

Mediating - Trauma Considerations for Peace & Reconciliation

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An ancient adage reflecting the ways in which we gain wisdom states that we learn through noble reflection, the simplicity of imitation, and the bitterness of experience. This is particularly true when we work with those who have been affected by war, violence, natural disaster, and the many traumatic experiences that surround our world. When we attempt to make sense of our experiences, and particularly when we address complex issues of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, it is critical to understand the implications of trauma in individuals, groups, communities, and systems. Research has shown that trauma and posttraumatic stress have implications in the peace, justice, and reconciliation process. Traumatized people are far less likely to have positive attitudes about the systems for peace, justice, and reconciliation. Building our Trauma Literacy is essential if we are to anticipate, prepare, recognize and respond to trauma and its far-reaching impact.

Becoming trauma literate helps us construct a common understanding and language. What we know is that trauma is not merely something that bothers us to the point of distraction or frustration. Trauma is an injury resulting from an experience that overwhelms one's ability to protect oneself and stay safe. The injury can be physical, developmental, emotional, relational or spiritual. Sometimes people heal from the injury and recover healthy functioning. Sometimes functioning is altered in a manner that persists. Whether and how recovery of healthy functioning occurs

depends on many factors - severity of the experience, age, innate characteristics, support within the environment, and previous traumatic experiences.

The persisting consequences of severe trauma, beyond the physical injuries, can be understood as alterations in the threat appraisal and stress response systems. "Am I safe or am I not safe?" And when these threats to our physical and emotional safety are severe and persistent enough, changes are expressed effecting perception (views), processing of information, and cognition (knowing). Trauma often effects behavior, where people become reactive and are unable to regulate their emotional states. They may appear angry, frustrated, agitated, despondent, or withdrawn. For adults, traumatic events may shatter the foundations of their beliefs about safety and damage their ability to trust. Witnessing the suffering of others and becoming emotionally engaged with those who are traumatized can create a form of vicarious or secondary trauma, which is frequently seen in humanitarian workers, Peacebuilders, and even community and government leaders.

For children, however, the developing brains actually organize around their experiences, especially those experiences that are persistent and repeating. This is especially concerning as we see the effects of war, community violence, and physical and social neglect where children are involved. Trauma can

actually change their brains in such a way that it is extremely difficult to recover. Although the long-term implications for individuals, communities, and countries of children's exposure to violence are not the subject of this article, one can only imagine a world where the majority of the children growing to adulthood can no longer think and act clearly and in ways that do not harm themselves and others.

We can see how important it is to becoming trauma informed as a way of supporting the peace and reconciliation process at all levels of engagement – not simply for those who are directly traumatized, but for those who are trying to help as well.