

Planting Seeds of Healing in Times of War: Insights from Trauma-Informed Crisis Communities

By Tricia Stringer

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Thirty Ukrainian pastors and church members sat in the hotel conference room in Poland. Some of them were happy to be there—happy to finally be out of the war zone their home had become. Others looked haggard and anxious, constantly looking at their phones for the next update on the war. Others looked guilty, as if they should be ashamed that they were sitting in a beautiful hotel instead of worrying that the next loud noise would destroy their home. My colleague and I stood before them, armed with our trauma-healing material, and backed by the prayers of our trauma-healing team and several churches. We knew that our Ukrainian brothers and sisters were hurting, and we knew that the pain was just beginning.

It was September of 2022, and the war in Ukraine had dragged on for months with no end in sight. Our ministry, Multiplying Hope, had been asked to run one of our trauma healing trainings with a group of Ukrainian refugees. Though we had worked with many survivors of trauma, we quickly realized that our normal healing-group structure would not meet the needs of people who had not only recently experienced trauma, but

also who would definitely experience it again. So, for the next four days, we walked alongside our Ukrainian brothers and sisters. We sat with them. We wept with them, and we just listened. Our Ukrainian friends learned how to listen to each other. They learned that what they were feeling was normal. They learned how to deeply engage with a Bible story and allow themselves to feel alongside the characters of the Bible. But perhaps most importantly, some of them formed a supportive community they would return to in the months ahead.

Over the past couple of years, as war and disaster have followed war and disaster, our trauma-healing ministry has faced new questions: What does it look like to walk alongside hurting people who are in the middle of war, and know that more hurt will come? How does walking alongside someone while war is still raging look different than more traditional trauma-healing paradigms that address the trauma *after* it happens?

The Ukrainian conflict is not unique. Among the least-reached communities among whom we often make disciples, war and conflict abound. It is imperative to address trauma in the communities to which we are called, bringing Jesus' light to every dark corner. While we do not have all the answers, our experiences may shed some light on best practices when supporting people in the midst of war. Our most significant learning was that people in ongoing crises need supportive communities. We will describe how we have structured these communities and discuss some of the best practices we use when facilitating such communities.

Creating Healing Communities in Crises

To begin with, it is important to establish that people in ongoing trauma do need trauma-informed coping skills. God created us so that our body, mind, emotions, and spirit can work together seamlessly. However, all of us have past experiences that create gaps in the way these parts of us work together, due both to the sin in our lives and the

simple fact that we live in a fallen world (Amy Butler and Megan Taylor, personal conversations with author, April 2020).¹ Trauma widens those already existing gaps between heart, soul, mind, and body to the point that our normal coping mechanisms are no longer sufficient. When we experience trauma or high stress, the logical and the emotional parts of our brain no longer communicate well with each other. While we will not explore the full details of the neuroscience of trauma in this article, we can say that trauma causes us to think and act in ways that seem irrational.² Over time, those thoughts and actions become ingrained in our lifestyle, working in similar ways to the way muscle memory works in our physical bodies. The longer we continue thinking and acting in these ways, the more difficult it is to reverse unhealthy patterns, even when we get to the place in our lives where we want to begin addressing our past trauma (Van Der Kolk 2015, 56–60).

Thus, trauma-informed coping skills can help people understand and endure on-going traumatic situations. In the September training, for example, we discovered that the Ukrainian pastors still found it helpful to learn basic information about trauma through Bible stories. During one of our activities, one of the pastors found himself sitting on the floor, acting out the story of Job. As he pretended to sit in ashes and scrape himself with pottery, the pastor found himself being offended when another actor, Job's "wife," told him to curse God and die. He found himself even more hurt when Job's "friends" accused him of causing his sorrow and pain by sinning. At that point in the activity, we stopped the action and asked each participant how their character felt. The pastor playing Job began weeping, and it took him a minute to answer. "This is exactly what some of my friends have said to me. They've told me that Ukraine's problems are caused by our pride." He felt hurt, embarrassed, ashamed,

1 GapRelief, <https://www.gaprelief.com/international>.

2 For further reading on this, see Van Der Kolk 2015, Oatley 1999, Siegel and Solomon 2003, Mar 2004, and Stephens 2010

and deeply betrayed by the people he had counted on to be with him in his hurt.

