After They Leave: A Thematic Analysis of Post-Exit Distress and Coping in Former Violent Extremists

After They Leave: A Thematic Analysis of Post-Exit Distress and Coping in Former Violent Extremists

by

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ABSTRACT

Disengagement from violent extremism is a challenging time of transition and turbulence. It requires change, adaptation, and in some cases a complete reconstruction of identity. However, reentry into mainstream society may be hindered if stressors seem insurmountable. No framework or validated measure currently exists to assess stressors that extremists experience during or after disengagement. For this study, 10 former extremists and six practitioners working with this population were interviewed. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to summarize topics and explore underlying themes. This resulted in an exploratory framework of post-exit distress and coping and seven themes: (1) “It’s a Lot.” - Post-Exit Stressors, (2) From 24/7 Movement to... "Now What?”, (3) Milestones Missed During Involvement (4) Continued Negative Impact From Involvement, (5) From Public to Private Battle, (6) “Nobody Gets it,” Except..., and (7) Coping: Balance Instead of Extremes. While these findings are exploratory, they can inform practitioners and later become the basis for a needs assessment tool.

INDEX WORDS: Violent extremism, Exit, Transition, Reintegration, Distress, Coping

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me during my journey that brought me here. Foremost my husband, my two amazing kids, my brother, and countless friends and mentors.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Although terrorist acts occur infrequently, they destabilize community well-being by instilling terror, uncertainty, and widespread fear, thereby presenting a significant social problem (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). As Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) put it, "Extremism is a grave societal problem with weighty negative consequences for both victims and perpetrators" (p. 105). Much of the psychological research on violent extremism/terrorism has focused on radicalization, mobilization, and deradicalization (acquiring radical views, acting on those views, and losing those views, respectively) (Bjorgo & Horgan, 2008; Kruglanski et al., 2014).[1] Broadly speaking, radicalization and deradicalization can be conceptualized as transitions or journeys into, and out of, these phenomena (Sieckelinck et al., 2019)

Thus far, despite initial recognition, there has been little sustained focus on how membership, continued involvement, or deepening involvement affects the individual extremist (Corner & Gill, 2020). Those few studies that do exist suggest that involvement can have, at multiple levels, highly negative impacts (Koehler, 2020). For example, membership in an extremist group can have short- and long-term negative consequences, such as potentially affecting job opportunities (Latif et al., 2020), relationships with family or the community due to stigmatization (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020; Özerdem & Podder, 2011) and other areas of daily functioning.

The act of leaving violent extremism is itself stressful and it can take months or years to adjust to the non-extremist world (Barrelle, 2015). Violent extremists' successful transition back to mainstream society may be hindered if these stressors seem insurmountable to them and their

[1] The terms terrorism and violent extremism are used interchangeably.

communities. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define distress as when an event is perceived as harmful, threatening, or challenging and is deemed to exceed one's social and personal resources. Subsequently, people engage in coping behaviors and reevaluation of stressful situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). From a terrorism response perspective, it is crucial to decrease post-exit stressors and increase productive coping in order to foster timely and lasting reintegration. Most people eventually leave violent extremism and even most of those incarcerated for terrorism charges will re-enter mainstream society. If they don't reintegrate successfully, they might end up joining a different extremist group or otherwise engage in criminal or extremist behavior.

This exploratory study seeks to provide foundational knowledge on these processes and sought to answer the following questions:

1) What are the challenges post-exit and the causes of post-exit distress for former extremists?

2) How disruptive are these challenges?

3) What ways of coping have helped former extremists post-exit?

4) What ways of coping have not helped former extremists post-exit?

The researcher asked ten former violent extremists what they experienced after exit, whether it was stressful, and how they coped. Then the researcher asked six practitioners working with this population corresponding questions. This study focused on participants' interpretations of their and others' experiences and perspectives via an experiential orientation of thematic analysis (derived from perspective, worldviews, and frameworks of participants) while

also integrating a critical orientation (centered in interpretative psychological frameworks)[2] offering multiple approaches to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher also employed a "hermeneutics of empathy" approach - an orientation that "seeks to stay close to participants' meanings and capture these in ways that might be recognisable to them" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 160).

Including both former violent extremists and practitioners allowed the researcher to capture different perspectives on the same phenomenon and derive findings that resonate broadly with both those transitioning out of extremism and those who work with them.

In order to generate deeper discussion and transcend accounts of individuals' own experiences, three focus groups were held in addition to individual interviews. Participants chose to participate either in a focus group or an interview. The data that arose from this inquiry were used to create a framework for understanding post-exit distress, and to create seven themes about transition, reintegration, and coping.

