

## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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

The next section details more specific definitions and theoretical foundations for each of these five areas.

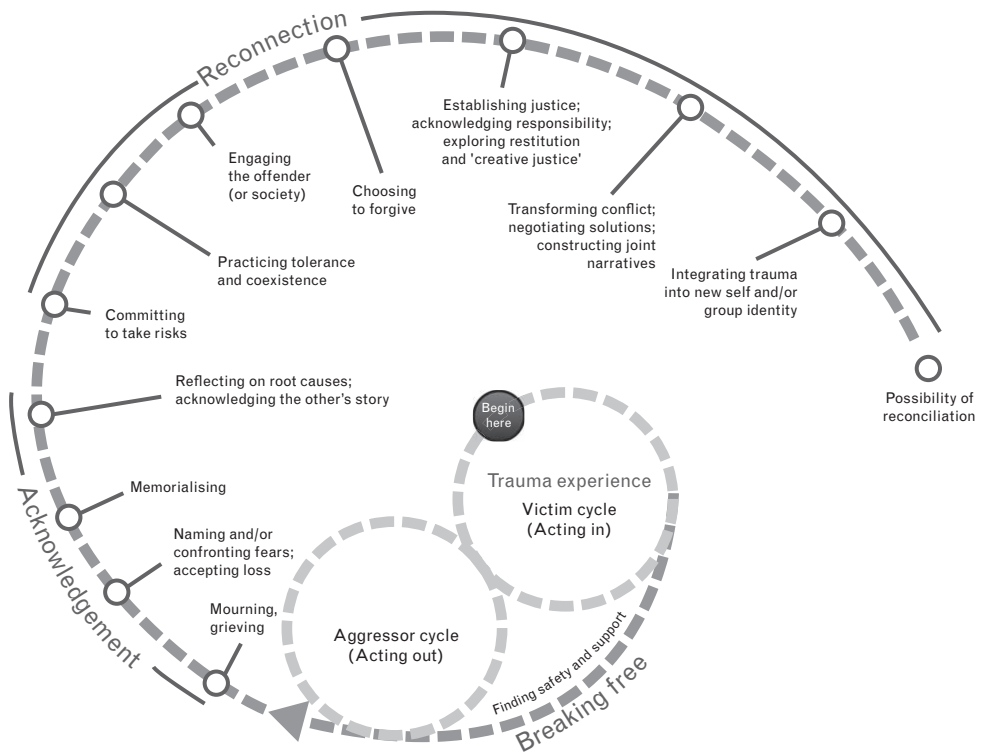
**Promoting trauma awareness and resilience**

The programme defines trauma as ‘the emotional and physical harm resulting from violent conflict, natural disasters or societal structures’ (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), 2017, p. 2), emphasising that trauma occurs when our ability to respond to threat is overwhelmed (Levine, 1997). STAR intentionally engages participants to explore trauma with multiple lenses, placing more emphasis on the lived experience of individuals and groups – and the tremendous resources all people have for integration, support and strength in the face of

trauma – than on technical definitions and medical response mechanisms.

The programme’s foundations in trauma awareness emerged from a variety of sources, informed by the works of Herman (1992), Levine (1997; 2010), Van der Kolk (2014) and Siegel (2012a; 2012b), along with STAR founding director Carolyn Yoder’s *Little Book of Trauma Healing* (2005) and Hicks’ exploration of dignity (2013).

Botcharova’s 1998 model is also foundational to STAR’s approach to understanding resilience and options for responding to violence (Botcharova, 2001). Using Botcharova’s original model, the STAR team has developed and continues to refine the ‘snail model’ depicted above – a model that spirals out from traumatic events and cycles of violence and includes breaking free, acknowledgement



**Figure 2: Breaking free from cycles of violence – building resilience: STAR’s ‘snail model’**

and reconnection, as likely stops along the journey to the possibility of reconciliation.

***STAR team at Eastern Mennonite University. Adapted from Botcharova (2001)***

STAR defines resilience as *'the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt, survive and bounce back in the midst of, or after, hardship and adversity'* (STAR, 2017, p. 3). STAR searches for evidence of resilience, not in the absence of traumatic response, but in the quality of relationships with self, other individuals, families and communities in the wake, or midst, of traumagenic events.