We asked the woman playing Job's wife how she felt. She said, "Those were my children too who died. I am so sad that I'm not thinking about the hurt I'm causing Job by what I'm saying." The man playing Job looked surprised. "I have never thought about that," he told her. "Different people respond to trauma differently. People don't always realize that when they are hurting, they hurt others too."

But while the pastors engaged with the story of Job, they could not act out or speak about the part in Job's story when Job's children died. That was too much. The subject hit too close to home. In response, we took that part out of the story. That part of the story remained unspoken, like the "elephant in the room" that no one wanted to touch. Telling personal narratives is key to identifying and working through our emotions in order to experience healing. However, as our Ukrainian brothers and sisters demonstrated, people living in war zones are not always able to talk about personal stories—or even to talk about stories that address experiences of violence and death that are too similar to their own. Forcing that kind of conversation too soon can cause a person to spiral into uncontrolled depression and shock.

This was one of our key findings over the past couple of years: there is an appropriate place and time to address past trauma. When someone experiences ongoing trauma, like war, it is not only inappropriate but also can be harmful to address that trauma while it is ongoing. It is a bit like being in a boat during a storm. The waves are crashing in, the boat is breaking up, and your body jumps into survival mode. Adrenaline sets in. You move at top speed to escape the boat, use something to float on, rescue everyone you can. The moment the boat breaks up is not the time for you to contemplate why you did not bring a life preserver, or to think about what you should have eaten for breakfast to give you more energy to move quickly in this moment. If you tried to think about those things, you would be distracted from the important work of staying alive.

Instead, you go into “survival mode.” You need to know other things, like how to survive in a storm on the open sea. In the same way, without being in a stable enough environment to feel safe, we cannot think clearly about past traumas or hurts. We need, instead, survival skills that allow us to experience our current trauma in a way that gets us to the other side of the current situation as unscathed as possible.

So, we should neither address trauma too soon nor wait too long before introducing trauma-informed tools to people in ongoing trauma. The key is to walk alongside each other from the very beginning, and to allow people in trauma to direct conversations and open up only when they are ready. In other words, the key is to build trauma-informed communities of support.

Renowned trauma counselor Judith Herman reminds us that “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others” (Herman 2015, 133). If this is true, then ensuring that our brothers and sisters remain in control of their own story and their own experiences, *while keeping connected with them in community*, is key. Diane Langberg, trauma counselor, says that those living with ongoing trauma need community even before they tell their individual stories. In fact, “ongoing connection and community” is one of “three things [which] are vital in the midst of trauma” (2015, ch.10, para. 34). The other two things, faith and purpose (which I will address later in this article), come after community has been established. Therefore, recovery involves a community, but not just any community—it requires a community that develops cohesion, intimacy, and generosity of compassion (Herman 2015, 215–216). In our setting, these ongoing communities take the form of weekly or biweekly meetings, either in person or via Zoom when necessary. These communities have become important because they have created safe and healthy environments in which people can talk about their personal stories *when* they are ready.

Judith Herman says that when groups have foundations of trust and acceptance,

a complex mirroring process comes into play. As each participant extends herself to others, she becomes more capable of receiving the gifts that others have to offer. The tolerance, compassion, and love she grants to others begin to rebound upon herself [this] occurs most powerfully in the context of a group. (ibid)

Perhaps in healing communities, new neural pathways are being formed as safe interactions occur again and again. This is our goal: to provide contexts in which daily—sometimes hourly—safe interactions occur again and again. Like muscle memory that physical exercise builds, these safe interactions build an “emotional memory” that may remain even after the war subsides. If nothing else, these safe interactions provide a community to which people can run even after the war when difficult things happen. We have seen this in a trauma-healing group in North Africa. Small healing groups met for a few months and then subsided as their immediate crisis subsided. However, when a new crisis happened, the group immediately contacted each other because they trusted each other, sought help from each other, and re-formed to walk alongside each other in this new situation. It is our prayer that this will happen again and again.