[2] Specifically concepts from terrorism literature, psychology, sociology, criminology, and public health.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Violent Extremism

There has been much debate on what constitutes violent extremism,[3] as it "emerges at the intersection of politics, research and public debate" (Carlsson et al., 2020, p. 75). It is broadly understood as a strategy involving undemocratic and violent actions to achieve its objective (Borum, 2011). Terrorism, a strategy employed by violent extremists, effectively targets noncombatants to generate fear and garner the public's attention for a political goal (Schmid, 2011). Terrorism also relies on a range of hostile actions, from verbal attacks, discrimination, and violence, all the way to genocide (Berger, 2018). Former violent extremists (hereafter, used interchangeably with "formers") in this study are defined as individuals who were non-state actors of an extremist group or movement that used or condoned violence to advance its political and ideological goals.

Just as terrorism is "an extremely complex set of phenomena" (Bjørgo, 2005, p. 1) (Bjørgo, 2005, p.1), so is the related issue of radicalization. Doosje et al., (2016) define radicalization as "a process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an out-group or symbolic targets to achieve behavioral change and political goals" (p. 79). While radicalization implies the acquisition of radical views that are deemed to lead to the individual's willingness to endorse or engage in extreme behavior (Swann et al., 2009), it is worth keeping in mind that someone can be radicalized and never perform an act of violence, and this is likely more common.

[3] Violent extremism has been defined in ambiguous terms and can imply ideas or behaviors (Stephens et al., 2021).

2.2 Involvement

Once connected to a violent extremist community, ideologies are the stories that define the community, its values, and its history, and create a sense of belonging (Holbrook & Horgan, 2019). Members build a narrative that justifies violence and hostile actions by proclaiming a crisis or threat from an out-group (Berger, 2018). This crisis-solution narrative highlights their own victimhood and promises to solve the problem (Aarten et al., 2018; Berger, 2018). For members, those narratives can become a central part of their identity.

Members of extremist or fundamentalist groups can be incredibly adept at compartmentalizing their beliefs, so beliefs neither sync up nor cancel each other out, no matter how illogical or self-contradictory (Altemeyer, 2006). Kutner (2016) goes so far as to say that the ideas of someone who is fully radicalized are likely to become "impermeable to logic" (p. 113). If the group displays authoritarian traits, an individual identifying strongly with this group is likely to display these traits as well, even if the individual may not exhibit authoritarian views in another context (Duckitt, 1989).[4] Members carefully craft an identity based on group prototypes and expectations, adhering to them even in the absence of the group (Moran & Sussman, 2014; J. R. Smith & Hogg, 2008).

As such, involvement with a violent extremist movement changes how individuals think and act and has far-reaching consequences. Latif et al. (2020) write:

> Involvement in organized white supremacism in the contemporary U.S. also can be an intensely marginalizing experience that disrupts many of its members' connections to the non-racist world. Its celebration of violence involves adherents in actions and goals

[4] While authoritarianism was originally thought of as comprising of personality traits, newer perspectives emphasize social and group determinants for right-wing authoritarianism as social attitudes and values (Duckitt et al., 2010).

that are widely regarded as loathsome, or at least wrong-headed, and may expose them to physical harm, criminal prosecution, and psychological distress. (p. 369)

Corner and Gill (2020) analyzed over 90 terrorist autobiographies and identified the following experiences as significantly associated with psychological distress during individuals' engagement in terrorist activities.

Experience	Frequency psychological distress N = 50 (%)	Frequency no psychological distress N = 59 (%)
Physiological distress	32.0***	8.5
Guilt over actions and group actions	32.0**	10.2
Regret for actions and group actions	34.0**	11.9
Trouble coping with role and actions	20.0*	6.8
Trouble with a clandestine lifestyle	42.0***	13.6
Became physically Ill whilst engaged	50.0*	28.8
Burnout	52.0***	20.3

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.005$

Figure 1 Significant associations between stressors and psychological distress (Corner & Gill, 2020, p. 511)

In looking at the connection of mental health and terrorism, Weatherston & Moran (2003) discredit the notion of a causal connection between a person's mental disorder and radicalization, but they point out that there may be another connection: engagement might lead to the development of mental disorders. Specifically, the authors say that "certain stressors that occur because of terrorist activity may result in psychological disturbance in terrorist individuals" (p. 698). That is not to say that living an extremist lifestyle will always lead to mental health issues, but it has the potential to. Weatherston & Moran identify the following variables as potentially contributing to mental illness: "terrorist lifestyle, terrorism effects, terrorist group conflict, interrogation effects, the effects on the individual of the conditions of imprisonment" (p. 702).