**Doing justice**

STAR draws heavily upon the teachings of restorative justice, which means focusing on respect, responsibility and relationship; showing respect to all who were involved in harm, opening space for people to take responsibility for making things right and working toward restoring relationships where possible (Zehr, 2002).

**Making meaning (spiritual/religious or secular)**

Human beings are meaning makers; for many, making meaning is tied to religion or spirituality. STAR begins with the assumption that *'spirituality, faith beliefs, identity validation and the systems by which people give meaning to their world are key to understanding trauma responses and addressing the deep wounds and torn social fabric created by the traumatic event'* (STAR, 2017, p. 3).

**Building secure, sustainable communities**

STAR challenges the state based concept of security that focuses on: a) a narrow national security shaped agenda that involves government protection of citizens, often through military means (STAR, 2017), or b) economic development models that privilege limitless consumption without attending to holistic human development. STAR trainings explore how individuals,

structures and systems can facilitate human development while honouring and sustaining community resources, drawing upon Max-Neef's human scale development (1991) and Adams' integrated theory around chronic violence, human development, social relations and the practice of citizenship (2017). Adams' framework encourages moving *'from a primarily top-down perspective (the state-centred focus on security, criminality and deviance) to also encompass a bottom-up perspective rooted both in how violence is lived by those who experience it most directly (both as victims and perpetrators) and in the multiple drivers that reproduce it'* (Ibid, p. xvi).

**Transforming conflict**

Adams suggests moving 'from the essentially negative and narrow goal of eliminating or reducing violence to the more fundamental goal of enabling vulnerable people and groups to thrive as individuals, social beings and citizens' (Ibid, p.xxiii). Her framework describes conflict transformation, which seeks not to end conflict, but to understand and harness conflict as a catalyst for needed change, and a spark for vision and life giving creativity (Lederach, 2003).

**Pedagogical approaches and cautions**

STAR is intended as an elicitive, participatory learning space in which 20–25 participants co-create the container for the learning journey with their experience and insight.

Trauma is a whole person experience. To honour that, STAR engages multiple learning modalities, including popular education approaches (Boal, 2002; Freire, 2011), expressive arts methods (Eberhart & Atkins, 2014; Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005), ongoing dialogue in smaller and larger groups, circle processes (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Pranis, 2005) and mindfulness practices. Interactive processes, play, deep listening and embodied learning are integrated with lectures, films, visual and print resources.

STAR aims to create and sustain a decolonised, welcoming, inclusive environment for all kinds of spiritual practice, while acknowledging current and historical traumas intertwined with religion and spirituality. This is often a difficult balance to sustain. Structurally, the programme is working to build a training pool inclusive of diverse religious, linguistic, ethnic, age, gender and experiential backgrounds.

STAR takes seriously the value of a safe and brave learning environment. Facilitators are up front with participants that this is an educational experience, rather than therapy, although it can be therapeutic. When training in the USA, we typically have counselors available, however, this is not always possible. We take precautions in coordinating participant invitations, being clear that this is not victim services nor trauma counselling, but rather awareness training and education for community leaders. Training occurs in teams of at least two, so that if a participant needs extra attention or accompaniment, one trainer can provide it. Where possible, locating local resources to turn to if someone needs additional attention beyond the training and clarifying that people have the option to pass/observe in talking circles or other activities. In this way, everything is kept at an invitational level.

### **Components of a typical training**

A typical STAR training takes place over the course of four to five consecutive days in one location. In a five-day training, participants are invited on the journey outlined below, although not every training will follow this exact arc.