It takes time to create trusting and trustworthy communities in which deep healing can take place. And it takes time for a crisis itself to come to a place where the community participants are no longer in physical danger or acute emotional distress and can experience healing. But in the meantime, these ongoing communities function as places of survival, providing trauma-informed survival skills. These survival skills include activities like listening to current personal stories about what is happening that week, teaching and reviewing grounding activities such as deep breathing, and embodied interaction with biblical narratives that can bring hope in seemingly hopeless situations.

The Structure of a Crisis Community

As more and more people in war zones have reached out to our team for trauma-healing training, we have changed the way we train for ongoing crisis in order to create a paradigm that better serves people in these crises. Understanding the differences between our traditional healing groups and our crisis groups may help illuminate how best to walk alongside people in ongoing crises such as war.

First, we must understand the difference between trauma and crisis. Trauma refers to the lasting impact of a crisis or highly-stressful event on our lives. A crisis refers to a specific event or time period. Crises cause sudden intense emotional upheaval.

A traditional healing group systematically and intentionally works through past traumas as a community. An ongoing community during times of crisis—a crisis group—is slightly different because its goal is to create a community that will trust each other enough to someday, in the future, work through these past traumas as a traditional healing group. In fact, in times of war, people may not be ready for even a crisis group immediately. In these cases, we have individual conversations where we listen to people, cry with them, and maybe share a few small healing activities about how trauma affects our lives. These conversations can build important foundations of trust so that someone feels comfortable reaching out for more support later. In addition, these conversations may also provide someone with some immediate relief or simple trauma-informed coping tools.

Once a person is ready to meet with others, a crisis group looks similar to a traditional healing group in that its goal is to meet together as regularly as possible. However, crises demand flexibility and slightly different expectations. “Outside” group facilitators from areas not affected by the war are more likely to be useful in crisis groups. Although our goal in trauma healing is for local healing groups to develop and grow without the need for outside help, in a crisis there may be no one from a community

with the stability needed to facilitate the group. In addition, meetings may not occur on the same day each week, they may be shortened or interrupted due to lack of internet or security concerns, and meeting structures may change due to the immediate needs of the group.

Although both our traditional healing groups and crisis groups follow a similar meeting structure, a crisis group is more likely to need to adjust that structure to meet the needs of the group. Ideally, each meeting typically follows a three-part structure of 1) looking back, 2) looking up, and 3) looking forward. In the “Looking Back” section of the meeting, the group emphasizes and builds healthy community. The participants talk about their week and spend time listening to each other’s stories. In a crisis group, we only talk about what is happening in our stories right now rather than in the past. “How was your week?” and “How are you today?” are common questions during this time. People need to share immediate needs and process how to get through each day. Listeners do not give advice, judge the person, or try to solve their problems. Instead, listeners give space for the storyteller to share what is happening in their heart without interrupting them or trying to teach them how to deal with the situation.³

In the “Looking Up” section of the meeting, the group builds faith, which is the second thing that Langberg says is vital in community. The group does this when they engage with Scripture, usually in the form of narrative. Individuals in trauma engage more easily with narrative because narrative effectively helps the brain make sense of difficult sensory input, such as what happens in times of crisis or war (Oatley 1999, 110–112).⁴ However, the biblical narratives we engage with need to be appropriate for the situation, as we learned with our Ukrainian friends. Perhaps, as in the Job story, we need to take out difficult-to-hear parts

3 There may be times when practical information, such as where to find food or clothing, needs to be given by the listener. We are addressing emotions and emotional pain in this article.