Long before Weatherston & Moran, Taylor (1988) wrote that "mental illness may not be a particularly helpful way of conceptualizing terrorism, [but] the acts of terrorism and membership in a terrorist organization may well have implications for the terrorist's mental health" (p. 93).

In an overview of toxic stress, child development, and membership in violent extremism, Koehler (2020) summarized that membership is highly stressful that opens the person up to potentially traumatizing factors, due to experiences of existential threat, apocalyptical scenarios if they don't comply, and dehumanization of the out-group. This creates an unhealthy interplay of negative emotional states and positive feelings of belonging, potentially leading to psychological dependency on the group (Koehler, 2020).

Despite their loyalty to the group or the cause, most members do leave eventually (Bjørgo, 2011; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2008), whether of their own accord or otherwise. While the experiences with violent extremism might differ, at the very least, people are likely to emerge as a different person than when they entered.

2.3 Leaving Violent Extremism

The process of deradicalization has received significant and attention from the research community in recent years. Leaving is understood as a "dynamic process shaped by a multitude of interacting push/pull factors, sunk costs, and the perceived availability of alternatives outside the group" (Horgan et al., 2017, p. 63). This process is a unique phase in the extremist's trajectory and has been coined *exit* by practitioners and academics alike. The exit process is a series of actions that lead to leaving the group (Kenney & Chernov Hwang, 2020; Latif et al., 2020) and can happen voluntarily or involuntarily (Altier et al., 2019). Ebaugh (1988) pioneered

the idea of role exit in her seminal study "Becoming an Ex-." In that research, she interviewed 185 ex-convicts, divorcees, ex-nuns, ex-doctors, ex–police officers, and others who had left a vital defining role behind. She writes that "disengagement, disidentification, dealing with role residual, and being categorized as an ex-member" make exit a "unique social process" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 6). Key elements of exit from extremism are disillusionment, disengagement, and deradicalization. They occur in a non-linear fashion and each is discussed further, below.

Disillusionment can be described as the realization that one's expectations of group membership, performance, strategy, or one's own role, do not match reality (Harris et al., 2018; Horgan, 2009). In other words, it is "a cognitive process of becoming disappointed" (Latif et al., 2020, p. 367). Disillusionment can be a result of built-up frustrations, emotional and physical exhaustion, burnout (Kenney & Chernov-Hwang, 2020), or increased distrust (Windisch et al., 2018). Barrelle (2015), in her study of 22 former extremists, found disillusionment played heavily into factors for leaving.

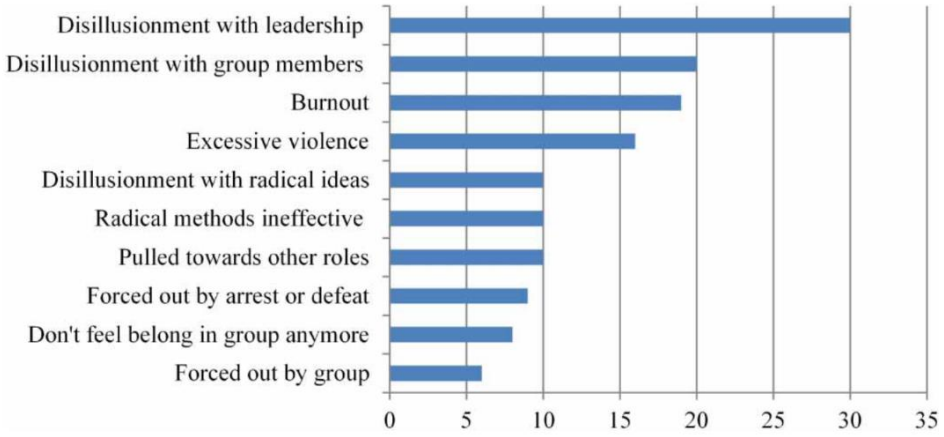

Figure 2 Reasons for Leaving (Barrelle, 2015, p. 132)

In addition, Harris (2015) found that members were more likely to become disillusioned when intragroup threats or tension, rather than external threats, occurred. When someone is

forced to leave involuntarily (e.g., incarceration), they might be neither disillusioned nor deradicalized at the time but might become so as a result of being removed from the radicalized surroundings (Horgan et al., 2017). Family and friends can play a role in an individual leaving violent extremism when the person is already disillusioned (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020).

