

Wounds of Violence
Weekly Trust
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Dr. K. A. Korb

I have often wondered what emotional toll the violence that has swept through the north in the past few years is taking on the communities affected—wondered what the psychological effects of mass trauma are on an entire population. After recently speaking with my friend Dr. K. Korb, the Head of the Department of General and Applied Psychology at the University of Jos, about a recent study on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that she has done, I asked her if she would be willing to write something about it for this column. This will be the first of two guest columns by Dr. Korb on PTSD. I hand over the rest of my column this week to her. -Carmen

Instead of joyfully celebrating his birthday on 16 December 2009, Joseph Obaje Sunny grieved over the tragic passing of his mother. Less than one month later, Sunny's community was engulfed in ethno-religious crisis. After struggling to protect vulnerable community members from the violence, Sunny tried to return to his house to collect his credentials. However, he had to abandon his quest after being shot at twice. Then fire broke out in a local church, so he rushed to quench the flames. When he finished, he found that his house was ablaze.

Sunny lost everything in the crisis: his credentials, money, clothing, food, and computers for his work as a graphic designer. These physical losses are generally the focus when we talk about the costs of crises. Over two years later, Sunny has a new home and clothes, and has replaced his computers. However, there is another cost of violent crises that we rarely discuss. It runs much deeper and is much harder to restore: the emotional cost of crises.

After the crisis, Sunny would sometimes collapse when he thought about the loss of his mother and his home. There were days when he would not leave his room from morning until evening. Sunny had difficulty eating because of the emotional pain that he was suffering, causing him to dramatically reduce in size. He would avoid passing by his burnt house because it reminded him of the pain. In the night, Sunny would dream about his old house. But when he awoke, the emotional pain from the dream would be so great that he wanted to cry. The emotional wound ate at him for well over a year before he began the journey of healing.

The emotional pain that Sunny experienced is not unusual. In fact, Sunny likely had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is a mental health condition that a person can develop after experiencing a horrifying event such as violent crisis, armed robbery, bombing, rape, or a severe automobile accident. A person can also develop PTSD after witnessing something frightening, such as seeing another person being tortured, raped, or killed. After suffering a traumatic event, it is perfectly normal to experience anxiety and confused thinking. After a few weeks, typically the emotional pain gradually disappears. However, for some people, these feelings can get worse or last for many months.

When a person suffers from malaria, there are different types of symptoms such as headache, chills, and fever. Similarly, when a person suffers from PTSD, there are three different types of symptoms. The first type of symptoms is called re-experiencing symptoms, such as having flashbacks where you replay the traumatic experience in your mind like a movie or having bad

dreams about the trauma. These flashback symptoms are oftentimes triggered by something that reminds you of the traumatic experience. For example, a few months after I was the victim of armed robbery, I went to a fireworks display. The smell of the fireworks triggered the memory of the smell of gunpowder from when one of the robbers fired a shot in the house. When the smell triggered the memory of the armed robbery, I started crying uncontrollably in the middle of the celebration.

The second type of PTSD symptoms is called hyper-arousal symptoms. These symptoms include being easily frightened, continuously feeling tense, having difficulty sleeping, or having angry outbursts. A friend told me that after a period of ongoing crisis in Jos, he would become anxious whenever mangoes fell from the trees onto a tin roof because it sounded like gunfire. He would then start shaking because he thought that another crisis had sparked.

The final type of PTSD symptoms is avoidance symptoms. This means that a person will try to avoid situations or emotions that might cause a person to fear. These symptoms include avoiding places, events, or objects that are reminders of the frightening experience; feeling emotionally numb; feeling guilt, depression, or worry; losing interest in activities that were previously enjoyable; or having difficulty remembering the traumatic event. For example, during one crisis, a friend almost got trapped in fighting along the road. For months afterwards, she avoided traveling that road because of the painful memories from the crisis.

A person can be diagnosed as having PTSD if they continue to experience all three types of PTSD symptoms – re-experiencing, hyper-arousal, and avoidance – after one month has passed from the date of the traumatic event. Having PTSD can disrupt a person's life because they might have a hard time doing tasks necessary for daily living, such as sleeping or eating. This can cause their physical health to suffer. Furthermore, a person experiencing PTSD generally has difficulty concentrating, which can hurt their work as well as their relationships with friends and family.