#### **Day 1. Orientation and beginning the journey**

The first day includes playful attunement activities, a programme overview, sharing of hopes and expectations, guideline setting, time to define trauma and resilience, an

interactive review of sources and types of trauma and arts based exploration of participants' own life stories. Participants begin the three-part journey with trauma and resilience, focusing on the common impacts of traumatic events on body, brain, beliefs and behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Day 2. Impacts of trauma (continued) and cycles of violence**

This day includes a circle process inviting sharing with a symbol of trauma relevant to each participant's life; emotional first aid DOs and DON'Ts and compassionate listening practice. Participants continue on to the second segment of the journey, *'Unhealed Trauma: Acting In and Acting Out.'*

#### **Day 3. Breaking free from cycles of violence and building resilience**

On the third day, participants explore *'Breaking Free from Cycles of Violence – Building Resilience,'* which includes: cultivation of safety, support, leadership and choice, various forms of acknowledgement, and reconnection of relationships. They explore the nature of, and challenges to, navigating peace, mercy, justice and truth (Lederach, 2014).

#### **Day 4. Breaking free and building resilience (continued)**

Participants are invited to share their spiritual resources in a circle process. They become acquainted with introductory theory and practical examples from restorative justice and conflict transformation, and use the STAR model to map their experience.

#### **Day 5. Resilience and self-care**

Participants share symbols of hope in a circle process and revisit resilience, including personal resilience, community/social resilience and qualities of trauma informed, resilient organisations (Hart, Lantz-Simmons & Nashat, n.d.). They explore compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction, wellbeing assessment tools and self-care strategies.

## A closer look

The following section explores particular elements of the training:

- defining and identifying sources of trauma;
- the three-part journey: (1) why we can't just *'get over it'*; (2) unhealed trauma: acting in and acting out; (3) breaking free and building resilience); and
- self-care practices and resources for building personal and community resilience.

### Defining and identifying sources of trauma

After a group exercise involving controlled chaos,<sup>3</sup> participants put words to trauma, acknowledging the English word's origins in the Greek word for *'wound'*.

Participants are then invited to *unlearn* what they may already *'know'* about trauma. Cautions are sounded about labelling people as *'traumatised'*, using a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis as the only measure of trauma (Yoder, 2005), as well as considering events *'traumagenic'*, to acknowledge that

specific events will impact people in diverse ways. Taking substantial time to unpack sources and types of trauma is foundational to any STAR training. With the term resilience on one side, and trauma on the other, we discuss potential sources of trauma response. This usually takes shape as a low-tech presentation, taping up a series of labels that look something like those found in Figure 3.

Acknowledging PTSD as one form of wound, we also name the limitations of pathologising trauma and treating it as a purely medical situation. We move to a wider naming of sources of traumatic response, from cultural, structural and historical harms that do ongoing collective damage, to dignity violations (Hicks, 2013), secondary or vicarious trauma (Figley, 1995; Ludick & Figley, 2017) and participation induced traumatic stress, which can emerge from participation in doing harm to others (MacNair, 2002). Because experience of these harms – and the ways they intersect to impact some lives more than others – is compounded by power and status disparities, we also discuss the

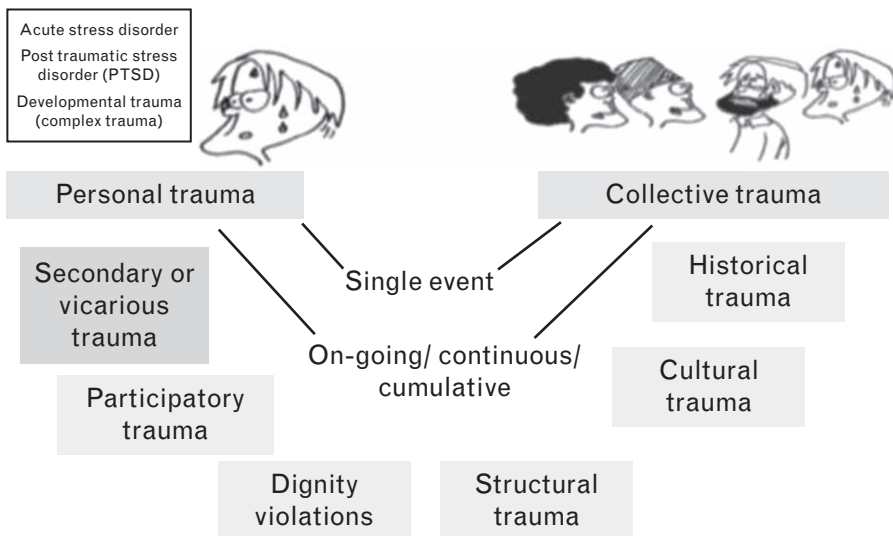


Figure 3: Sources and types of trauma

intersectionality of harms (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

These activities and conversations establish the framework for naming our own experiences, the diversity of responses to various traumagenic events and patterns, and the common impacts of these events on bodies, brains, beliefs and behaviour.