However, when there are no good alternatives, such as social networks outside the group, people might stay even after they become disillusioned (Horgan et al., 2017; Kenney & Chernov-Hwang, 2020). In addition, there can be major delays between when a person experiences disillusionment and their subsequent departure (Barrelle, 2015).

Disengagement is the process whereby people physically leave the group. It can include a psychological reckoning (i.e., deradicalization) or may happen by itself, a change in behavior without an accompanying change in attitudes (Khalil et al., 2019). Some leave and still stand behind the group's ideals.

Deradicalization is the psychological process of leaving radical and violent ideas behind. Horgan et. al (2017) state that deradicalization, "may be a long-term process, and may in some cases supersede rather than precede one's exit, even where disillusionment precedes disengagement" (p. 63). Similarly, Windisch et al. (2016) write that an individual can stay active in the group while lessening their commitment to the ideology or, alternatively, disengage physically while still being committed to the belief system.

In their study of 15 former neo-Nazis, Mattsson & Johansson (2020) describe crucial decision moments consisting of "events such as the end of a relationship, the death of a close friend or family member, a betrayal by peers in the movement, and exposure to ultra-violence and hospitalization" (p. 91) where individuals were faced with crises that allowed for change.

For others, deradicalization is a slow process without a specific “aha” moment. Berube et al. (2019), interviewing Canadian former extremists, found that many left because they felt that hate, anger, and negativity were mentally draining, but leaving itself had a heavy emotional cost. In her study of the various ‘Ex-es’, Ebaugh found that leaving a group that previously held central meaning in a person’s life was often painful and sometimes even traumatizing (Ebaugh, 1988).

2.4 Exit and Reintegration Organizations

A common obstacle to leaving extremist groups is a lack of exit options (Horgan et al., 2014). It can be difficult to leave terrorism behind if disillusioned members feel they have nowhere to go. In addition, when they are able to disengage, formers have varied needs. While one might have to move to avoid retribution or recidivism (Cherney, 2018), another might need help with substance abuse, and still others may simply need someone to talk to (Braddock, 2014) or access to other social support (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Preventing extremist violence cannot be achieved by law enforcement alone and has to involve functions of broader civil society, such as public health and mental health strategies (Weine & Kansal, 2019). The same holds true for the exit process. In the U.S., only a handful of small organizations help extremists disengage and reintegrate (e.g., Exit USA, Parents for Peace). When trying to find resources in their hometown or state, former extremists are not likely to find them.

Koehler (2020) notes that there is a lack of essential intervention elements, such as funding, specialized training, and public support for intervention measures. He argues that not meeting needs in terms of quality or quantity may pose an increased risk to society, beyond

terrorism, in the form of criminality, substance abuse, or violent behavior, all of which are more frequent in traumatized individuals (Koehler, 2020).

2.5 Transition

Looking outside of the field of violent extremism, we can find insight and inspiration. In their literature review on transition within the field of nursing, Kralik et al., (2006)) defined transition as occurring over time, requiring change, adaptation, and reconstruction of identity. The authors continue to say that transition entails, "developmental, personal, relational, situational, societal or environmental change" (Kralik et al, 2006, p. 320).

In the context of violent extremism, the process of disengagement requires new, healthy relationships, as well as new social and even physical environments (Mattsson & Johansson, 2019). So much of the psychological work starts then, because learned behaviors from group involvement, such as needing to settle a conflict with violence, do not automatically end with disengagement (Simi et al., 2017) (Simi, 2017). Moving away from an extremist past and reconciling with society might be observed in behaviors such as reconnecting with old relationships (Gould, 2021). As in moving away from other all-encompassing social roles, transition becomes its own phase with its own stressors.

2.6 Distress

As defined earlier, distress is one's reaction to one's appraisal of an event that is personally relevant and seen as either harmful, threatening, or challenging, and perceived as exceeding one's social and personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).[5]

Formers, much like anyone else, might be reluctant to ask for help and don't want to be labeled as having psychological problems. However, the term *distress* generates dialogue and makes help-seeking more acceptable, thereby reducing reluctance when it comes to counseling (Holland & Gooen-Piels, 2006). In their book, Cancer Medicine, the authors point out that distress is an "unpleasant emotional experience of a psychological (cognitive, behavioral, emotional), social, and/or spiritual nature that may interfere with the ability to cope effectively" and state that it "extends along a continuum, ranging from common normal feelings of vulnerability, sadness, and fears to problems that can become disabling, such as depression, anxiety, panic, social isolation, and spiritual crisis" (p. 799). This spectrum of distress allows individuals to place and see themselves.

