JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Spring 2024
No. 38
ISSN: 2363-9849

After They Leave: Exploring Post-exit Distress in Former Violent Extremists

Katharina Meredith[a1], John Horgan[b2]
[a]PhD Candidate, Department of Psychology, Georgia State University, [b]Distinguished University Professor, Department of Psychology, Georgia State University

Abstract
This exploratory study provides foundational knowledge on the post-exit process experienced by former members of violent extremist groups. While disengagement from violent extremism and the transition to mainstream society is known to involve change and adaptation, little is known about the post-exit life of former violent extremists. For this study, ten former violent extremists, and six practitioners who work on facilitating exit and reintegration, were interviewed. This led to a comprehensive identification of post-exit stressors and the subsequent creation of an exploratory framework of post-exit distress with four dimensions: 1) Daily Life & Social, 2) Psychological & Physical Well-being, 3) Safety & Consequences, and 4) Transition & Identity. Post-exit stressors may stem from radicalization, involvement in violent extremism, disengagement, or the transition back to non-extremist life. The findings show that internal and external stressors are plentiful, vary in frequency and magnitude, and are most dominant in the first 1-2 years after disengagement. The 97 stressors expressed by former violent extremists and practitioners indicate that post-exit distress is not only wide ranging, but highly disruptive, and sometimes unmanageable. Left unaddressed, such stressors can profoundly hinder efforts to rebuild a life outside of violent extremism. This has implications for evidence-based reintegration efforts and future studies.

Article History
Received Feb 8, 2024
Accepted Mar 26, 2024
Published Mar 29, 2024

Keywords: Terrorism, Disengagement, Exit, Reintegration, Distress, Trauma

Introduction

Although terrorist acts occur infrequently, they destabilize communities and are often symptomatic of a significant social problem (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). Such acts can have serious negative consequences not only for victims, but also perpetrators (Dalgaard-Nielsen,

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Katharina Meredith, Email: kmeredith1@gsu.edu, Georgia State University, Department of Psychology, 140 Decatur Street, Atlanta, GA 30303-3083, USA
[2] Transparency Note: John Horgan serves on the Editorial Board of the Journal for Deradicalization. He was not involved in any way in the peer review process for this manuscript.

2013). Much of the psychological research on violent extremism has thus far focused on radicalization (largely understood to be the acquisition of extreme views), mobilization (how people move from thought to action), and disengagement (how and why people move away from violent extremism) (Horgan, 2009; Horgan & Braddock, 2010; Kruglanski, 2019; Sieckelinck et al., 2019). Related to this, there is no shortage of literature on the impact of mental health problems, unmet needs, and perceived or real grievances on radicalization and deepening involvement in violent extremism (see Gill et al., 2021; Misiak et al., 2019). Yet, despite early recognition (e.g., Taylor, 1988) there has been little systematic focus on how membership or involvement affects the individual extremist (Corner & Gill, 2020).

Even less is known about the practical, social, and psychological aspects of transitioning back to mainstream society. Those few studies that do exist suggest that involvement can have, at multiple levels, highly negative impacts (Koehler, 2020) that ultimately compound an array of pre-existing barriers to re-entry. In a systematic review, Morrison et al. (2021) pointed out that "stress and burnout, rather than personality or clinical disorders" most relate to disengagement and deradicalization, and that more research is necessary (p. 42).

Involvement in terrorist groups often involves hardships such as group conflicts, interrogation, and imprisonment which may result in psychological disturbance and negatively impact mental health (Weatherston & Moran, 2003). More recently, Koehler (2020) highlighted how involvement can open a person up to potentially traumatizing factors due to experiences of existential threat, dehumanization of the out-group, an unhealthy interplay of negative and positive emotional states, and psychological dependency on the group. In short, membership of extremist groups is "generally not good for a person's mental health in the long term" (Barrelle, 2015, p. 135).

Despite loyalty to a group or cause, most members do leave eventually (Bjørgo & Horgan, 2008), whether of their own accord or otherwise (Altier et al., 2019; Kenney & Chernov Hwang, 2020). By disengagement, we refer to Horgan's (2009) definition:

> [t]he process whereby an individual experiences a change in role of function that is usually associated with a reduction of violent participation. It may not necessarily

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ISSN: 2363-9849

> involve leaving the movement, but is most frequently associated with significant temporary or permanent role change. Additionally, while disengagement may stem from role change, that role change may be influenced by psychological factors such as disillusionment, burnout or the failure to reach the expectations that influenced initial involvement. This can lead to a member seeking out a different role within the movement. (p.152)

De-radicalization, on the other hand, is the related but distinct process that is sometimes associated with disengagement. Again, we use Horgan's definition (2009, p.153) here as: "the social and psychological process whereby an individual's commitment to, and involvement in violent radicalization is reduced to the extent that they are no longer at risk of involvement and engagement in violent activity."

The process of disengagement is influenced by an array of factors that 'pull' or 'push' a person to leave or stay, including incentives for staying and the availability of options outside the group (Horgan et al., 2017, p. 63). This process and the subsequent transition to nonviolent society is a unique phase in the extremist's trajectory and has generally been coined *exit*. Ideally, exit involves a complete break from the group in question, the acquisition of new, healthy relationships, as well as embracing new social and even physical environments (Gould, 2021; Mattsson & Johansson, 2020).

The process of leaving violent extremism is itself stressful and it can take months or years to adjust to the non-extremist world (Barrelle, 2015). Van de Wetering and Hecker (2023) found that "persistent moods such as fear, frustration, powerlessness, and shame, as well as feelings of guilt" are serious and stressful during the disengagement process (Wetering & Hecker, 2023, p. 90).

Several researchers have of course recognized the existence and importance of stressors during this phase. For example, Barrelle (2015) found "anxiety, paranoia, trauma, poor physical health, drug/alcohol abuse, physical injury, loss of relationships with family and friends, disrupted education and career, criminal charges, and/or imprisonment leading to limited future employment, limited housing and social opportunities" (p. 135-136). Scholars have examined such stressors as lack of employment and legal economic opportunities

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ISSN: 2363-9849

(Ferguson et al., 2015; Latif et al., 2020), poor relationships with family or the community due to stigmatization (e.g., Mattsson & Johansson, 2020; Özerdem & Podder, 2011), the cost of concealing one's past (e.g., (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), mental health concerns (e.g., Corner & Gill, 2021), experiences and perpetrating forms of violence, including sexual violence (e.g., Friedman, 2018), hate as a learned mindset (e.g., DeMichele et al., 2021), feelings of shame and guilt (e.g., Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Schewe & Koehler, 2021), substance abuse (e.g., Koehler, 2020), and questions around purpose and identity (e.g., Raets, 2017; Syafiq, 2019). In addition, many of the behaviors learned and shaped through prior group involvement, such as the habit of resolving conflict through violence, do not automatically end upon disengagement (e.g., Simi et al., 2017).

This study focused on distress, which, according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) occurs when an event is perceived as harmful, threatening, or challenging and deemed to exceed one's social and personal resources. Unlike more stigmatizing labels, the term *distress* "extends along a continuum," generates dialogue, and reduces reluctance in regard to seeking help (Holland & Gooen-Piels, 2006, p. 799).

While such studies indicate that clear progress has been made, as far as we can tell, no comprehensive overview or exploration of post-exit stressors currently exists.

Aims

This exploratory study offers foundational knowledge on the post-exit process of former members of violent extremist groups. When it comes to exit, there is a lack of essential intervention elements, such as funding, specialized training, and public support for intervention measures (Koehler, 2020). Knowing the stressors former extremists may face after disengagement can help practitioners identify what challenges must be overcome and advocate for appropriate resources. Violent extremists' successful transition back to mainstream society may be hindered if these stressors seem insurmountable to them and their communities. Not meeting the reintegration needs of those disengaging from violent extremism (e.g., "access to mental health treatment" Brown et al., 2021, p. xiv) may pose an

increased risk to society. Even if individuals do not reengage in violent extremism, they may perpetuate other forms of criminality, violence, or self-destructive behavior (Koehler, 2020).

