



*Affirming the vision and practice of active nonviolence
at the heart of the Catholic Church.*

A project of Pax Christi International

Trauma-healing

Humanity in the 21st century faces major global challenges including war, terrorism, climate change, poverty, hunger, overpopulation and other seemingly intractable problems. Beliefs and mindsets rooted in desires, denial, fear, shame, fantasies and low self-worth lead to behaviors that are aggressive, oppressive, abusive and divisive.¹ Many who resort to violence have previously experienced degrees of trauma, and thus to scale-up nonviolence, we need to heal trauma.

What is trauma? Psychological traumas by definition are emotionally painful and distressing experiences that have overwhelmed an individual's ability to cope. Trauma is the long-lasting negative impact on behavior, beliefs, feelings and bodies which leads to reduced functioning and often leaves one feeling confused, powerless and stuck.

Trauma changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think. Beyond that, trauma can show up as anxiety, suspicion, fear and powerlessness, but it can also be transmitted as hostility, rage, bullying and abuse. If left untreated, traumas last a lifetime — they do not get better with time. At best, victims learn to live with them, yet, they darken their lives.

Trauma's scale and impact. Psychological trauma affects perhaps as many as 500 million people worldwide. This global burden of trauma is growing day-by-day, due mostly to the “four violences”² — direct (intended), natural (unavoidable), structural (built-in patterns) and cultural (deep attitudes).

Trauma quietly undermines the economic and cultural productivity of its victims, and tears apart the social fabric of whole communities. Yet, its most devastating — but least suspected — effect may well be on the potential for peace.

Trauma as a driver of conflict. This is aptly captured in the phrase: “hurt people hurt people.” Unaddressed trauma often leads to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence where people who hurt end up justifying their decisions to hurt others. Trauma can embed itself in societies and generations.

1 R. Walsh (1984) *Staying Alive: The Psychology of Human Survival* (Shambala)

2 J. Galtung (2000) *Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means: The Transcend Method* (UN Disaster Management Training Program)

No surprise, then, that Northern Ireland, for example, has the highest recorded prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, at 26 percent of the population. Ever since the Vietnam and Iraq wars, PTSD has become the best-known consequence of trauma. PITS or perpetrator induced traumatic stress is also increasingly recognized.³

The World Health Organization recognizes two effective, evidence-based, scientifically validated therapies: cognitive behavioral therapy with a trauma focus, or TF-CBT, already well known; and the more recent eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. These two therapies could decisively interrupt the chains of trauma, violence, abuse and new trauma. And they could end immense and insidious inner suffering and, this way, help a post-violent society move toward more stability, prosperity and peace.

Treating psychological trauma is part of the human right to health. But given the immense humanitarian need and the high stakes involved, trauma therapy should perhaps first be offered to high-risk populations and individuals — for example, as prevention but also to traumatized peace negotiators and mediators, ex-combatants and children (including former child soldiers), field personnel in humanitarian and peace operations, in addition to refugees and internally displaced people.

Addressing trauma in negotiators seeking to end a violent conflict is an urgent need because too often they struggle to identify the genuine needs of themselves and of their adversaries. This lack of capacity for empathy too often leads to either a drawn out negotiation process with ongoing violence, or a fragile agreement that gets violated soon afterwards.

Role of the church. Many faith-based organizations have extensive networks and workforces that are already involved in trauma-healing work, often under trying circumstances. Jesus' ministry addressed healing at all levels of our being – body, mind and spirit. When the Church today reaches out to support those who are suffering from trauma, ensuring access to treatment and services that restore hope and functioning, they are following the example set by Jesus Christ. And another specific reference can be found in Isaiah 61:1 *“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners.”*

The vast network of Christians and Christian institutions could play a key role in scaling-up this nonviolent practice especially within negotiation processes during violent conflicts.

³ <http://www.rachelmair.com/pits>