In one of the few studies looking at post-exit distress, Barrelle (2015) found a wide range of experiences:

> The personal damage suffered by extremist group members can be significant: including 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, housing and social opportunities. (p. 130)

[5] Recently, in their analysis of psychological distress during and after terrorist involvement, Corner & Gill (2020) defined distress as "the range of symptoms that may concern, confuse, or trouble an individual" (p. 501).

2.7 Coping

Coping, a concept first defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), refers to the efforts to deal with one's distress. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), appraising one's experience of stress and anxiety is followed by deeming it an insignificant or significant threat, which is followed by coping behaviors and subsequent reevaluation of the situation (see Figure 3).

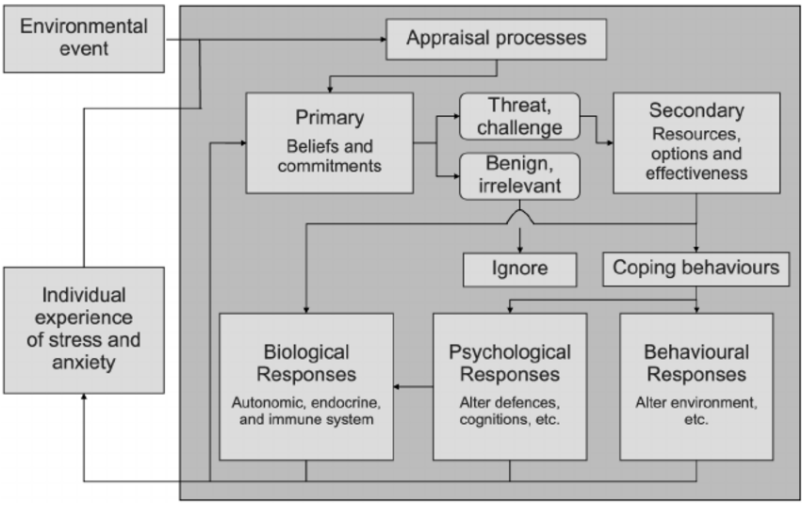

Figure 3 Appraisal Model of Stress (Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in Lovallo (1997, p. 77).

Some coping styles, such as avoidance are linked to lower well-being, and others, such as problem-focused coping, are linked to higher well-being (Mayordomo-Rodríguez et al., 2015). Jason et al., (2019) created the following overview of coping strategies: Problem Solving or Active Strategies, Emotional Expression and Emotional Regulation Strategies, Seeking Understanding Strategies, Help-seeking Strategies and Support-seeking Strategies, and Problem Avoidance Strategies and Distraction Strategies. These five strategies, plus Cognitive Restructuring will be used to analyze coping in former violent extremists.

3 METHODS

3.1 Research Design Overview

The goal of this study was to better understand former violent extremists' appraisal of their experiences and how they perceive themselves and their pathways after exit. Specifically, it sought to explore their post-exit experiences with respect to stress and coping. To do this, the researcher invited former violent extremists and practitioners working with this population to participate in focus groups and individual interviews.[6]

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 were able to speak broadly about a much larger number of formers who had contacted them or worked with their organizations.

Once analysis was underway, a member check, asking participants to give feedback on the findings, was offered to both populations. Doing the member check added valuable insight, as participants were given a chance to critique or comment on the findings and even develop new codes.

Thematic analysis was selected over other methods, as it is ideally suited for identifying patterns in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Specifically, the researcher adopted a strategy of reflexive thematic analysis, which acknowledges the researcher's subjective lens in meaning-making. Based on an analysis of the literature, her own lived experiences, and previous conversations with former violent extremists, the researcher expected to find certain stressors and coping styles. This informed the decision to start with a concept- or researcher-driven

[6] For an exploratory study such as this, the use of focus groups can be beneficial for "distinguishing between shared and variable perspectives" (Frey & Fontana, 1993, p. 82) and can serve as grounds for further studies.

approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Gibbs, 2018). During analysis, a more inductive approach was deemed appropriate, which highlights coding as "an organic and evolving process" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 54). The topics and themes kept expanding and changing to better reflect the actual findings. This continuum between deductive and inductive reflects the researcher's philosophy that researchers come at a topic with their own lens and pre-existing ideas, deeming a purely inductive approach impossible (Braun and Clarke, 2022).[7]

The analysis resulted in two topic overviews (post-exit distress and coping), a framework for post-exit distress, and seven themes.