The goal of this study was to better understand former violent extremists' experiences after disengagement. Specifically, it sought to explore their post-exit experiences with respect to stress and asked:

1) What are the challenges former violent extremists face post-exit?
2) What are the causes of post-exit distress?
3) How disruptive are these stressors?

To do this, the lead researcher (KM) invited ten former violent extremists, and six practitioners working with violent extremists, to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. Including these two populations allowed for different viewpoints and a more comprehensive understanding of the issue (Patton, 1999). Formers spoke about their lived experiences, while practitioners reflected broadly about formers who had received support from their organizations. The resulting data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Method

Research Design Overview

This study focused on participants' perspectives and interpretations via an experiential orientation, while also integrating a critical orientation centered in interpretative psychological frameworks in terrorism literature, criminology, and public health.

Thematic analysis is ideally suited for identifying patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, KM adopted a strategy of reflexive thematic analysis, which acknowledges the researcher's subjective lens in meaning-making. All codes and constructs created by KM were discussed, revised, and re-coded upon frequent consultation with JH.

In addition to interviews, focus groups were added to the research design, as they can transcend accounts of individuals' own experiences and have the potential to foster participation (Duggleby, 2005), encourage candor (Krueger & Casey, 2000), be cathartic to the participants (Barbour, 2007), and allow for quietness when participants wish to keep something private (Barbour, 2007). However, they are rarely, if ever, done with former violent extremists.

During ten interviews and one focus group, KM asked former violent extremists about their post-exit experience. In two separate focus groups practitioners who work with formers answered corresponding questions.

Once analysis was underway, a member check, asking participants to give feedback on the findings and suggest new stressors, was offered to several participants. Data was intentionally conceptualized in a way that is recognizable to participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021), enabling them to understand the findings (Elliott et al., 1999; Smith & McGannon, 2018). This form of participant validation added valuable insight.

Data gathered from this inquiry was used to create a topic overview and framework for understanding post-exit distress.

Study Participants and Data Sources

Study Participants

Ten former violent extremists over the age of 18 participated. Three were female and seven were male. Six were former members of far-right groups, one of a jihadist group. Three declined to disclose, but were likely part of anti-government militias, based on the accounts that emerged from their interviews. One member's involvement had been exclusively online, while everyone else had participated in person. The options given on the survey for how formers had left the group were: 1*) On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active; 2) I was forced to leave by the group/movement by people in it; 3) The group/movement stopped existing.* Eight former members left voluntarily while the group was

still active, one was forced to leave by the group, and another left when the group ceased to exist. One had left less than a year prior to the interview, four had left 2-5 years prior, one had left 6-10 years prior and four had left 10+ years prior. Two were between the age of 18-25, four between the age of 26-35, and four were 36 and up. Only two former extremists participated in a focus group, although more had indicated prior interest. Seven opted for one-on-one interviews.

Of the practitioners, four were women, and two were men. They reported working with formers associated with a variety of ideologies or movements, which they referred to as: "far-right," "far-left," "Islamist," "eco-terrorism," "former combatants," "conspiratorial thinking (e.g., QAnon)," "mixed-personalized ideologies," "misogyny," "anti-immigrant," "antisemitism," "anti-government," "Antifa," and "Incels." Practitioners indicated that they work in the USA, Canada, Europe, Central Asia, Australia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Germany, and Northern Ireland.

All practitioners spoke fluent English, participated enthusiastically, and responded to each other's insights. Seven out of ten former extremists spoke fluent English, engaged in in-depth discussion, paused, and responded to questions from multiple perspectives. The other three (recruited via social media) only had a basic to intermediate grasp of English, needed more prompting, and were less likely to elaborate on their answers. Based on the information gleaned from their three interviews, they were engaged in a much higher level of violence and had likely never spoken to a researcher before. What they did share added a valuable different perspective.

Participant Recruitment

KM had previously met four out of six practitioners when participating in online events and a practicum. She had also interacted with four of the formers (three who work at exit organizations and one she knew through a public event), prior to the study. None of the other former extremists who participated were known to KM before the onset of the study.

Out of the former extremists who participated, seven were recruited via snowball sampling and three via social media. All six practitioners were recruited via snowball

sampling. The initial participants recruited via snowball sampling received an email containing a 2–3-minute Qualtrics intake survey with the option of providing background information and indicating availability. The intake survey for practitioners included who they work with and what country they work in. The survey for former violent extremists was crafted with more privacy concerns in mind and pre-tested with one practitioner and one former extremist for content and understandability to ensure that it would not unintentionally deter someone from participating. In addition, the researchers purposely did not ask many demographic questions and turned off the VPN detection feature on Qualtrics, making it impossible to determine which country a survey was submitted from. The option to participate in either a focus group or an individual interview was given and clearly explained.

Unknown to KM, one participant shared the recruitment text on social media. Within three days, nearly 150 people signed up for the study via Qualtrics. It was suspected that not all of them were former extremists. A pre-screener was deemed necessary, which consisted of an uncompensated 15–20-minute conversation with questions about the person's extremist background. Most of the new sign-ups did not respond to this scheduling request, however three interviews resulted from this effort.

Participants were asked during the interviews if they might be willing to provide feedback on the findings. This resulted in member checks with three former extremists and two practitioners.

Sample size

Fifteen participants are generally considered sufficient for an exploratory study such as this (Hunter et al., 2019). Former extremists are a hard-to-reach population, on top of which there may be greater barriers for focus groups involving former extremists. Indeed, three formers signed up for a focus group but did not attend. This could be due to fear of being recognized, someone from the same group showing up and critiquing them or being uncomfortable talking about issues in front of other formers.

Traditionally focus groups are recommended to include 8-12 people but this is often considered too large when discussing complex topics (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Given the

willingness to engage and the breadth of knowledge practitioners wanted to share, small groups proved to be beneficial.

Participants were compensated with a $35 Amazon gift card. This was deemed necessary to get a less biased sample. For example, if expecting to find individuals who would participate for free, one can risk biasing the sample in regard to participants who can afford to take uncompensated time off or have a specific interest in the research topic (Williams, 2022).

Data Collection

The study was approved by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (protocol number H23062). KM obtained informed consent from all participants prior to the study and engaged with participants in a respectful manner. Appropriate steps to protect the privacy of the participants were taken, such as storing data on a password-protected folder on an institutional server, reducing access to the authors alone, removing identifying information from the transcripts, and deleting the audio recording at the end of the study.

Interviews, focus groups, and member-checks were conducted between September 2022 and December 2022. Interviews averaged 60 minutes in length, and focus groups averaged 90 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group or interview, KM read a script going over the purpose of the study, privacy, and confidentiality, and gave one sentence of self-disclosure. A semi-structured interview guide with open questions shaped the conversations, but the researcher followed up with individualized questions. Initially, the interview questions asked a) what was stressful after leaving violent extremism and b) how do former extremists deal with that distress? However, after the first few interviews, questions around what stressors were more dominant during the first two years and what milestones were missed during involvement were added.

Interviews and focus groups were led via Zoom. After each interview and focus group, the researcher transcribed the recorded audio verbatim and removed all identifying information.

For the member-checks, KM shared her screen via Zoom and asked each participant to comment on the findings. This was not recorded. Based on notes taken, the researchers made adjustments to the codes and the framework.

Analysis

Based on an analysis of the literature, previous conversations and research interviews conducted by both authors with former violent extremists, the researchers expected to find certain stressors. This informed the decision to start with a concept-driven approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Gibbs, 2018). During analysis, a more inductive approach was deemed appropriate, which meant going beyond preconceived categories of stressors, and letting the data serve as the starting point (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This continuum between deductive and inductive reflects the philosophy that researchers come at a topic with their own lens and pre-existing ideas, deeming a purely inductive approach impossible (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

KM engaged extensively with the data, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis - familiarization with the data, coding the data, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. These phases are neither linear nor unidirectional (Braun and Clarke, 2021) and various forms of visualizations were used to better understand and cluster the codes (e.g., writing stressors on individual magnetic tiles and moving them around on a whiteboard).

