description of relevant practices and projects.

## Highlights of the discussion

### (Historical) collective trauma

Collective trauma is a psychological reaction to a traumatic event in which an entire social group is victimised. Examples of phenomena that can result in collective victimisation, and consequently collective trauma, are pandemics, natural disasters, terrorism, war or atrocities. Collective trauma is not a reflection of individual suffering or actual traumatic events; instead, it is largely based on a symbolic reconstruction and social imagination. Historical trauma is the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma and the corresponding burden from one generation to the next. Collective narratives of past atrocities can play an important role in the development of historical collective trauma.<sup>1</sup>

When historical events that caused collective trauma in the past are linked to current events, this can awaken the historical collective trauma in generations that have not actually experienced the traumatic event, provoking the related feelings of fear, shock, anxiety, shame, guilt or self-blame, anger, hostility, rage, resentment and emotional numbness. These selective or chosen traumas can be exploited to mobilise in-group members in support of a specific cause. Using narratives that implicitly trigger unsettling (historical) emotions (e.g. feelings of vulnerability) can promote dissatisfaction with the group's status, fear of attacks by ancient enemies and a polarising, 'us' versus 'them' perspective. In the Western Balkans, for example, right-wing extremist groups build their ideology on historical battles and myths. Their activities reflect a transgenerational transmission of extremism, underlining the importance of historical context in understanding contemporary violent movements.

The transmission of transgenerational trauma and radicalisation is multilayered, with several sources.

- Leadership influence. This is when specific historical narratives are utilised by leaders to instrumentalise and mobilise the general population, including the generation lacking previous experience with war themselves. The media can accelerate the impact of extremist narratives through selective historical framing and the promotion of propaganda like descriptions of ingroup victims as martyrs who are 'dying for the cause'. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s in former Yugoslavia, the media was heavily utilised to evoke trauma from the past.
- Digital networks with online influence and social networks with in-person interaction can accelerate intergenerational radicalisation when like-minded individuals connect. For example, online games can be used to promote transgenerational collective trauma and further the radicalisation of young people.
- Social structures like schools, religious institutions and cultural products can be used as platforms for narrative reinforcement. An example is religious institutions trying to hold back secularism.
- Parents who experienced episodes of (political) violence can transmit their trauma to their children by sharing stories and memories of the related events. This process of learning about past suffering can result in children internalising the victim identity, which might lead to radicalisation. By embracing and sharing the historical narratives where they are defenders against historical invasions, parents can keep alive a legacy that might prime the next generation for extremism. This demonstrates the powerful impact of transgenerational collective traumas.

<sup>1</sup> Buljubašić and Holá, *Historical trauma and radicalisation - How can intergenerational transmission of collective traumas contribute to (group) radicalisation?*

- Another means of family transmission is through silence. Not sharing stories or speaking of historical events can be harmful when it causes children to seek interaction with others, as it leaves space for other family members or peers to fill in the 'gaps' with (extremist) narratives.
- Lack of communication between communities can create bubbles, furthering polarisation and increasing the appeal of collective trauma narratives for new generations. This is how echo chambers are created, with no discussion between groups about the past (victimisation) and their status in society.

## The impact of incidents of mass violence

We are seeing the highest number of violent conflicts since World War II, and their impact is felt beyond the borders of the conflicts. During the meeting, participants discussed the impact on society, community and individuals.

### *Society*

Incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments can cause political polarisation. Every party has a different interpretation of the events. A country not taking a stance might be pushed to do so if the social and political debate hardens, with arguments such as 'if you are not against them, you stand with them'. Even if the war or conflict is not happening in the EU, proximity to the strife can cause a country to engage in military mobilisation. This is even more evident when the country has a shared history with one of the countries in the conflict, as this then allows the current conflict to connect with the existing discourse, causing a 'rebirth' of traditional ideologies. Providing economic and military support to one of the countries in the conflict can foster dissatisfaction in society. In the context of the energy crisis, individuals recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation may feel like they are not supported by their own government or the EU when funding is redirected to support a country outside the EU. This in turn leads to or feeds into anti-government sentiment.

### *Society and community*

Not only in politics are people forced to take a stance. Polarisation can also arise at societal level, between and within communities. People interpret a conflict based on the information accessible to them, the diaspora and social groups they are connected to, and the potential contact they have those directly affected by the conflict. This can foster solidarity with groups involved in the conflict and the strengthening of communal ties. The communal identity could be based on people's real or perceived differences with the enemy/the absolute bad. This can help to consolidate prejudices about the enemy, and in some cases, violence is normalised by fostering the feeling that violence/action is needed to protect the in-group. This can result in hate speech, hate crime, (violent) riots and demonstrations.