### On the journey: why we can't just get over it

Following personal exploration, we move into some of the lessons from neuroscience around common responses to traumagenic events, starting with the fight, flight and freeze responses to threat, which humans share with other animals (Levine, 1997, 2010; van der Kolk, 2014). We also dig into meaning making and unmet needs as key reasons we can't 'just get over' trauma experiences, drawing on Volkan's chosen glories

and chosen traumas (2004) and Max-Neef's understanding of ways to meet needs (1991).

The basic model of the trauma experience (outlined in Figure 4) is followed, acknowledging that beyond the pervasive experience of some form of physiological change, responses to traumagenic events will vary individually and culturally. These responses are not presented as sequential or definitive.

### Part 2 of the journey: unhealed trauma and cycles of violence

After examining the protective, natural and potentially life giving responsiveness of the body and brain to threatening events, and the potential impacts on beliefs and behaviour, attention turns to effects of trauma energy that is not discharged from the body. Drawing on the wisdom of Richard Rohr, we emphasise the concept that pain that is not transformed is transferred (2008).

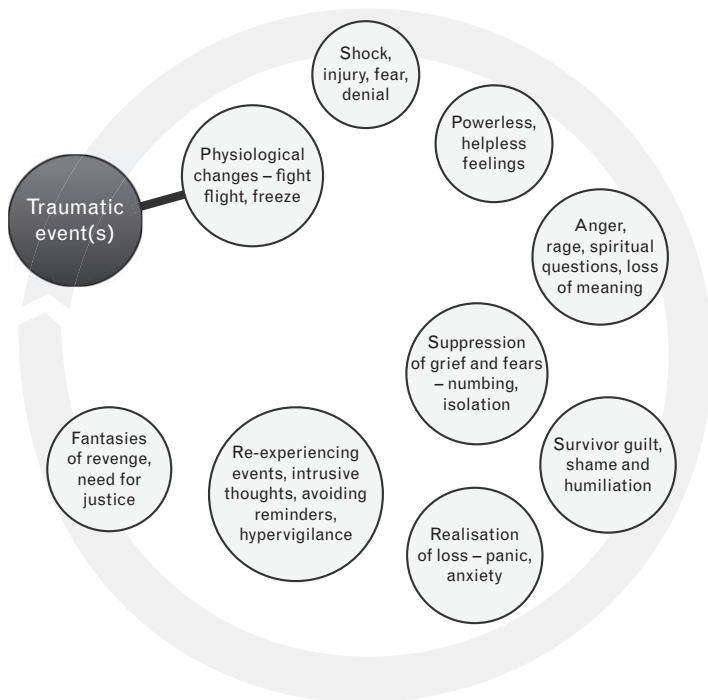


Figure 4: The trauma experience

Participants unpack what they have witnessed/experienced in the realms of emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology, spirit and society/relationships. The following model is our current depiction of how the victim cycle of the trauma experience can flow into an aggressor cycle, creating new trauma experiences.

### **Part 3 of the journey: breaking free from cycles of violence and building resilience**

After a preliminary naming of the group's own ideas and experiences of ways people can interrupt the transmission of woundedness (O'Dea, 2012), strategies and examples of how individuals and communities break free from cycles of violence via the *snail model* are explored (Figure 2).

Although a model seems to simplify and make linear a path that is typically quite complicated and messy, the fact that stations along the snail are not necessarily progressive nor step-by-step is emphasised. Individuals and communities may skip certain steps, progress deeply in one area even as cycles of violence continue, or find they need to revisit certain areas. Each space on the intentionally broken line that escapes the cycles of violence is a potential entry point for building resilience.