As this was an exploratory study using reflexive thematic analysis, inter-coder reliability was not part of the design. Indeed, Braun and Clarke (2020) do not recommend it for reflexive thematic analysis. To reflect on the data, KM engaged with JH in extensive discussions and relied on other researchers for informal conversations (see 'kitchen table reflexivity' by Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Lisiak & Krzyzowski, 2018).

All coding and analysis decisions were corroborated with JH. This included sharing what prompted the codes to be named or clustered in certain ways, new directions for themes, notes on interviews, analysis, and member checks.

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Coding followed the streamlined codes-to-theory model by Saldaña (2021) and resulted in 97 codes of post-exit stressors. One practitioner and clinician who provided feedback during the first round of coding was especially helpful in clarifying some of the terms used for coding and verifying categories. Several formers elaborated on the stressors from the first two rounds of coding. The final set of codes were applied to a blank set of all the interviews.

This paper focuses on the topic summary of post-exit distress, rather than the seven themes which were also developed during analysis. In reflexive thematic analysis, topic summaries report what was said about a certain topic (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This overview serves as an introduction to post-exit distress and the thematic findings will be reported in a subsequent paper.

Results

By focusing primarily on distress, this study was able to unearth many more stressors than previous studies. The 97 codes of stressors derived from the data (see Appendix A), were grouped into 12 categories. The 12 categories were further clustered into four topic overviews (further referred to as dimensions) of post-exit distress: Daily Life & Social, Psychological & Physical Well-being, Safety & Consequences, and Transition & Identity. This categorization aids in the organization of stressors. However, it must be noted that stressors are interrelated and the occurrence of a stressor in one category or dimension, might influence the occurrence or strength of stressors in others.

Table 1. The 4 Dimensions of Post-exit Distress

Codes →	Categories →	**Dimensions**
(See Appendix A)	Daily Life Relationships Social Interaction	**Daily Life & Social**

	Mental Health Physical Health Emotions	**Psychological & Physical Well-being**
	Safety Legal Public Image	**Safety & Consequences**
	Transition Identity Worldview	**Transition & Identity**

Dimension 1: Daily Life & Social

This dimension includes stressors regarding daily life (e.g., housing or income instability); navigating relationships (e.g., family, partner, co-workers); and social interaction (e.g., lack of communication and social skills).

Daily Life

Daily life stressors are best described as those affecting daily routines on a practical level and include financial insecurity, difficulty finding or keeping a job, lack of education, housing insecurity, and lack of access to healthcare or missing legal documents. Instability in this dimension may hinder other areas of reintegration.

Financial. Participants repeatedly mentioned their neglect of financial planning during involvement. Former Timothy explained, “I didn't care about financial stuff. It was, you know, we had been waiting for the race war to start and the end of the world to happen and expecting it to happen any day. So, like, why have a 401k?”[3] Former Kate discussed that her group fostered financial dependency by women on men, preventing her from saving up for the future and hindering disengagement. She said that being “financially and domestically reliant

[3] A 401k is a popular category of retirement plan available in the United States.

on another person" and "extricating myself from extremism and extricating myself from my romantic relationship [...] meant a huge loss of financial security."

Career. The majority of interviewees reported not working outside of the group during involvement or not holding meaningful jobs. Former Danielle described working primarily to support her partner in the movement, an arrangement that was at odds with the ideology: "I was the one working 60 hours a week, and he was living off of it, so that he could go on these fucking podcasts telling people that women shouldn't have jobs."

Gaining employment post-exit is often made more difficult by a criminal past. If formers get a job, issues such as lack of social skills, difficulty with authority figures, substance abuse, mental health issues, or ongoing paranoia can make it hard to remain employed. A couple of interviewees reported working with family members or in minimum wage positions where expectations were lower.

Education. Many violent extremists are discouraged from pursuing education (Latif et al., 2020). Several formers interviewed mourned not pursuing an education and therefore having fewer skills qualifying them for employment. Former Mark regretted that "had I not been part of it, I may have realized that I needed to re-enroll in college a lot sooner. I may have taken my education a bit more seriously." While he was able to start college after he left, for others that time had passed.

Housing. Most of the formers interviewed experienced housing instability after disengagement. For one female participant, housing insecurity led to the threat of sexual assault while couch-surfing. Relying on family members for housing or support, while usually helpful, may also lead to pressure to recover or share about involvement before being ready. Disengaging from violent extremism requires the person to make a series of life-altering choices. In many cases, solving one problem creates another.

Relationships

Formers and practitioners disclosed stressors formers might experience such as difficulties with romantic relationships, familial relationships, and coworkers, as well as fellow former or current violent extremists.

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Relationships Prior to Involvement. As they became more involved in violent extremism, formers distanced themselves from parents, siblings, childhood friends, and others who had been meaningful in their life. Former Mark expressed that "to this day, I haven't repaired any old relationships. They're dead and gone." Former Lara said, "no one waits for you." Only one participant disclosed that her childhood friends expressed relief at having her back and were willing to start over.

Relationships Formed During Involvement. Most formers were unable to salvage relationships they formed within the group after they left. Even for formers who started a family during involvement, the relationship was usually tied to a shared worldview. Unless the family disengaged together, this created problems. Former Timothy, who had children during involvement because he felt compelled to procreate to "save" his race, described losing access to his children when he divorced and left the movement. It remains a point of grief for him to this day.

Relationships Post-Exit. Several formers discussed difficulties with close relationships after exiting. Many experienced betrayal trauma (Freyd, 1994), which they described as a violation of trust and perpetration of violence by people close to them during involvement. Betrayal trauma is especially detrimental as it can negatively impact future relationships (Freyd, 1994; Owen et al., 2012). Former Danielle expressed, "the second you tried to go past that surface level, I would have panic attacks, or I'd push you away, or I'd find a problem."

Several participants reported that the first relationship(s) after exit were stressful or even abusive. Two female participants conveyed that during involvement they got used to gendered power dynamics and a subservient role. This made them vulnerable to abuse post-exit as they didn't see the warning signs or abusive behavior felt familiar.

One of the male participants talked about how ashamed his new wife was of his past and how that turned into resentment against him. Several female and male participants disclosed that the fear of being alone with themselves drove them to engage in casual sex or intense relationships before they were ready. Former Kate expressed confusion over wanting closeness and validation but going about it the wrong way:

> I would engage in just like absolutely meaningless sexual relationships with no romantic intent [...] I felt like I have wasted so much time, and that I was no longer valuable to anyone. And ironically, I went and wasted more time in a way that made me not valuable to anyone.

Isolation. The majority of formers decided to shut themselves away during the first year or two. This was due to fear of retaliation, but also negative initial experiences when trying to socialize, leading to dual isolation from both former group and mainstream. A couple of interviewees expressed that addressing what led to involvement and understanding themselves better, made them feel more comfortable engaging in new relationships and made them feel less isolated.

Social Interaction

Formers and practitioners mentioned that post-exit, formers may have a deficit in social, communication, and conflict resolution skills. Defensiveness and distrust further contributed to alienating people. Several formers reported struggling to form social contacts after exit, despite having had no issues making friends before involvement.

Communication. Several formers described losing their patience and propensity for small talk and polite conversation during involvement. Formers and practitioners alike agreed that communicating and interacting in non-violent and constructive ways had to be relearned. Some formers discovered that even their non-verbal communication could be a barrier to forming new relationships. Former Simon, discussed having “resting war face” which was, “not the best place to start when you're supposed to establish a new social circle.” Another former mentioned tattoo removal or dressing differently to signal a change away from violent extremism.

Behavior. Formers also relayed how living in an environment that promoted violence normalized antisocial behavior. For example, Former Doug said he had to relearn how to behave in socially acceptable ways in a reintegration camp and still relies on his wife to tell him when he falls back into old patterns. Having alienated themselves from the rest of the

world during involvement, formers mentioned not understanding others' feelings or viewpoints early after exit. Former Felix admitted to not knowing how to handle other people’s strong emotions and laughing at inappropriate times.

Worldview/Ideology. Practitioner Neil described the conditioning of involvement as being trained in “a way of thinking, responding” and automatically reacting. He said this could build on pre-existing biases or not. Practitioner Greg referred to a lingering worldview as the framework through which a former interprets everything. Several formers described that it took them months or years to step away from radical thinking and the propaganda they internalized during involvement. This has the potential to lead to what has been characterized as “ideological relapses” into previously held beliefs and possibly even re-engagement (Bubolz & Simi, 2015, p. 1600).