Another important effect that might be overlooked relates to the differing treatment and status of refugee groups. Some countries welcome these groups with immediate support, housing and jobs, while in others, a strict quota exists for some refugee groups, and one could even be penalised for helping them. This can lead to feelings of injustice and grievance in communities. These feelings are based on how many characteristics the communities share with the lower-status refugee group and how much they identify with them.

### *Individual*

Mass violent incidents, war and conflict add to the accumulated experience of crises. Individuals in crisis for a long time experience a generalised fear of the future and a great deal of insecurity and uncertainty. This can cause anxiety, self-victimisation and feelings of helplessness. Individuals who experienced similar atrocities and traumatic experiences might be affected by conflict and war, with old traumas rising to the surface in secondary trauma. Individuals identifying with one of the groups affected by war or conflict and who feel disregarded or sidelined by their government or who believe the government supports the 'other side' might feel the need to take action. This can take the positive form of organising support or aid for those affected but can also be used to legitimise the use of violence to achieve justice.

Participants identified the following other factors that might influence whether an individual is impacted.

- Individuals who experienced similar atrocities and traumatic experiences might be affected by conflict and war, with old traumas rising to the surface in secondary trauma.
- Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are vulnerable to becoming fixated on narratives and have a preference for structure and predictability in events. Depending on context, this can be a protective or a vulnerability factor.
- Repeated exposure to adversity or collective traumas leads to a higher sensitisation to subsequent potential traumas. The affective responses to specific exposures may be critical in determining subsequent responses to similar potential threats or traumas.
- **(Social) media** plays a big part in publishing information on conflicts and related developments, narratives and opinions, giving the younger generations access to a great deal of information about the world, including bad news like war, conflict, climate change and pandemics. Meeting participants noted that people seem to be radicalising at a younger age: 'They want to die in a way they choose themselves, because there is no future anyway'. These young people feel that they are unjustly burdened with the legacy of issues that were not created by their generation.
  - o Individuals with intellectual disabilities might be more impacted because they may find it challenging to filter information: they can become overwhelmed with the volume of information that is shared online.
- **Identification** with (characteristics of) the groups involved can result in a more intense experience of the indirect impact, especially if the characteristics (religion, cultural background or history) are key to the origin of the conflict.
  - o Retraumatization can result from events or interactions that remind survivors of their previous traumatic experiences. Retraumatization is the reactivation of trauma symptoms via thoughts, memories or feelings related to past experiences. These symptoms can include anxiety, difficulty concentrating, nightmares and depression. Participants discussed this in light of the current Israel-Hamas conflict and the rise of antisemitism and corresponding hate crimes and hate speech. Holocaust survivors, with the trauma of past experiences, can be more vulnerable to the effects of such acts, and might be retraumatized. Second and third generations of Holocaust survivors can be more vulnerable to the effects of antisemitism via historical collective trauma.<sup>2</sup>
  - o Focusing on the differences distinguishing one's in-group from the out-group stabilises one's social identity but amplifies polarised, us-versus-them thinking. Participants pointed out that they have seen a great deal of this phenomenon recently – it can be a way for individuals to deal with the uncertainty they experience.
  - o Participants discussed cases in their respective countries in which children of immigrants do not identify with the country they are living in. They often feel marginalised and are in search of their own identity. International conflicts are used by some radical groups to recruit and mobilise in-group members. This is especially pertinent to cases when a young person identifies with the actors involved in a certain conflict.
- Lack of **emotional regulation** can be a vulnerability for the extent to which an individual is affected. This is seen most clearly on social media. The threshold for sharing unnuanced opinion is much lower there than it is in real life. This then affects offline discussions as well, since individuals become increasingly accustomed to sharing their unnuanced opinions and simplifying the terms of debate without reflection. Living in a bubble without coming into contact with people of different opinions amplifies this tendency.
- **Knowing oneself** very well can be a protective factor against the impact of incidents of mass (extremist) violence and related geopolitical developments. This means having clarity about one's identity, desires and

<sup>2</sup> Buljubašić and Holá, *Historical trauma and radicalisation - How can intergenerational transmission of collective traumas contribute to (group) radicalisation?*

goals; it also means having the ability to calm oneself, to reduce personal fears and to heal personal injuries. It means possessing the ability to remain calm and not overreact, rather than creating distance and running away from a situation; it also means having the ability to intensify one's efforts and confront confusing and challenging issues in relationships, as well as the ability and willingness to endure discomfort for the sake of growth.