3.2 Researcher Description

In terms of lived experiences and lens, the researcher is a white, middle-class, cisgender, straight, non-disabled female, a *third-culture kid* who has lived in six countries, and an immigrant to the United States.[8] She was taken out of school at age 10 when her parents joined a commune. Ten years later, she had to transition out of an all-encompassing "the end is near" worldview and reintegrate into the "outside world." While the commune mostly directed violence against its own members, a strong ideology, us-versus-them, and all-or-nothing thinking guided daily life. To that end, the researcher has an insider perspective, to some degree, into the population she is studying. This perspective was beneficial to developing the research questions and guided the interview process and methodological decisions, such as including participants in

[7] As explained by Braun and Clarke (2022) in their book Thematic Analysis: A practical guide, "In Big Q qualitative analysis, the subjective and embedded process makes pure induction impossible: we bring with us all sorts of perspectives, theoretical and otherwise, to our meaning-making, so our engagement with the data is never purely inductive." (p. 56)

[8] 'Third Culture Kids' live in different countries before 18, building connections with all cultures they have lived in, but do not have roots in any (Tan et al., 2021).

the meaning-making process via a member check. At the same time, the researcher took great care to practice analytical memoing, reflect on her own assumptions and biases, and regularly seek feedback from her advisor.

3.3 Researcher-Participant Relationship

The researcher had previously met four out of six practitioners when participating in online events or a practicum. However, the researcher had only met or interacted with three of the formers, who worked at exit organizations, prior to the study. None of the other former extremists who participated were known to the researcher before the onset of the study.

3.4 Participant Recruitment

Participant Selection. To qualify for inclusion in the study, former violent extremists had to have previously been involved in a violent extremist group or movement, but no longer involved at the onset of the study. However, there were no stipulations regarding deradicalization. For their part, practitioners had to be employed at an organization providing exit or reintegration services, and either work directly with clients who were former violent extremists or work with staff who were former violent extremists. All participants were required to be over the age of 18.

Ethical considerations. The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants prior to the study and engaged with participants in a respectful manner. No deception was used in this study and all communication in relation to the study was transparent. Appropriate steps to protect the privacy of the participants were taken, such as storing data on a password-protected folder on the psychology department's server, reducing access to two researchers alone, removing identifying information from the transcripts, and deleting the audio recording at the end of the study.

Recruitment Process. Most of the participants were recruited via snowball sampling. After finding out about the study, potential participants had the option of filling out a 2-3 minute Qualtrics intake survey, answering a handful of questions, and indicating availability (see Appendix A and B).[9] The intake form for practitioners included who they work with, the ideologies their organization interacts with, and what country they work in. The survey for former violent extremists was crafted with more privacy concerns in mind. The researcher purposely did not ask many demographic questions and turned off the VPN detection feature on Qualtrics, making it impossible to determine which country someone was submitting the survey from. This might have helped in gaining participants, but valuable demographic information could not be obtained. Some participants disclosed their country, while others were intentionally vague. Not many former violent extremists were expected to choose participation in a focus group over an individual interview, but the option was given and explained.

Pre-Screener. After the recruitment email text was shared, unknown to the researcher, on social media, a pre-screener was deemed necessary for participants who were not known to other participants or the network of exit organizations and formers that the email had been sent to. In addition, as the time for the pre-screener was not compensated, quite a few people did not even respond to the scheduling request. Three interviews resulted from this effort. These three added valuable perspectives.

Incentives. Participants were compensated with a $35 Amazon gift card. Compensation was deemed necessary in order to get a less biased sample. The researcher wanted former extremists to sign up who might have disengaged but still held extremist views or simply could not afford to take time out of their working day otherwise. If expecting to find individuals

[9] The researcher asked one practitioner and one former in her network to pre-test the survey for content and understandability in order to ensure that it would not unintentionally deter someone from participating.

who would participate for free, one can risk biasing the sample in regard to participants who can afford to take part for free or have a specific interest in the research topic (Williams, 2022).[10] This does not account for the emotional toll of participating in a qualitative study on distress. As one participant mentioned during a member check and subsequent email, the $35 gift card cannot cover 30 minutes of therapy, but the gesture was much appreciated.

3.5 Participants Overview

Participants included ten former violent extremists (four of whom worked as practitioners with lived experience at North American and European exit organizations) and six practitioners and staff at exit organizations. All participants were over the age of 18. There were 7 women and 9 men.

Table 1 Former Violent Extremists- Intake Survey Results

Participant Synonym	**Years since exit**	**How did you exit the group/movement?**	**Age**	**Ideology**	**On- or offline**
Former Simon	6-10	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	36 and up	far-right	offline
Former Arif	10+	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	36 and up	jihadist	offline
Former Kate	10+	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	26-35	far-right	offline

[10] Some of the practitioners with lived experience expressed that they would have done the interview for free.