Former Danielle gave an example of how propaganda can slip into everyday conversations, leading to further alienation:

> I'm so embarrassed by it now. But like, I would talk to friends. And I'm like, "Look, I know the Holocaust happened. But was it really 6 million people?" And they just looked at me, they were like, "Danielle, the Holocaust is the most studied event in human history. Like, if someone is the person who finds out that it wasn't what we all thought it was, they're gonna be a kajillionaire." But it was just one of those like, you're completely out of touch with the world. And that was really hard.

Distrust. All formers reported being highly distrusting of others post-exit, making it harder for them to form new relationships. Former Joel disclosed that “relationships were a part of the reasons why I joined this group in the first instance,” making him wary of being close to anyone post-exit. Similarly, Former Felix described his brain being “fixed on mistrust,” assuming the worst from people and having to make a conscious choice to act against it. Practitioner Jillian stated that, “there's this kind of automatic in-grouping and out-grouping that still goes on, constantly being vigilant for people being a threat to them, not knowing who to trust,” sometimes even for people who had disengaged and deradicalized for 20-plus years.

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Defensiveness. Participants also talked about formers generally being defensive and "hyper-sensitive" to rejection, perceived or real. Former Danielle shared, "when I first left, I didn't feel embarrassed. I felt very victimized, and I also felt like I really needed to defend myself [...] I was so raw in my pain and in my like, fog of uncertainty and fear." This was heightened if formers experienced prosecution in their social circles or someone attacking their ideology before they had deradicalized. Several also described an underlying sense of shame for having joined in the first place, having been involved for as long as they did, or struggling with life post-exit.

Boundaries. The formers interviewed shared that their boundaries were violated to varying degrees during involvement. They accepted these violations at the time as being part of a hierarchical group structure or culture. Male and female participants expressed that in some cases this led to porous boundaries post-exit which opened them up to controlling or abusive situations and relationships. In addition, practitioners mentioned that formers may inadvertently cross others' boundaries in personal and professional life.

Impulsivity. Involvement may lead to fast-life strategies, which might persist post-exit (Del Giudice, 2014; Koehler, 2020). This was confirmed by several participants who expressed being at times highly reactionary. Practitioner Jillian said that for some formers she works with "there is no pause before they react," and many are "compulsive, and impulsive." Post-exit this behavior may set back their reintegration process.

Dimension 2: Psychological & Physical Well-being

This dimension includes stressors regarding mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD); physical health (e.g. dysregulated eating and sleeping, disability); and overwhelming emotions (e.g., shame, anger, grief).

Mental health

Formers and practitioners described how traumatic experiences during involvement and disengagement can negatively affect mental health. Specifically, interviewees mentioned

that formers might experience anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, self-harming, suicidality, trauma, PTSD, and feeling "wired" — ready for fight or flight post-exit.

Pre-existing Stressors and Trauma. Several formers spoke about their family and upbringing, mentioning physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and other issues that led to mistrust and other long-term consequences. Indeed, one study found that those who joined violent extremism were four times more likely than the general U.S. population to have experienced at least four adverse events during childhood (Windisch et al., 2022). For example, one former called her family "racists" and a "cult." Another spoke about being molested as a child and neglected by his family. He said this made him vulnerable to radicalization. Only after exit did he realize the weight and influence the abuse had on him.

Exposure During Involvement. The majority of the formers interviewed described intensely distressing experiences, such as rape, domestic violence, psychological abuse, seeing friends die, physical injuries, life-threatening situations, fear of being caught by the authorities, and the emotional toll of perpetrating violence or killing.

A few also spoke about what the prolonged exposure to hate and violence did to their psychological well-being. For one, constant exposure to violence normalized it. Former Felix described feeling mortal threat as a 12-year-old when pursued by police and police dogs, as well as having a gun held to his head (which in turn instilled a need to escalate violence further.) He also talked about people around him dying and thinking, "well, people die. They always have. It's normal."

Exposure During Exit. The exit process can be stressful or even traumatic if there are continued threats of retaliation, ongoing legal issues, housing insecurity, or a cognitive reckoning and struggle with one's identity. Several formers reported being threatened, beaten up, and hunted down by former comrades and living in constant fear for the first months or year post-exit.

Trauma Responses. Formers and practitioners mentioned trauma responses they experienced or observed, such as emotional dysregulation, flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. For example, Former Doug said he had nightmares about the things he had done in the group, such as killing people as part of an anti-state militia. Others described

experiencing nightmares, dissociation, hypervigilance, or being triggered and having flashbacks to this day.

There was agreement among practitioners that some form of prolonged distress or PTSD is the norm. Practitioner Neil followed up by saying it would be unexpected for formers to "brush off a bit of dust, and [...] just move on."

Self-harm and Suicidality. Self-harm and suicidality were described by over half the formers interviewed. Some of those feelings resulted from feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, or directing the anger that was previously directed at an out-group at themselves. Former Danielle recounted "feeling like I wasted my life, I wasted my time." She reported being unable to forgive herself and becoming suicidal as a result. The idea that one needed to feel remorse and pain post-exit also came up with Former Simon, who said that "you almost start to target yourself." He remembered telling himself, "You're not good enough. You're a piece of shit [...] that's all you are."

Overwhelmingly, participants brought up the necessity for formers to take responsibility for their past and current actions and feel adequate guilt. However, several participants reflected that while guilt is an appropriate reaction, excessive shame can impede recovery. Indeed, moral injury, which will be discussed later, can "impair the capacity for trust and elevate despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence" (Shay, 2014, p. 182).

Practitioners confirmed seeing occurrences of self-harm or suicidality in the majority of former extremists seeking help. Practitioner Fiona specifically mentioned an increase of suicidality in their clients in recent years, connected with increased feelings of guilt and shame for the entire movement.

Physical health

Participants mentioned disability, illness, and injury resulting from involvement, as well as chronic physical tension or pain, irregular sleeping or eating, substance abuse, and sexual and reproductive issues. Several participants had visible scars and aches from involvement or retaliation during exit. One interviewee has a limp to this day, while another has reduced lung capacity because of cold and wet conditions in their camp coupled with

insufficient medical care. A male participant spoke about sexual dysfunction as being a current stressor. A female participant spoke of reproductive issues resulting from not going to the hospital during an emergency. Another participant, Kate, turned to the other former in her focus group and asked:

> I don't know if dudes are like, as concerned with the, uh, inevitable march of time as women are, but I was also like, "I wasted so much time, I'm not getting any younger, I have to reconstruct an entire identity and hope [...] that I can meet somebody and like start a family and have kids and do all of this with somebody who will accept that this used to be a part of my life, and is always gonna be a part of my life because I can't, I can't rewrite it.

Emotions

Participants expressed that formers may experience a wide range of confusing and intense emotions post-exit. Specifically, they talked about self-loathing, embarrassment, shame, guilt, remorse, low self-esteem, hopelessness, loneliness, fear, anxiety, grief, loss, sadness, resentment, and anger. In addition, feelings of uncertainty and confusion permeated the entire transition out of violent extremism.

Inner turmoil. Former Arif described exiting as turmoil and said that "it's not a psychologically silent process." He summed it up as, "lots of emotions, none of them good," to which Former Kate interjected, "'I mean, can I just copy and paste that? Like, (chuckles) it's a mix of emotions, all bad." She continued, "the only remotely good feeling I had was like, a sense of relief," but said that it was negated by self-doubt and feeling overwhelmed by the mechanics of survival. She remembers thinking, "I have nothing anymore." Indeed, the consequences following exit, can trigger "a spiral of self-reflection and self-condemnation" (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p. 212).

Loss and Grief. The loss of a support network and a fixed social group was difficult for all formers post-exit. Former Doug said, "the one thing that I miss maybe was the, the unity they were having, and also the, the kind of support, they were giving someone." In addition, participants expressed significant grief for the person they might have been had they

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not become radicalized. Most went through a phase of reckoning post-exit, where they struggled with how involvement had changed their trajectory in life and who they are now.