4 And other references in the bibliography such as Heffernan, Scheff, and Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson.

of the story in ways that do not change the overall message of the story, or perhaps the stories we choose need to be overtly filled with hope. Often shorter stories work better because people living in the midst of highly stressful situations typically have shorter attention spans.

In this section of the meeting, our team pairs each Bible story with a healing exercise that deepens the engagement with the Scriptural truths found in the story. These healing exercises often become the “survival skills” that participants use throughout the week when life becomes overwhelming. Healing exercises may include activities like deep breathing, grounding exercises, meditating on the Bible story itself, drawing, singing, or lamenting. Whatever the exercise, it is important that they are simple, easy-to-do activities.

In the past two years, crisis group participants have said that meditation on a Bible story, deep breathing, and lamenting are their favorite activities because they are able to replicate those activities anywhere and at any time. Based on our conversations, lament seems to be key to many people’s emotional survival. In our activities of lament, people share their feelings honestly with God. They tell God what is happening, how they feel about it, and what they know and believe—or want to believe—about God. Even if they are not ready to tell God they believe he is good, they have the opportunity to confess to God that they know he is good, and that although they do not believe it at the moment, they would like to believe it. The freedom of being honest with God has been significant as participants develop a healthy and intimate relationship with God. This relationship will ultimately lead to healing of trauma, and it is this relationship that we desire to protect and cultivate in times of crisis.

Finally, in the “Looking Forward” section of the meeting, groups address the third thing vital in the midst of trauma—building purpose. In this section, we practice telling the week’s Bible story to each other. Although we encourage group members to share the story during the week, in crisis groups that encouragement is more subtle. Just the practice of saying the story aloud during the meeting, or repeating it to

themselves during the week, can be helpful. Narratives heard, and then re-told, powerfully affect our brain's ability to heal.

Of course, many challenges exist when building and structuring communities that effectively walk alongside each other in the midst of war. Interpersonal conflicts abound. Real, logistical issues abound as well: the Internet shuts off, electricity is cut, or people go on the move. Outsiders often must facilitate or run meetings because those in the midst of trauma may not have capacity to schedule or organize meetings. Immediate issues of safety, hunger, and deep depression can keep a group from meeting effectively. The session structure we have just described often devolves into just praying and crying. These are all normal cycles in a group's life, and that is completely acceptable. It is more important for a group to experience the love and time commitment of each other and a facilitator than a set plan that ignores the immediate pain the group is experiencing.

Best Practices in Crisis Communities

As we have run crisis groups, some common themes have emerged as facilitators (who are often not experiencing war themselves) walk alongside hurting people in the midst of war. The following are a few of the "best practices" facilitators have developed in the groups we have been forming and sustaining.⁵

1. People need to know that God is good and that he did not start the war.

They need to know that God does not allow evil to go unpunished. Bible stories of hope and victory are helpful. Stories that show that God understands us and will conquer evil in the end are important. Jesus' resurrection and second coming remind group participants of truth.

5 These best practices were largely compiled by the Multiplying Hope Latin America Director, Janice Utterback, who is currently walking alongside Ukrainian groups of women.

Many of them have never paid attention before to the victory they see in these stories. We have seen group participants weep with hope when they hear and retell how—when Jesus comes again—all evil, including death itself, will be thrown into the lake of fire. We have seen group participants weep with thankfulness and comfort when they hear and retell that even though Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, he wept when he saw everyone weeping—God himself cries with us. We may know that God is in control, but participants do not need to hear that in the midst of war—we have seen people become angrier when reminded that God has the power to stop violence. They need to know instead that God walks next to them in the midst of violence and pain.