PTSD is similar to a physical wound. I recently was playing sports and collided with another player. In the trauma of the collision, one of my ribs was cracked, which resulted in constant pain for many days. It took time for the physical wound to heal. If a person develops PTSD after experiencing or witnessing a trauma, it does not mean that they are weak. Having PTSD is just like having a cracked rib. Experiencing a trauma results in a wound within a person's soul, which will cause emotional pain. Just like a physical wound, an emotional wound will take time to heal.

PTSD is a mental health condition that was identified and described by Western psychologists. Culture can influence the symptoms of PTSD, as well as the treatment that is effective. This means that the Western research on the symptoms and treatment of PTSD may not be fully accurate for Nigerians who have experienced trauma. However, the underlying message of PTSD still applies: when any person experiences or witnesses something horrifying, they will be emotionally wounded, and it will take time for these wounds to heal.

Adults are not the only ones emotionally affected by trauma. Many people mistakenly believe that children are too young to understand a traumatic event or that they will soon forget the traumatic event, so it will not hurt them. However, adolescents, primary and nursery school

children, and even infants can be emotionally affected by trauma. Decades of research have shown that trauma can have serious long-term effects on the brains, minds, and behavior of young children and even infants. For example, children who experience trauma are more likely to have behavioral problems when they grow up. Children also have difficulty paying attention and concentrating after experiencing trauma, which means they have an increased risk of failure in school. Research has found that children under the age of 8 who were exposed to violence in the United States scored lower on intelligence tests, particularly those children who experienced violence before they were 2 years old. It is important to note that witnessing violence inside the home can be very traumatizing for young children, even if they are not the victims of the abuse themselves.

Our society has a very high rate of violence, including armed robbery, crises, domestic violence, and ghastly automobile accidents on hazardous roads. This violence creates emotional wounds that are hurting individuals, families, communities, and even hindering national development. We must take steps now to help those who are carrying the emotional wounds of trauma, as well as work to prevent trauma from occurring in the first place. Next week, we will discuss what can be done to heal the emotional wounds of trauma. *(to be continued)*

Healing the Wounds from Violence
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Dr. K. A. Korb

This week my friend, Dr. K. Korb, the Head of the Department of General and Applied Psychology at the University of Jos, concludes her two-part article on post traumatic stress disorder.-Carmen

About one year after the last major crisis in Jos, I gave a questionnaire that is commonly used to diagnose PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, to students at the University of Jos. PTSD is the long-term emotional pain that results from experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. I found that 31% of these students could be diagnosed with PTSD. For comparison, RAND Corporation found that only 14% of American soldiers who have returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have PTSD. This means that twice as many students who simply live in Jos suffer from the emotional wounds of trauma, as compared to soldiers returning from battle.

PTSD is a serious mental health condition that is hurting individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, since people who have PTSD have difficulty focusing on their work and are more likely to become addicted to illicit substances such as alcohol, PTSD is also hindering national development. Just as national agencies and NGOs are working to treat and prevent diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, proactive steps must also be taken to treat and prevent PTSD for the wellbeing of society.

Just like a person who has malaria needs treatment to recover, a person who has PTSD needs treatment to recover from their emotional wounds. As mentioned last week, Joseph Obaje Sunny developed PTSD after losing his mother on his birthday and having his house looted and destroyed in a crisis less than one month later. He suffered with the emotional wounds of the

trauma for well over a year. The emotional pain caused him to have bitterness in his heart, and he wanted revenge on the people who destroyed his house. His physical health also suffered because of the emotional wounds, causing him to lose weight and have bad dreams.

Many events worked together to help Sunny begin the path of healing. A number of Sunny's friends and mentors were involved in peace efforts. They would talk to Sunny about the need to forgive the people who destroyed his house. One day, Sunny began writing a poem about the difficulties in life. As he was writing, he realized the necessity of forgiveness as a Christian. At this point, Sunny actively sought out the people who burnt his house and offered them the gift of forgiveness. He also began participating in programs that taught about forgiveness, peace, and healing from trauma. Using what he learnt in these programs, Sunny began reaching out to others who experienced even greater loss to help them also heal from their emotional wounds. Sunny also finds healing in his writing, including a movie script about Muslim and Christian youth coming together in harmony.