Loneliness. Loneliness was among the biggest stressors mentioned early post-exit. Former Lara expressed that after exit, “I don't talk to anyone. Definitely I felt depressed ‘cause it's not so easy being alone [...] I felt like no one wanted me.” Even Former Danielle, who had feared for her life, said the loneliness was the most devastating. She contemplated, “The biggest stressor was not having someone else who really got it. [...] we can go through truly heinous things and come out, okay, if there's, if we don't have to do it alone.”

Fear and anxiety. Fear and anxiety were mentioned by every former during the interviews. They talked about their emotional responses to threats (e.g., fear, hypervigilance, paranoia) and how this affected their mental health. On top of this, several described that their group had fostered a fear of the outside world, which led to persistent anxiety following disengagement.

Anger. Extremist movements can channel pre-existing anger stemming from adverse childhood experiences, making the movement “an extension of maladaptive coping rather than an origination” (Windisch et al., 2022, p. 14). Participants expressed that formers may have an inability to feel or deal with their emotions, such as anger. This can have a negative effect on post-exit relationships. A few formers explained that hate and anger were cultivated during involvement and turned outward against a common enemy. Indeed, socialization in extremist movements, especially for children and adolescents, often involves the deliberate creation of trauma and toxic stress (Koehler, 2020). Former Felix disclosed that when he was a teenager, the group validated and directed his anger. In order to deal with his emotional pain, his go-to option became hurting others, with the rationale that “if others suffer, my suffering makes sense.” Former Doug stated that after exit he still found himself being disproportionately angry at people over the smallest things. Practitioner Neil shared that sometimes formers even turn their anger against their family.

Limited emotional range. Formers also described experiencing a limited emotional range (sometimes referred to as emotional blunting) early post-exit or even long-term. Two expressed only being able to distinguish between happy and angry, but not much in-between.

Another mentioned experiencing extreme highs and lows. Former Danielle recalled, "I had moments of completely unhinged euphoria of just being happy to be out," which were then followed by depression and presented as a rapid cycle of emotional dysregulation. Another response was numbing, either due to trauma or feeling completely overwhelmed. At least for a period of time, the majority of formers interviewed attempted to shut off all emotions or drown them out via substances.

Dimension 3: Safety & Consequences

This overview deals with stressors regarding safety (e.g., threats of retaliation); public image (e.g., doxing, media requests); and the legal system (e.g., probation, legal fines).

Safety

A major concern formers faced immediately upon exit was safety. Formers disclosed hostility, threats, and assault from their group and having to figure out how to safely remove themselves from the group and sometimes abusive relationships therein. Fear of physical safety came up for every former interviewed except for one, who was only involved online and was more concerned about damage to his reputation and future.

Extricating Oneself Safely. Participants expressed that extricating oneself safely from a violent extremist group is challenging. It is a delicate balance between wanting, or needing, to cut ties with the group while having to do so in a way that prevents an escalation of violence. The dynamics are not dissimilar to those experienced by people who try to leave domestic violence. Former Arif described asking himself, "Do I just not answer their phone calls anymore? Do I just lie to them and tell them 'Well, I'm busy?'" In two cases, female formers mentioned having to remove themselves not just from the group but also from interpersonal violence.

Threats. Formers spoke about specific threats of retaliation that illustrate the validity of their post-exit safety concerns. Former Arif was told, "You're an apostate, upon whom death is permitted." Former Danielle described that members of the group specifically told her

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that "they are everywhere, they will find me, they will break my legs, rape me and murder me."

Typically, the extent and severity of threats subsides over time, as Practitioner Neil explained, "so you leave a group it's usually very tense [...] but after a while, the movement moves on."

Keeping Safe. Practical responses to threats ranged from monitoring the group, keeping the peace with former comrades (e.g., by keeping their secrets) to going into hiding (e.g., immediate relocation, changing phone number or place of employment), and other measures of safeguarding. One participant pretended to have "dirt" on the group that would be released if they retaliated. Another has an ongoing agreement with the group not to speak to law enforcement. Former Danielle took extra precautions by leaving a vehicle unregistered and avoiding signing a lease. Others isolated themselves by avoiding going out in public. Responding to threats, harassment, and doxing is emotionally exhausting and time-consuming.

Paranoia. Former Simon expressed how this turned into paranoia, "'there was like the constant watching over your shoulder, like, 'who's that out there in the yard?' Like 'who's driving by so slow?'" The experience of feeling followed and under threat led to further isolation. Practitioner Tanja explained how this kind of caution can turn into a habit, such as former combatants checking their cars for bombs daily, even years later.

Legal Consequences

Legal consequences following involvement include incarceration, probation, legal fees, fines, custody issues, and lawsuits. Dealing with divorce, separation, custody, and child support can be taxing. Practitioners mentioned that legal fines resulting from involvement add to the financial burden and, conversely, having a criminal background makes it even harder to achieve financial stability. In addition, formers who were asked by law enforcement to cooperate on a case regarding their former group found this tough to navigate.

Public Image

Another list of stressors was clustered into the category “public image,” as they relate to outward-facing issues. Formers might face involuntary exposure in their small social circle and doxing (involuntary public exposure). Former Danielle shared an instance where her rejection of a date inquiry led to a man researching her and getting her fired from two jobs. Anticipating exposure or to mitigate fallout, formers might disclose their past. For example, Practitioner Neil reported that formers might attempt to remove their digital footprint (e.g., extremist online posting history) — not an easy feat.

When formers decide to go public, this can easily lead to media requests, which participants described as not only stressful, but potentially exploitative. Others decided to do awareness and prevention work (e.g., speaking engagements, working as a peer supporter), which involves retelling their past. This was predominantly described as rewarding, but stressful when the exit organization didn’t have firm boundaries to protect the former, or in the rare case that there was negative public backlash. Several expressed feeling “forever marked” by their past, or like they were faking being a part of “normal” society.

Stigma. Formers recounted experiences of stigma from family, spouses, and their community. Former Felix, who became radicalized as a preteen, said family members seemingly wanted him to fail in his recovery process and stay “the black sheep” of the family so they did not have to address their own issues. In addition, he conveyed his distress when someone told him that they could see in his eyes that he was still a radical, to which he responded, “I can't poke out my eyes.”

The past becoming known can have direct consequences on income and living arrangements. Former Lara said that after talking with her landlord, “word got out” and she didn’t feel that she could stay in the neighborhood any longer. Former Mark contemplated that he and others were a group of “snotty kids” who were in over their heads and pretending to be white nationalists. He said, “I've kind of figured out my path forward, for the most part. But a lot of these other kids, they're done.” He gave examples of how doxing has affected people he knows, who were only involved on the periphery, and lamented that there is no handbook for how they are supposed to publicly repent.

Indeed, former extremists may keep their past hidden for fear of stigma or ostracization (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020) which in turn leads to isolation. Former Timothy said most people don't understand what it's like to be a convict, much less having been a member of an extremist group, and that he didn't share his background often because it "would be horrifying to your most average people."

Dimension 4: Transition & Identity

This overview relates to stressors regarding transition and reintegration. This may include grappling with one's past and current identity and questioning one's worldview. Formers may go through a variety of abstract processes when it comes to identity, ideology, and worldview, making these harder to conceptualize than other categories of stressors.

Transition

Formers and practitioners alike spoke about how taxing the transition out of extremism can be, particularly the speed and vastness of external and internal change, other people's and one's own expectations, having to catch up, questioning whether leaving was the right choice, and barriers from society (e.g., stigma or practical barriers).

Speed of Change. Every former interviewed reported feeling unprepared and overwhelmed at some point in their transition. Practitioner Neil discussed the sheer expanse of questions to be answered and life-altering decisions to be made. For some formers, the process might feel too slow, and there might be an eagerness to skip critical steps, such as confronting hard questions and feelings. Others might experience a rapid increase in self-awareness and "a-ha moments," learning and testing new behaviors and ways of living, which can feel too fast. In addition, several interviewees reminisced that expectations put on them by society exceeded their capacity to change, especially during the first years. This resonates with Bubolz & Simi (2015) who found that in their sample, many formers feared "being unable to change" and that struggling to break away from previous "ways of thinking" made it harder to reintegrate (p. 1600).