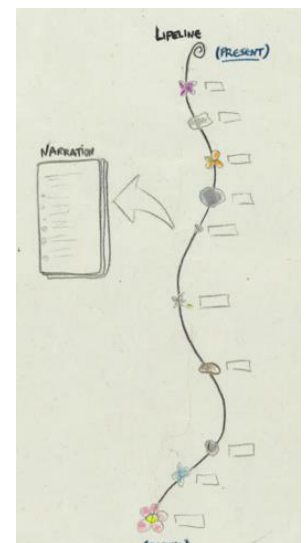
## Recommendations

### Emotional regulation and knowing oneself

- To develop reflective skills, it is important to encounter a range of opinions. In group therapy this can be done by having a round table discussion where everyone takes a role in the reflective team, with each person assigned a specific role in the discussion, thus providing alternative views and opinions.
- Some people do not have the knowledge or language to express their emotions. They are not accustomed to voicing their feelings. Mental health practitioners could help by using a sheet that describes different emotions, and asking the client to underline the emotions they can recognise. Practitioners can further deconstruct the emotion by asking clients to consider what underlies that emotion.
- It is also possible that people may feel disconnected from their bodies, and so when they are triggered, they express this the only way they know how, as anger. Through therapy, they can learn to identify the bodily reactions linked to different emotions by focusing on connecting the emotions to where they are felt in the body.

### (Re-)traumatisation

- An effective treatment for individuals with trauma is narrative exposure therapy (NET).<sup>3</sup> NET is a short-term treatment that blends components of behavioural exposure, narrative testimonies and neuroscience.
- During a session, the processing of traumatic events occurs at a slow, appropriate pace. Therapists ask questions about various sensations and feelings while contextualising the facts and cognitive elements. Therapists typically write down this exposure and review it at the start of each session.
- By the end of treatment, traumatic memories are reconstructed, and any fragmented reports become consolidated into an appropriate narrative. With the client's permission, recorded statements or autobiographies may be used for ongoing advocacy.
- The long-term goal of these sessions is to help reshape and reimagine the meaning of the traumatic experience, from the perspective of who the person was when that event occurred, instead of experiencing it as retraumatisation.



### Resilience and supporting young people

- **Media literacy** might help young people filter the information and judge the relevance and truthfulness of it. Together with resilience, this can act as a protective factor against the impact of these mass violent incidents.
- **Civic education** at school can promote collective responsibility, active participation in society, enhance dialogue and promote critical thought.
- Challenging life situations and feelings of exclusion and hopelessness can make young people vulnerable to the influence of extremist movements. The Finnish Hope for the Future project offers young immigrants support and activities in different areas: assessment of the need for psychiatric and social support,

<sup>3</sup> Onyut, L. P., Neuner, F., Schauer, E., Ertl, V., Odenwald, M., Schauer, M., & Elbert, T. (2005). Narrative Exposure Therapy as a treatment for child war survivors with posttraumatic stress disorder: Two case reports and a pilot study in an African refugee settlement. *BMC Psychiatry*, 5(1), 7. [doi:10.1186/1471-244X-5-7](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-5-7)

housing, software development training, job-seeking training and employment opportunities. As a result, the **experience of inclusion in society** increases and the risk of violent action decreases.

- Immigrant families carry specific ancestral knowledge, health practices, ontologies, conceptions of misfortune, and kinship theories and practices. These can be utilised as therapeutic resources in treatment by including an **ethnoclinical mediator**, who plays a key role as translator and cultural broker. The purpose is to address friction between larger (cultural) systems, explore and confront conflicting (cultural) theories and promote reciprocal learning, e.g. individuals learn about the Western theories being applied to them by caseworkers, judges and teachers, and therapists learn from their ways of conceiving and treating problems.

## Relevant practices and projects

### 1. [Narratives Exposure Therapy \(NET\)](#)

NET is a treatment for trauma disorders, particularly in individuals suffering from complex and multiple trauma. It has been most frequently used in community settings and with individuals who experienced trauma as result of political, cultural or social forces (such as refugees).

### 2. [Kide Foundation – Hope for the Future project](#)

The practice targets (radicalised) young immigrants whose risk of violent behaviour has been identified. These individuals may have a legal right to reside in Finland or may be undocumented. The focus of the activities is provision of assistance and help in an identified emergency and/or problematic situation of the target group. As a result of the provided assistance, the risk of violent action decreases and the experience of inclusion in the organised society increases.

### 3. [Ethnopsychiatry](#)

In an ethnopsychiatric setting, there is a multi-ethnic and multilingual group of clinical psychologists and academics working together, as well as an ethnoclinical mediator speaking the language and culture of the individual. This team takes into account all the psychological, social, political, religious and cultural data to be able to understand the radicalisation of an individual. They do so in his/her course of life surrounded by the sociocultural collective and as an 'outcome' of transgenerational history,



## Follow up

The RAN YOUNG meeting of 2 and 3 May built on some of the points discussed in this paper by focusing on the youth perspective. How can young people help others to protect themselves against the indirect harmful effects of the current polarised geopolitical climate, wars and conflicts?

## Further reading

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