Former Felix	10+	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	36 and up	far-right	offline
Former Lara	0-1	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	26-35	anti-government militia	offline
Former Doug	2-5	I was forced to leave by the group/movement by people in it	26-35	anti-government militia	offline
Former Joel	2-5	The group/movement stopped existing	18-25	anti-government militia	offline
Former Danielle	2-5	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	18-25	far-right	offline
Former Timothy	10+	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	36 and up	far-right	offline
Former Mark	2-5	On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active	26-35	far-right	online

Table 2 Practitioners - Intake Survey Results

Participant Synonym	**Ideologies organization interacts with**	**Countries**
Practitioner Tanja	former combatants from the Lebanese civil war. Ideologies represented in this group are rather political than religious	Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Germany, Northern Ireland
Practitioner Neil	VFRE/REMVE & VIE	US, EU, Central Asia

Practitioner Fiona	Religiously motivated extremism, ideologically motivated extremism. Far-right, white supremacist, Islamist, conspiratorial thinking	Canada
Practitioner Greg	RWE, jihadism, anti-government, Qanon, mixed-personalized ideologies	Canada
Practitioner Anna	Neo Nazi, Islamism, White supremacy, Eco-terrorism, Antifa, Incel	USA, Canada, Australia
Practitioner Jillian	Violent far right - antisemitism, white supremacy, misogyny, anti-government, sovereign citizen, anti-immigrant, anti-muslim	USA

3.6 Data Collection

Focus Groups and Interviews. Former members of extremist groups are often stigmatized, may have a criminal background, or have other reasons to avoid openly talking about their experiences. They are difficult to reach and focus groups for this population are not common if they have been done at all. However, focus groups have the potential to foster participation (Duggleby, 2005), encourage candor (Krueger & Casey, 2000), and be cathartic to the participants (Barbour, 2007). Focus groups can indeed be appropriate for sensitive topics, as they do not force participation, but allow for quietness when participants wish to keep something private (Barbour, 2018)), and focus groups have been done with other hard-to-reach populations, such as gangs (e.g., (Valdez et al., 2000).

At the beginning of each focus group or interview, the researcher read a script going over the purpose of the study, privacy, and confidentiality, as well as one sentence of self-disclosure. The researcher asked if there were any questions, then started the recording and began with the

first question on the semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide for the former violent extremists (see Table 4) was almost identical to the one used for practitioners (see Appendix C). The questions were based on disengagement literature and piloted with non-participating colleagues who are practitioners and formers. This ensured that the questions were easily understood and able to prompt discussion relevant to the research questions (Barbour, 2021).

Table 3 Semi-structured Interview Guide – Formers

Post-Exit Distress

In your own words, can you describe some of the challenges you experienced after leaving?

- What was an unexpected hurdle?
- What presented a minor challenge; what presented a major challenge?
- What were you able to overcome in a short period of time, what took a long time, and what are you still struggling with today?

Coping

- How were you coping with these challenges or stressors at the time?
  - Are you still dealing with some of them today?
- What helped you cope?
  - Was it something you did, some resource you were able to use, or someone reaching out (e.g., a service offered, someone being kind)?
- What has not helped?
  - Is there any behavior or activity you engaged in that might have made things worse
  - Did you do things to avoid dealing with issues?

- More generally speaking, what services do you wish existed to help people after they leave extremism?
    - Do you feel that any needs of former extremists go unaddressed? If so, which?

The researcher responded to what participants shared, asking new questions during the interviews. Some of the interviewees brought up points that the researcher had not expected and they were incorporated into questions for subsequent interviews. The focus groups ranged from 2-4 participants, in part due to no-shows. All practitioners chose to participate in focus groups. The focus group with four practitioners proved to be just the right size. With more participants, some would not have been able to speak in depth on an issue. Even for focus groups where it was just two people, participants responded to each other by agreeing, disagreeing, or elaborating.

The focus groups lasted 90 minutes, while individual interviews varied in time from 50-60 minutes. The process for the interviews was almost identical to the focus group, but the researcher had to use more prompts with some formers, due to language barriers or the newness of participating in a study. For the most part, participants left their cameras on, except for the three former violent extremists that had signed up via social media and one other former who did not work at an exit organization. Of these four participants, none had been on TV or had publicly spoken out about their involvement, to the knowledge of the researcher. Privacy seemed a much bigger concern.