Each entry point represents a deep body of theory and practice, drawing on trauma and resilience studies (including neurobiology), restorative justice, spirituality/meaning making, human security and conflict transformation. Through film and story and participants' own observations, examples unfold of how people engage in breaking free through healthy leadership, creation of spaces and processes for building safety, support and a wider range of choices, and use of body/mind tools for building resilience. Processes of acknowledgement are explored, such as: rituals, storytelling, memorials and acknowledging the story of the *other*.

We examine pathways to reconnection en route to the *possibility* (not the expectation)

of reconciliation. Justice needs are unpacked, such as safety, information, truth telling, participatory power and choice, and acknowledgement and repair of harm. Once familiar with examples of practices included in the snail model, participants map their own situations to the model, re-imagining how to respond to traumatic events in their communities.

### **Resilience and self-care**

STAR's discussion of resilience encompasses individual and community resilience. In exploring community resilience, STAR leans heavily on Anderson and Wallace's *Opting Out of War* (2012), which documents communities that resisted joining mass violence in their midst. At the personal and organisational levels, trainers introduce some simple and more technical assessment tools and invite discussion about being a trauma-informed organisation (Hart, Lantz-Simmons & Nashat, n.d.). Participants are also invited to share their own self-care strategies and spiritual resources throughout the course of the training.

### **Results**

Evaluations have been conducted on STAR adaptations implemented by two local NGOs, Wozo in Haiti and SOYDEN (Somali Youth and Development Network) in Somalia. Within the USA, pre and post training surveys have been conducted by the Minnesota Peacebuilding Leadership Institute and at STAR trainings at the Eastern Mennonite University. STAR is in the process of developing a long-term survey of participants. Below are findings from Haiti and Somalia, selected participant stories from the author's experience in Kenya, and further results.

#### **Example 1: Wozo, Haiti**

Led by four Haitian staff, collaborators from the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at