The journey of healing has been long and there are many things that have helped Sunny recover from his emotional wounds: offering forgiveness to those who hurt him, participating in trauma healing and peace workshops, helping others who have also been affected by trauma, and writing. However, Sunny testifies that the most powerful healing touch has been the peace that he finds in God.

If you are suffering from the emotional wounds of trauma, remember that healing will take time. Like a broken bone, healing will not occur overnight. However, there are steps you can take to help in the journey of healing. First, seek support from family and friends. You might not feel comfortable discussing your traumatic experiences yet, but spending time with loved ones can provide a great source of comfort and encouragement. Research has shown that having strong support from family and friends is very important for healing from a traumatic experience.

You also might consider finding an organization that offers trauma healing workshops. There are a number of organizations in Jos that are trained to help others recover from the wounds of trauma. Oftentimes, trauma healing workshops include religious teachings that can help a person make sense of what they have suffered, as well as the religious values that can help a person recover, such as coming to a place of forgiveness and finding peace in God. Trauma healing workshops also generally help a person think about what they can learn from the experience, and how the experience can even help them grow into a better person.

If trauma healing workshops are not available, then it can be helpful to find other people who have suffered similar trauma and form a support group. Listening and sharing with others who have similar experiences can be a powerful source of support. Also, learning how others have coped with their pain and grown as a person can also inspire you and give you ideas on how you can cope.

There are also professional mental health services that can help a person heal from trauma. The primary strategy is talk therapy, which involves talking with a mental health professional either one-on-one or in a group setting. Generally, talk therapy includes information about trauma,

relaxation and anger control skills, strategies to help a person deal with their feelings about the event, and coping skills for managing PTSD symptoms.

Because support from family and friends is important for healing emotional wounds, it is important for all of us to know how to help somebody who has experienced trauma. Most important is to just be available, to listen, to just, or to help them with any needs they may have. Listen well when they share what happened, even if they say the same thing repeatedly. Also listen when they express their anger and fear without quick judgment. Be patient with them as they are healing. Ensure that they are taking good care of their body by properly eating and resting. Help them set small goals for their life and help them open up to others who can provide assistance. It will likely be difficult supporting a person who has recently experienced trauma because of their anger and pain. However, your ongoing support and patience will go a long way in helping them heal.

However, these “treatments” for PTSD are ineffective in the overall battle for positive emotional health. The best way to fight HIV/AIDS is not to wait until a person has contracted the disease and then provide treatment. Instead, most efforts in the fight against HIV/AIDS are geared towards trying to prevent people from contracting the disease in the first place. Likewise, the best way to fight PTSD is not to wait until a person has experienced trauma. Instead, efforts need to be made to remove violence from the society. If we can reduce the amount of trauma that people experience, particularly through violence, then the battle toward defeating PTSD is almost won.

Individuals, families, communities, religious institutions, and the nation all have roles to play in eradicating violence. Individuals need to be careful in how they think and discuss other people. The rhetoric of dehumanizing others (e.g., “they are like animals”) and of retaliation contribute to the high rate of violence. We must train ourselves to be compassionate and understanding towards others. Furthermore, we must foster forgiveness in our hearts, even for the small wrongs that we suffer. When we forgive our friend for not greeting us in the market, then we are more likely to forgive our much larger wounds.

Families must also reduce the violence in their homes by using nonviolent strategies for resolving conflict. Furthermore, parents must be aware of their children’s movements to ensure they are not getting into trouble, and use appropriate disciplinary strategies when their children go astray. Communities need to provide positive opportunities for youth to develop their abilities and pursue their dreams, both through community organizations and employment opportunities. Community members also need to put strategies in place to actively prevent violent crisis from occurring when conflict arises. Religious institutions need to emphasize religious teachings on compassion for others, brotherly love, and reconciliation. Finally, the nation needs to strengthen the justice system so that those who engage in violence are held accountable for their actions, which will deter others from engaging in violence in the future.

Working together, each doing what little we can, we can reduce the amount of violence in society, which will improve the emotional wellbeing of all.