2. Just as God weeps with people who are hurting, facilitators need to walk alongside and weep with our hurting friends.

We cannot fix or dismiss problems that we have no control over. The weeping and walking take time, and we must be patient. Remember Job's friends? They spent seven days just being present with Job, but then they messed it up when they tried to fix Job's problem, although they did not really understand it. As the friends' accusations continued, Job finally cried out, "If only someone would listen to me!" (Job 31:35 [NLT]) Job's cry echoes that of thousands who just want a place to lament and weep and friends to weep with them.

3. People need to know that God sees every person's journey and responds to each person individually.

Everyone walks through their journeys differently, and there is no right or wrong way to walk through their journey. When people see how someone else reacts differently in the same situation, they may be confused or worried that they are not acting in the same way. Facilitators need to know that their reactions are normal and acceptable, and they need to respond with grace. Facilitators also need to recognize that they

often have no idea what very basic and valid concerns people face every day. If the head of a household is not present, who makes the decisions they normally make? If someone's family member returns home safely, is it acceptable to celebrate when so many other people's family members have not come home? How is a mother or father supposed to feel when their son is conscripted into the army? These are emotions and situations many of us have never faced, and we cannot and should not impose our opinions on those facing these issues daily. Instead, we should employ simple tools that help groups normalize their emotions in group settings.⁶

4. People need to be seen as individuals, but they also need to know that they are not alone.

We have seen that people in war zones are extremely touched to know that people around the world are praying for them. They also need to know that people around the world understand the depth of their pain. One of the best ways for people to show that they understand the depth of pain is to call wars what they are: war. While we sometimes want to soften the blow and use less violent language when talking about war, it is not helpful to those experiencing war. When our friends in war-torn countries know that we are fully aware of the danger and crisis they face daily, they feel that we are truly walking alongside them.

5. People in trauma make bad decisions.

This is normal. The trauma and stress in a war, combined with family members away for long periods of time, can lead to bad decisions. These bad decisions often lead to crippling feelings of guilt that are often worse than anything else they have done. We are not the judge or the executor of justice. We are the listeners. We help people identify and name what is happening. War fatigue, loneliness, and fear are all real emotions that are difficult to live with.

6 For more information, please see Multiplying Hope's Healing Conversations training (www.multiplyinghope.org).

6. We need to remember that facilitators make mistakes.

It is important to have a basic level of training in trauma healing, but it is also important to remember that as we do our best, both the groups we facilitate and God have much grace for us when we read a room badly, or when we accidentally say the “wrong” thing. Training is important, but deep love and patience is more important. Basic training is necessary but fear alone should not keep us from walking alongside those who are hurting.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian group made it through that training in 2022, even though we were not sure how it would go. They listened to each other, they acted out Bible stories, and they cried together. Some of them are still meeting together. The fruit of that first training tells a story of hope, a hope founded in communities dedicated to walking alongside each other through sometimes unspeakable trauma. Churches and pastors have walked through God’s Word together. Soldiers have shared stories with each other on the front lines. Wives have cried together. Communities have lamented and prayed together. And Ukrainian church leaders are learning about trauma in a one-year course as they begin to pray through what it looks like to walk alongside hurting people in the years and decades to come.

We do not know what will happen next year. We still do not know how to perfectly walk alongside people in war. We only know that we are committed to walking alongside our hurting friends. However we choose to do it, to live in the present and walk alongside communities caught in the trauma of war is the precious responsibility of the entire church community. We cannot bring the healing ourselves, however. We cannot try to fix or heal at our own pace or in our own way. This is a journey of faith for us as well, as we trust that the Holy Spirit will bring healing, and we know that a trinitarian love and compassion embraces each meeting, each prayer together. And that is enough for now.

Questions for Conversation

1. What do you consider to be the greatest advantages of doing trauma healing in groups?
2. In addition to war, in what other kinds of crises could you use this approach?
3. What lessons did you learn that you can apply to your ministry as you walk alongside people suffering from trauma?

Further Reading

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Training Resources

- <https://www.multiplyinghope.org>

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