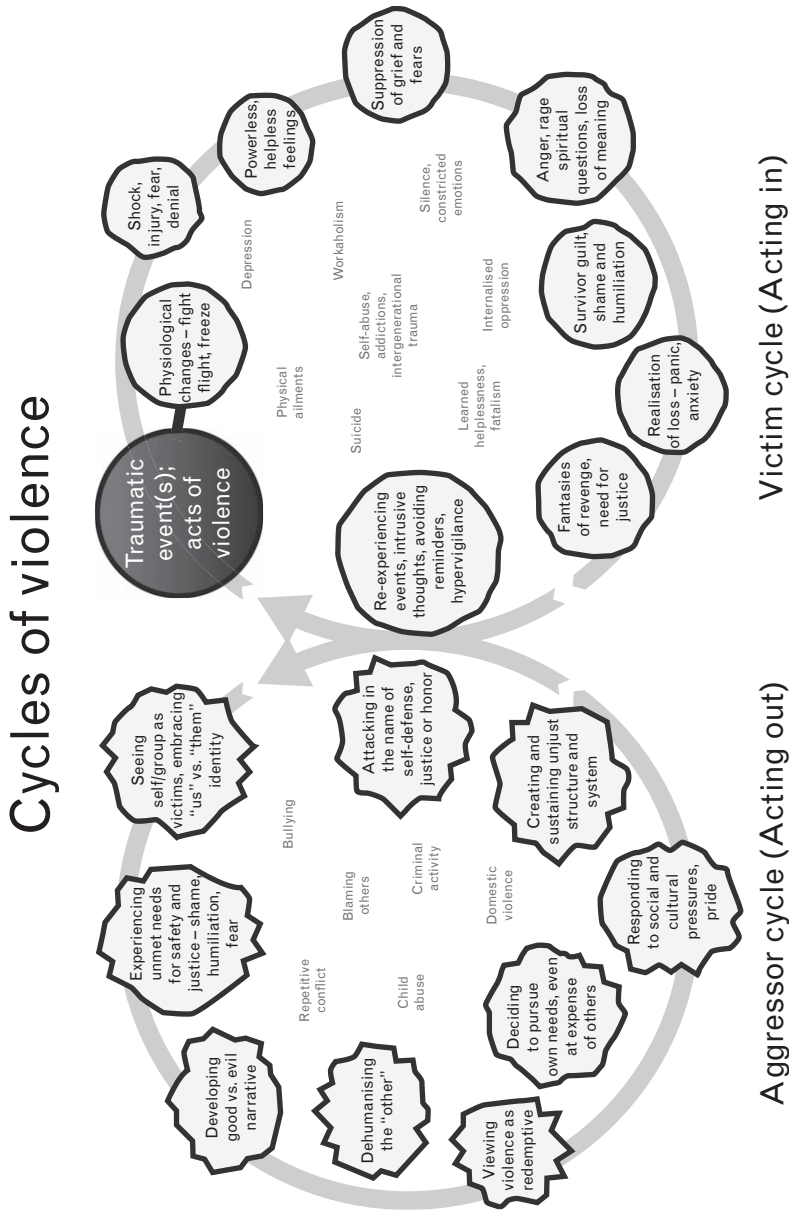


Figure 5: Cycles of violence.

EMU and various donors, Wozo's work is estimated to have touched approximately 13,000 people. Everett M. Ressler of The Konterra Group conducted the evaluation. The overall programme goal was to establish a contextualised, long-term trauma resilience programme to work with impacts from the 2010 earthquake, in addition to longer-reaching social traumas experienced by Haitians. This began with training local trainers, developing contextualised materials and teaching approach and building networks. From 2011 to 2013, Wozo conducted approximately 36 STAR Level I workshops, with approximately 976 direct participants. According to the evaluation:

- participants described the programme as *'transformative'* and *'life changing'* and carried learnings into their home, work and community environments, citing change in marriage relationships, treatment of children and dispute resolution;
- trainings changed the way participants view the difficult circumstances (traumas) experienced in the course of life, how they understand and feel about themselves, how they see and treat others, and how they deal with conflict.

### **Example 2: Quraca Nabadda, Somalia<sup>4</sup>**

SOYDEN (Somali Youth and Development Network) translated and contextualised the *Village STAR* curriculum for use in multiple districts in Somalia, under the name *Quraca Nabadda* (QN, Tree of Peace). In 2014, they conducted an evaluation of a series of QN community dialogues which were accompanied by a local radio programme (whose creators had been involved in the QN training of trainers and community dialogues). They conducted rapid pre and post participation surveys of approximately 1,600 participants.

Their research showed shifts in attitudes and orientation to forgiveness and reintegration of combatants:

- trust in neighbouring clans rose: a total of 80% felt attitudes about their own clans changed, and 79% felt attitudes about other clans had changed as a result of their participation;
- forgiveness: 91% of respondents said they would forgive others who committed traumatic events, and in a separate question about handling perpetrators, 12.7% stated they should be arrested, 2.6% wanted them killed, with the remaining 85.4% stating don't know (up from the baseline by 12%);
- reintegration: when asked whether the members of armed groups should be allowed to return to their communities, the overwhelming majority agreed or strongly agreed that they should, with only 12.5% disagreeing.

### **Example 3: two women in Kenya**

These participant stories come from a training the author co-facilitated with the late Doreen Ruto in 2012 in Kenya.

One participant appeared to be exhibiting signs of emotional and physical distress at the beginning of the training. She informed the trainers of deeply wounding events she had been through during mass violence in her home area. By the end of the week, she was leading the group in song and dance, and laughing. During a visit with her six months later, she informed us that at the time of the training, she had been planning revenge attacks and trading weapons. She told us, *'now I am just helping other women. . . I am so thankful. I have forgiven him, the one who cut me with a panga. I greet him. I even bought him a soda the other day!'*

Another participant, a small business owner, had been attacked in her home and witnessed the torture of a loved one. She shared her stories, shaking, while we were together. When we visited with her six months later, she still seemed slightly shaken. Yet she said, *'I used to have ulcers. Since we were together I no longer have pain in my stomach. Somehow drawing*

*those things and sharing the stories. . . Ino longer feel the ulcers?*

Another of her brothers had been killed since our first meeting. She said that the men in the family came together to raise money 'to buy a gun and revenge.' She approached them. She suggested, 'Yes, let's raise money, but let's use it to pay the school fees for the children in our extended family, not to revenge.' They listened to her.