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Pressure. Former Simon expressed his frustration about pressure by community and loved ones to recover quickly. He said, “people don't realize that when you're becoming an extremist, or you're channelling your energy into that sort of ideology and coping tool, there's a lot of process that happens before.” He said it’s not like “I just woke up one day and was, like, wearing a Nazi flag.” When reflecting on the reversals of radicalization he wondered why people seem to expect change to happen overnight. He concluded, “with the internal shit that goes on with you mentally, emotionally, physically, it's like, it's a lot.”

Practitioner Neil conveyed that people in the community might be watching for signs of recidivism. He said that it would be helpful for formers to have “a space to simply just exist and to figure out yourself [...] and not having to be attacked.” Several formers interviewed also expressed putting a lot of pressure on themselves to distance themselves from their past and catch up with others, whose lives had not been derailed by involvement in extremism.

Barriers. Practitioner Fiona said one barrier can be “not really wanting those changes to happen or not being ready for those changes.” In addition, several formers and one practitioner mentioned that therapists may not understand this process or may be unwilling to work with this population. Depending on the country interviewees were from, there might not be any help available outside of family and faith-based institutions.

Identity

During involvement, members carefully craft an identity based on group prototypes, norms, practices, and expectations (Moran & Sussman, 2014; Smith & Hogg, 2008). As such, involvement in a violent extremist movement changes how individuals think and act, and can have far-reaching consequences (Latif et al., 2020). Barrelle (2015) found that 61% of formers indicated that their “sense of self was almost totally merged with the group” (p. 131). Unmerging one’s sense of self from the group requires restructuring of the self and can be detrimental to psychological well-being (Ferguson & McAuley, 2021; Swann Jr. et al., 2012). A lack of purpose was also mentioned by several participants. Similarly, one study found that post-exit, former extremists may experience a six times higher sense of insignificance than before involvement (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

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Former Lara spoke of not having a strong sense of self and Former Arif remembers asking, “I've invested all this time and energy and, you know, into an identity formation into that, into belonging to that group. What happens now?” Former Danielle said that the transition out of extremism “was devastating” and upon leaving she did not know who she was anymore and had to reevaluate her identity. Practitioner Jillian said that former members with whom she worked would ask themselves: “What do I believe? Who am I? Where do I belong?” She said that, during involvement, the ideology told them who they are and post-exit they often did not even know where to start looking for answers to these questions.

One participant specifically mentioned how his identity as a father helped him shift away from his identity as an extremist, which is reflected in the literature (see Morrison et. al, 2021). However, another interviewee, Former Simon, explained that it was still confusing at first to know who he was:

> I was a baseball player for the school. I was a I was a track runner for the school. Get out of school, join the army. Well, I'm not Simon no more. I'm Private Simon. I'm Sergeant Simon. I'm a soldier. I, I'm a soldier. That's who I am. I get out of the military, I transition into extremism. I'm not Simon, I'm a Klansman. I'm a, I'm a KKK leader. So now when I transition out of there, like, okay, I went to, who am I? Yeah, I'm "Dad," I'm "husband," but like, what the fuck is that? You know, like, what do I, what do I do with that information? Right? Where's the book on that? How do I be that?

Moral Injury. It can be agonizing for formers to reconcile who they were before joining violent extremism with the hateful things they said, did, and condoned during involvement. These issues align with the moral injury model which describes how perpetrating or failing to prevent ”acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectation” can damage our belief that we and others are good and trustworthy, leading to psychological, social, and spiritual problems (Litz et al., 2009, p. 695; 2022). Nearly every former interviewed acknowledged grappling with past choices and asking themselves “how could I have done those things?” This often led to identity crises. In addition, practitioners and

formers said formers might not trust themselves to make good choices now, after having been misled, betrayed, exploited, or having been too young or naive to know any better.

Self-exploration. Several interviewees discussed how certain foods, drugs, or drinks, intercourse with people of a different race, homosexuality, or women leadership, were taboo or even forbidden during involvement. Several expressed trying on different personas and experimenting post-exit to see what felt right to them. Two participants compared it to being a teenager. Former Felix expressed that most people get to explore as adolescents "how they think, how they talk, what they like to wear, the music they listen to, what they stand for, what they're against, who they wanna vote for." He said, "I skipped that fucking step and went straight to adulthood. [...] So, like, here I am at [age removed] years old, and doing shit, that like 18, 17-year-old kids are doing."

Worldview and Ideology

Participants conveyed that it can be deeply unsettling to leave one's entire social circle and worldview behind. Former Kate disclosed, "I spent a long time wondering who I was [...] I feel like my whole worldview was shaken." Practitioner Greg referred to a lingering worldview as the framework formers interpret everything through. For example, he said that even post-exit, a former might watch the news and think, "another example of why the West is at war with Islam." He followed up with, "it's probably hard to get out of that if that kind of neural pathway is so entrenched."

Practitioner Fiona followed his statement with: "I would definitely agree with that. I think if you've subscribed to a very black-and-white view of things for a very long time. And then you're kind of attempting to learn the gray, that can be confusing, right?"

Formers and practitioners mentioned that ingrained thought processes and views that contributed to an ideology take a long time to change. Examples they mentioned were biases, stereotyping, out-grouping, seeing others as inferior, a sense of elitism, all-or-nothing and us-vs-them thinking, as well as sexism, racism, and homophobia. In some cases, formers interviewed reported that these patterns, while strengthened during involvement, had built on pre-existing biases. This is in line with Latif et al. (2020) who state, "People may hold

negative attitudes toward nonwhites or immigrants before they discover organized white supremacism, but such views are intensified and pushed toward action when they become involved with racial extremist groups." (p. 369).

Interviewees expressed that deradicalization required reevaluating past views (e.g., identifying the group's ideology as harmful), questioning current ones, letting go of "ultimate truths," learning to live with uncertainty, and recognizing that they could craft their own views and change them as they saw fit.

