

Field report

Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience programme: experiential education towards resilience and trauma informed people and practice

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War, genocide, gender based violence, structural oppression and other forms of chronic violence and social upheaval can reveal and cultivate tremendous strength and resilience. They can also gravely harm people in body, mind and spirit, both individually and collectively. These harms can lead people to act in on self and act out against others, entrapping us in cycles of violence. Many strategies can assist in breaking free from cycles of violence and building resilience. Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience is one educational programme that offers a gateway for participants to: a) understand and destigmatise potential impacts of traumagenic events and b) develop life giving responses that meet human needs rather than escalate violence. This Field report details the programme's origins, practical and theoretical foundations, pedagogical approach and the components of a typical training, as well as selected results, challenges and questions for further research.

Keywords: resilience, trauma awareness, trauma informed peacebuilding

Introduction: background

Peacebuilding professionals typically work in the midst or aftermath of potentially traumatic events (Bonanno, 2005) or 'traumagenic' circumstances (Anderson Hooker & Potter Czajkowski, 2011), such as war, genocide, gender based violence, structural oppression or other forms of chronic violence and social upheaval.¹ Such events impact people both individually and collectively. One impact can be the revelation and cultivation of

enormous personal and collective resilience, the ability to bounce back and resist and even thrive in the face of potentially overwhelming circumstances (Zolli & Healy, 2012; Taleb, 2012).

Other trauma responses can be more diminishing and harmful. In response to potentially traumatic events, people can act in on self and/or act out against others, echoing the adage that pain that is not transformed is transferred (Rohr, 2008). Resulting cycles of violence can play out in individuals, families, organisations and communities for generations, reinforcing oppressive structures and systems, feeding toxic narratives and reifying destructive patterns in relationships. Strategies for breaking free from these cycles of violence are as diverse as the potential impacts of traumagenic events.

While deep technical expertise is helpful for understanding and responding to trauma and (re)building resilience, basic knowledge and awareness can provide a substantial foundation for communities and individuals, whether or not they hold such technical expertise.

Education around natural, protective body/mind responses to traumagenic events begins to de-stigmatise, rather than pathologise, trauma responses (Yoder, 2005). Exploration of the tapestry of chronic, continuous social harms and one time sources of trauma responses – and the needs that arise as a result – can awaken awareness about why we can't 'just get over it'. Examination of one's own experience (and broader communal

experiences) invites a grounded understanding of how protective body/mind responses can transmute into forces for harm to self and others, and initiate/maintain cycles of violence. Examples of individuals and communities who have broken free from cycles of violence illustrate possible pathways to building resilience and addressing needs. Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) is an educational programme that includes these elements.

Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience

STAR invites communities and individuals to: a) address the impacts of traumagenic events and b) build resilience, creativity and capacity to address human needs, including the needs for security, dignity and justice so often at the heart of violent conflict.

Origins

STAR emerged in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 in the USA. In the wake of the attacks, Church World Service provided a grant to Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) to support community leaders dealing with impacted communities. The CJP is

home to educational programmes that prepare leaders to transform violence and injustice, and not a provider of therapy nor counselling services. Rather than providing direct services for those who have experienced violence, the programme was created to educate community leaders about trauma caused by collective violence. Fifteen years later, STAR has worked with people from more than 60 countries and conducted trainings in more than 20 countries.

Practical and theoretical foundations

STAR promotes a multilevel response to traumatic events by integrating information about how to simultaneously promote individual, community and societal wellbeing and resilience. STAR is not value neutral. The programme actively promotes knowledge and encourages actions derived from five prosocial responses to violence (presented graphically in Figure 1):

- Promoting trauma awareness and resilience
- Doing justice
- Making meaning
- Building secure, sustainable communities
- Transforming conflict



Figure 1: STAR integrated framework of foundational fields