### **Other impacts**

Beyond these examples, individuals and organisations have developed STAR in new directions. STAR Practitioner Heather Peters conducted an organisation wide trauma audit for the Mennonite Central Committee in Canada, an international peace, development and relief organisation that is including STAR based training in its leadership orientation, and with some of its partner organisations. STAR's curriculum has inspired numerous adaptations for particular contexts, communities or problems, including historical harms (Anderson Hooker & Potter Czajkowski, 2011), returning from war (Prestwood-Taylor, updated 2015), gender based violence (*Family STAR*, 2011), and work with youth (original author Vesna Hart, 2007, updated 2012), as well as literacy training (Medley, 2017). Condensed and visually oriented *Village STAR* (Zook Barge, updated annually) has served as a basis for many translations: Haitian Creole, Urdu, Arabic, Spanish, Somali (*Quraca Nabadda*) and a variety of South Sudanese languages (*Morning Star*).

### **Challenges and questions for further research**

As STAR has unfolded from its origins, many questions and possibilities have emerged. As more practitioners and trainers apply the elements of the STAR journey in their lives and communities, we are challenged (as a tiny organisation) to ensure that individuals receive ongoing support after the training. We have developed an online

learning community so that practitioners and trainers may continue learning together with us.

Since this work tends to raise as many questions as it answers, this paper closes with key questions for further research:

1. How do we best measure and understand the immediate and long-term impacts of this experiential, educational programme? How do we measure the impact on peacebuilding and development (and in justice, health care, community building, religious and disaster response organisations) of people doing their work in more holistic and trauma informed ways?
2. Adaptations of STAR to various contexts and social challenges suggest this framework is both wide enough to apply to different manifestations of violence and particular enough to offer specific, useful tools. What pieces remain consistent across the transmission of STAR learning? What are the unique adaptations, stories and tools that practitioners are bringing, and how can they be fed back into the foundational training?

While many questions remain, STAR's first 15 years of providing an educational space that honours both profound resilience amidst, and grave impacts of, traumagenic events has demonstrated one possible approach to addressing trauma in the midst or aftermath of violent conflict. Further, it is worth considering the statement, '*long lasting peace cannot be built without work on traumas that have been created through violent conflicts*' (Puljek-Shank & Puljek-Shank, 2008, p. 160). How would conflict transformation work shift, if it consistently incorporated trauma awareness and resilience building as foundations for addressing the political, social, economic and environmental challenges that burn in the midst and aftermath of violence? STAR embodies an approach that invites participants to do just this – work for justice, build peace and meet human

needs, and to do so in a way that embraces the complexity of the human spirit and destigmatizes the common impacts of stress and trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Traumagenic' will be used hereafter to indicate events that involve overwhelming threat, that may or may not result in a trauma response (depending on personal and community resilience and other factors). STAR uses this word rather than 'traumatic' to acknowledge that not everyone who experiences a traumatic event or traumatic situations experiences traumatic stress.

<sup>2</sup> While STAR has for some time been using the language of 'body, brain, beliefs and behaviour', it is worth mentioning that Nancy Good, one of the teachers whose work was foundational to STAR theory and pedagogy, now shares a framework of 'the four Bs' (which the author encountered in Good's keynote address in a 2016 conference, Trauma, Memory and Healing in the Balkans and Beyond). While Good has not yet written about this formally, it seems important to mention this is not STAR's intellectual property, but an alliterative organising frame that is emerging from multiple origins.

<sup>3</sup> The 'chaos exercise' involves tossing an object around from one group member to another, and the facilitator adds rules and distractions that make the activity increasingly challenging and chaotic. The intention of this exercise is both a) to help participants connect with each other and loosen up, and b) to spark a conversation about diverse responses to chaos and crisis and complexity.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Angi Yoder Maina for sharing results from Quraca Nabadda.

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