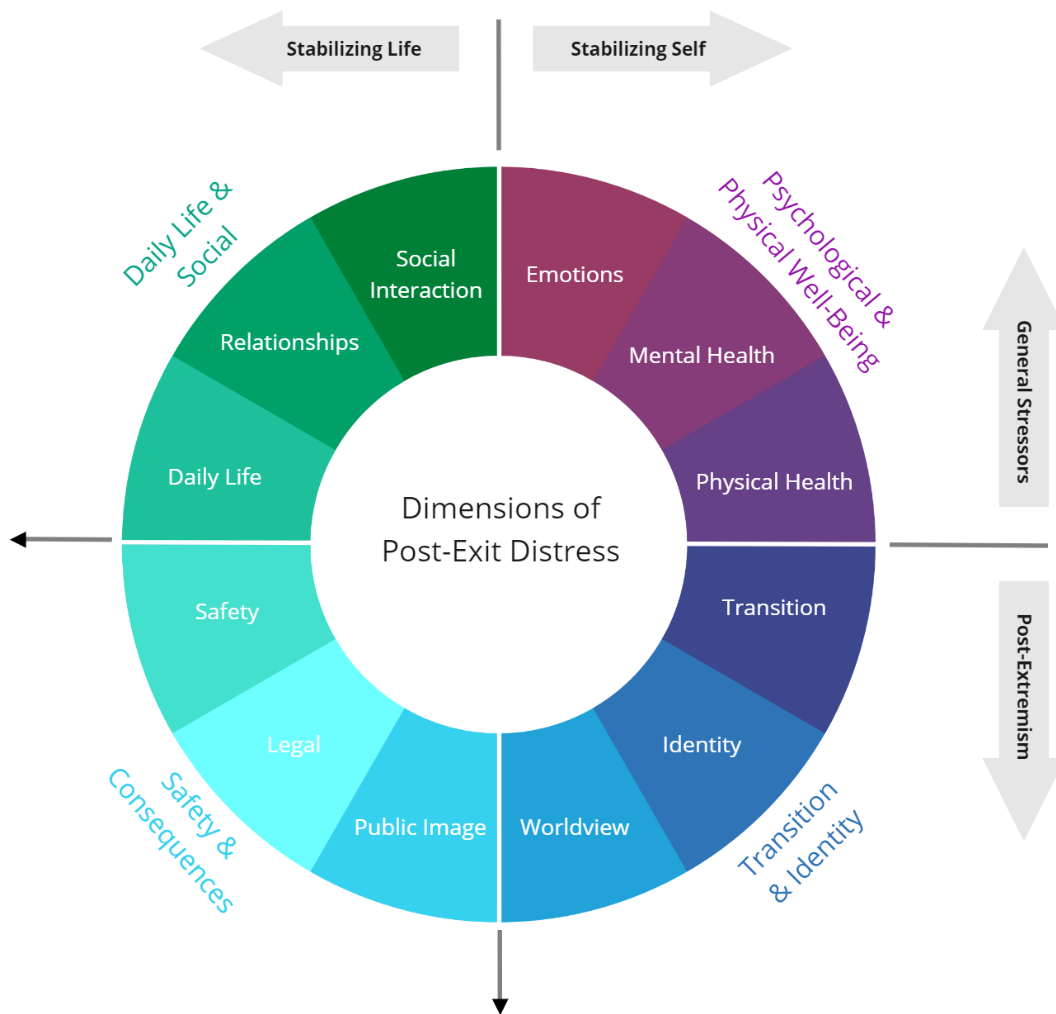
Post-Exit Distress Framework

The stressors that emerged during the focus groups and interviews led to the development of a framework of post-exit distress. While stressors can be clustered in a variety of ways, the four dimensions discussed were developed with practical application in mind.

Pending the development of a validated post-exit distress screening tool, practitioners seeking to help formers in their reintegration efforts may consider using the post-exit distress framework and corresponding codes (see Appendix A) developed during this study.[4] While the post-exit framework cannot be used as a diagnostic tool (nor is it intended to be one), it provides an overview of common post-exit stressors and can help practitioners explore these with clients.

[4] This is to compliment trauma-informed care and psychological support, an essential part of successful reintegration (Morrison et al., 2021). Specifically, psychological services can "support trauma processing, identity development, social skills training, and coping skill development with an emphasis on increasing cognitive flexibility, improving capacity for problem solving, and acquiring new skills to regulate strong emotions, including anger" (Ellis et al., 2023, p. 13).

Figure 1. Post-exit Distress Framework



<u>General Stressors (upper half of the framework)</u>

Stressors in the dimension of *Daily Life & Social* and *Psychological & Physical Well-being* are more likely to overlap with those experienced by the general population. This is supported by Cherney (2021) who says that for formers "social isolation, anti-social associates, limited education, drugs, alcohol, mental health, or poor family support," (p. 125) are similar to non-extremists' stressors. Practitioners in this study suggested that social workers and therapists are likely already very familiar with these stressors.

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Post-extremism Specific Stressors (lower half of the framework)

Stressors in the dimensions *Safety & Consequence*s and *Transition & Identity* are more salient to those disengaging from violent extremism. Formers are likely to experience a dual isolation from both former group and mainstream, fear of retaliation, guilt for past actions, and grappling with one's identity and worldview. Several interviewees indicated that helping professionals might be completely unfamiliar or only vaguely aware of these stressors. During a member check a clinical practitioner indicated that this might be the case because the topic of violent extremism is rarely (if ever) included in training or continued education.

Stabilizing Life (left half) versus Stabilizing Self (right half)

The left versus the right half of the vertical axis can be understood as an overview of stressors for more practical concerns ("Stabilizing Life") versus stressors regarding internal struggles ("Stabilizing Self"). Practitioners expressed that former members might first have to stabilize their life before being able to deal with internal stressors. Although debatably, treating crippling anxiety, depression, or physical illness would also need to be addressed quickly. Practitioner Jillian spoke about stress resulting from being pushed toward "ideology change before you're ready for ideology change," especially when there are basic needs that must be taken care of first.

Temporal Aspects of Post-exit Distress

Post-exit stressors might prevail for any length of time and seem to occur along two variables - frequency and magnitude. While an exact estimation is outside the scope of this study, the findings indicate that certain stressors occur more frequently and are more disruptive during the early post-exit phase.

Early Post-exit Phase

Immediately after disengagement, practical stressors, such as housing insecurity, financial instability, difficulty finding a job, safety concerns, difficulty knowing whom to trust or how to make friends, are abundant. Additionally, the first 1-2 years are typically dominated by emotional dysregulation and high internal chaos, such as feelings of loneliness, loss, hopelessness, self-doubt, exhaustion, anger, remorse, and anxiety. This resonated across the board, with Former Simon saying, “the first six months were hell. I mean, that's the best way to describe it was just an emotional and mental hell.”

Later Post-exit Phase

After the first two years or so, formers described getting more settled, building a pro-social network, utilizing new productive coping strategies, and stepping away from unproductive coping strategies (e.g., numbing with substances). As initial stressors abate, space opens up for the focus to shift to other stressors that might emerge or become more pronounced. Formers reported diving into questions around identity, purpose, reckoning with their past, and dealing with trauma. However, some behaviors or thought patterns may persist for years, unless addressed.

Discussion

This exploratory study sought to contribute to the field by identifying and analyzing post-exit stressors. Former extremists interviewed for this study relayed their own experiences of distress, which were complemented by practitioners’ accounts of their interaction with a multitude of clients. The inclusion of practitioners’ views expands the range of regions, movements, and ideologies that inform this data.

Former extremists remain a sub-population that is incredibly hard to reach. Participants expressed having friends who had also left the movement but had no interest in sharing their experiences. As such, the findings cannot represent the vast expanse of former extremists’ post-exit experiences. Instead, they provide conceptual generalizability and can be “exported” to comparable situations (Horsborough, 2003). Future studies on post-exit distress

that reduce barriers to participation, by considering, for instance, indirect (e.g. survey) methods of data collection may have more success in reaching this population.

Social desirability bias was another concern as interviewees might well be inclined to present themselves in a socially acceptable way (Bergen & Labonté, 2019). This is not only an obstacle for qualitative research in general, but also a criticism routinely leveled at formers engaged in prevention work. To account for concerns around self-report and desirability bias, KM adopted a deliberate strategy of recruiting participants from two distinct yet related populations. Findings were cross-checked between them and triangulated with existing studies. Reports of distress are undeniably subjective, but it should be noted that self-reporting is also the preferred method of measurement for physical pain (Birnie et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis, while well-suited for an exploratory study such as this, has both the advantage and disadvantage of being a flexible method, highlighting the "essential tension between flexibility on the one hand, and consistency and coherence on the other" (Holloway & Todres, 2003, p. 345). Transparency regarding codes, the process, and reflexivity were achieved via a codebook that was continually updated, as well as expansive note-taking (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) and regular communication with the second researcher. Additionally, the researchers set out to achieve validity by supporting claims with evidence from the data (Murphy et al., 1998).

The member checks, a strategy contributing to the credibility of the study (Lincoln, 1995) demonstrated the advantages of taking the findings back to the participants to receive feedback. Specifically, the member checks were able to address whether what participants shared and the researcher interpreted from that information aligned (Schwandt, 2001). Because of time restraints, only three formers and two practitioners were asked to provide feedback. Those were chosen based on their life and work experiences. These participants wanted to not only see the results of the analysis but asked many background questions about the study. As such 60 minutes were barely enough time for each member check, but it was inspiring to see such keen interest in the research.

The use of focus groups was beneficial for distinguishing between similar and differing perspectives (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The focus group where two formers attended

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(different ages, gender, ethnicity, and group ideology) indicated that there is incredible value to a real-time discussion about the similarities and differences of their experiences. A lesson learned is to reach out to former extremists who have signed up for focus groups and vet them before participating. This would allow the researcher to say with more certainty that everyone in the focus group has disengaged and put participants' minds at ease. Additionally, video should be disabled and participants should only be allowed to sign on to the focus group with a fake name or participant ID. Those two steps might result in a higher retention rate for focus group participants.

Enough shared stressors were described by participants to warrant a follow-up quantitative or mixed-methods study, necessary for establishing baseline data around frequency and magnitude, as well as for future comparisons with other groups. At a minimum, significant additional research will be necessary to see if the findings that emerged in this study are detected across a wider range of ideologies, personal attributes, styles, role types, length of involvement, countries with varying degrees of post-exit support, and more.

Conclusion

Long ignored, disengagement, deradicalization, and reintegration are all concepts and processes that now enjoy sustained research and evaluation. From a terrorism response perspective, it is crucial to address, and in turn, decrease, post-exit stressors to foster timely and lasting reintegration. There is no doubt that many practitioners currently working in the exit field are already well aware of these stressors and have a good understanding of the challenges they can pose to successful reintegration. Yet, for now, knowledge informed by empirical research on these issues is in its early stages. This gap must be redressed to better enable practitioners to address these issues with the confidence of having an underlying evidence base to inform, and challenge, what they do and how they do it. While previous studies have sporadically highlighted stressors following disengagement (e.g., Berube et al., 2019; Barrelle, 2015; Koehler, 2020; Simi et al., 2017; Corner & Gill, 2020), the overarching

objective of the study presented here is to call for an extensive exploration of post-exit distress.

The nearly one hundred stressors expressed by former violent extremists and practitioners paint a stark picture of post-exit distress, showing that it is not only wide ranging, but highly disruptive, sometimes even unmanageable. Post-exit stressors may stem from experiences prior to radicalization, involvement in violent extremism, disengagement, or the transition back to non-extremist life. In other words, some stressors are pre-existing, while others are the byproduct of disengagement and reintegration. There is indication that pre-involvement and involvement stressors may heighten post-exit distress, though this merits further exploration.

The results offer much to consider for theoretical and practical implications. Upon disengaging, the level or severity of distress does not immediately return to a baseline of pre-involvement for at least a year or two. If this finding is replicated in future studies, then interventions or support might be especially impactful if focused on the immediate short-term phase post-disengagement. Addressing any stressor (in whatever order is necessitated by the individual) will likely reduce distress in other areas. The findings indicate that stressors vary in frequency and magnitude and can profoundly hinder reintegration efforts. Flexibility in addressing them and responding to changes is recommended.

Much work remains to be done to gain a broader understanding of post-exit distress. To further this research, the authors will develop a survey of post-exit distress in order to reach more participants and contrast findings with a control and comparison group. The survey findings will help validate the stressors and serve as the foundation for a post-exit distress screener. It is the hope that an understanding of exit-specific stressors can also contribute to the knowledge base informing training for therapists, social workers, peer support specialists, probation officers, and others to better equip them in helping former violent extremists with reintegration and rehabilitation efforts.

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JOURNAL FOR DERADICALIZATION

Spring 2024
No. 38
ISSN: 2363-9849

Appendix

Appendix A: Codes for Post-exit Stressors

Daily Life & Social			Psychological & Physical Well-being		
Mental Health	**Emotions**	**Physical Health**	**Daily Life**	**Relationships**	**Social Interaction**
Anxiety	Anger at others	Chronic physical tension or pain	Financial insecurity	Coworkers and professionals	Confrontational, reactionary, no pause
Depression	Anger turned inward, self-loathing	Disability, illness, injury	Finding or keeping a job	Current or desired romantic relationships	Defensive (thinking others are out to get you)
Feeling wired, used to high stress levels, ready to fight	Embarrassment, shame	Irregular sleeping or eating	Food Insecurity	Fellow former extremists	Difficulty setting boundaries
Intrusive thoughts	Fear	Sexual, reproductive issues	Housing Insecurity	Issues with physical or emotional closeness	Difficulty understanding others' feelings or viewpoints
Neurodivergence, mental disorders	Grief, sadness	Substance abuse	Lack of access to healthcare	Making and keeping friends	Difficulty understanding, respecting others' boundaries
Self-harming	Guilt, remorse		Lack of education	Parenting, family planning	Lack of communication skills
Suicidality	Hopelessness			People who are still extremists	Lack of confidence in trusting the right people
Trauma, PTSD	Inappropriate emotions, extremes highs and lows			Relatives and family	Lack of conflict resolution skills
	Limited emotional response (either happy or angry)				Lack of social skills, missing social cues
	Loneliness				Overly sensitive to (perceived or real) rejection

	Low self-esteem				Tension with authority figures (e.g., boss)
	Resentment, bitterness				
	Uncertainty, confusion				

Safety & Consequences			**Transition & Identity**		
Safety	**Legal**	**Public Image**	**Adjusting / Transitioning**	**Identity**	**Worldview**
Dealing with societal prosecution and ostracization	Cooperating with law enforcement	Digital footprint, online posting history	Amount of wanted or unwanted change	Deciding whether to help others leave or not	Being judgmental, stereotyping
Emotional response to threats (e.g., fear, hypervigilance, paranoia)	Divorce, separation, custody, child support	Disclosing past intentionally	Barriers by society (e.g., stigma or practical barriers)	Grappling with past choices (actions taken, time wasted)	Holding rigid views, difficulty changing opinions
Experiences of hostility, threats, or assault by people who are still extremists	Fines, legal fees, lawsuits	Doxing and involuntary public exposure	Feeling removed from people, previous life, societal standards	How could I have done those things?	Negative outlook, all-or-nothing thinking
Isolating yourself because of concerns over physical or emotional safety	Incarceration, probation, legal record	Feel like you're faking being a normal member of society	Learning and testing new behaviors and ways of living	Identity crisis and confusion - who am I now?	Questioning current views, reevaluating past views
Monitoring group you left, keeping the peace		Involuntary exposure in one's social circle or environment	Missing intensity from being in the movement	Lack of trust in making good choices now	Seeing others as inferior, thinking you're "better than"
Moving or changing jobs because of threats		Media requests, writing a book, TV, etc.	No more distractions, sitting with your thoughts and feelings	Loss of belonging and social network, loneliness	Us-vs-them thinking, in-group vs. out-group
Safely removing yourself from abusive relationship within group		People continuing to identify you as former extremist, "forever marked"	People's expectations, pressure to change	Loss of purpose, meaning, and being important	Wanting "ultimate truths," struggling with uncertainty

Safely removing yourself from extremist group		Purposely keeping past hidden at times	Pressure to catch up, measuring yourself against other people	Trust issues, having been misled, betrayed, or exploited	
		Speaking engagements, awareness, and prevention work	Questioning whether leaving was the right choice		
		Stigma	Rapid increase in self-awareness and 'aha' moments		
		Tattoos	Speed of change being too fast or slow		
			Therapists or helping professionals denying services		
			Therapists or helping professionals not being helpful		
			Triggers (e.g., social issues, places, music)		

Spring 2024
No. 38
ISSN: 2363-9849

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The JD Journal for Deradicalization is the world's only peer reviewed periodical for the theory and practice of deradicalization with a wide international audience. Named an "essential journal of our times" (Cheryl LaGuardia, Harvard University) the JD's editorial board of expert advisors includes some of the most renowned scholars in the field of deradicalization studies, such as Prof. Dr. John G. Horgan (Georgia State University); Prof. Dr. Tore Bjørgo (Norwegian Police University College); Prof. Dr. Mark Dechesne (Leiden University); Prof. Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (American University Washington D.C.); Prof. Dr. Julie Chernov Hwang (Goucher College); Prof. Dr. Marco Lombardi, (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milano); Dr. Paul Jackson (University of Northampton); Professor Michael Freeden, (University of Nottingham); Professor Hamed El-Sa'id (Manchester Metropolitan University); Prof. Sadeq Rahimi (University of Saskatchewan, Harvard Medical School), Dr. Omar Ashour (University of Exeter), Prof. Neil Ferguson (Liverpool Hope University), Prof. Sarah Marsden (Lancaster University), Prof. Maura Conway (Dublin City University), Dr. Kurt Braddock (American University Washington D.C.), Dr. Michael J. Williams (The Science of P/CVE), Dr. Mary Beth Altier (New York University) and Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), Prof. Dr. Adrian Cherney (University of Queensland), Dr. Wesley S. McCann (RTI International), and Dr. Daren Fisher (Hampton University).

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ISSN: 2363-9849

Editor in Chief: Daniel Koehler