Table 4 Number of Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus group 1	2 practitioners
Focus group 2	2 formers
Focus group 3	4 practitioners
Individual interviews	8 formers (separately)

Data was collected over eight weeks. The focus groups and interviews were recorded and then transcribed and stored on the password-protected and encrypted Georgia State University Psychology Department servers. Transcripts and audio files were only accessed by Dr. John Horgan and Ms. Katharina Meredith. All audio recordings were destroyed at the end of the study.

Member Checks

Member checking is a way of formally asking for feedback from participants about the one's interpretations of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While uncommon in terrorism studies, the researcher chose to invite participants back to provide feedback on the findings. Member checks were conducted on Zoom and not recorded. The researcher shared her screen to show developing frameworks, drawings, topics, and theme overviews. The feedback received was invaluable. One practitioner 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, the research process, and the themes. One former said about the themes and sub-themes, "It's like you took a look inside my brain." The researcher took notes and chose what was relevant for analysis and write-up.

4 STEPS OF REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Reflexive thematic analysis focuses on the researcher as the subjective creator of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The researcher engaged extensively with the data, guided by six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. These phases are neither linear nor unidirectional (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

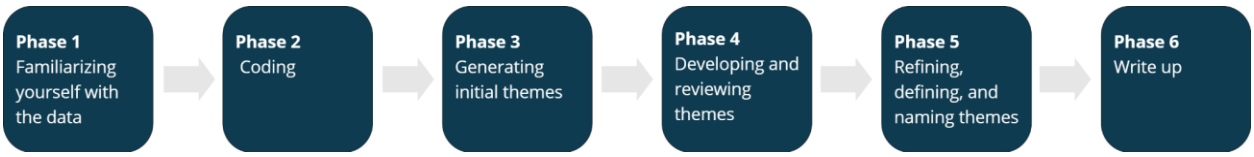

Figure 4. Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (based on Braun and Clark, 2022)
Note:

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data

For each interview, the researcher jotted down notes about ideas or insights regarding analysis. The researcher was the sole transcriber and became intimately familiar with the data, using notebooks, a blackboard, and applications to note and visualize ideas, connections, potential themes, and potential codes.

Phase 2: Coding

Transcripts were coded in NVivo. In order to test the viability of apriori codes and develop new codes, the researcher arranged coded sections from the first interviews on a table.

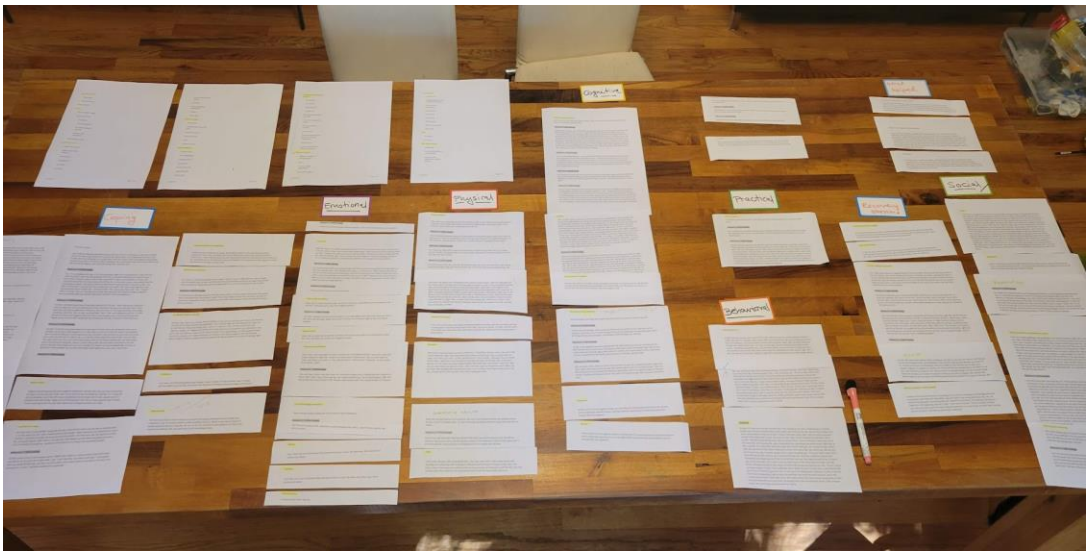

Figure 5 Coded sections from one Interview and potential categories

After this step, the researcher retrieved all existing and anticipated codes from NVivo, wrote each code on a magnetic tile, and kept re-grouping them until an initial set of categories and codes was developed.

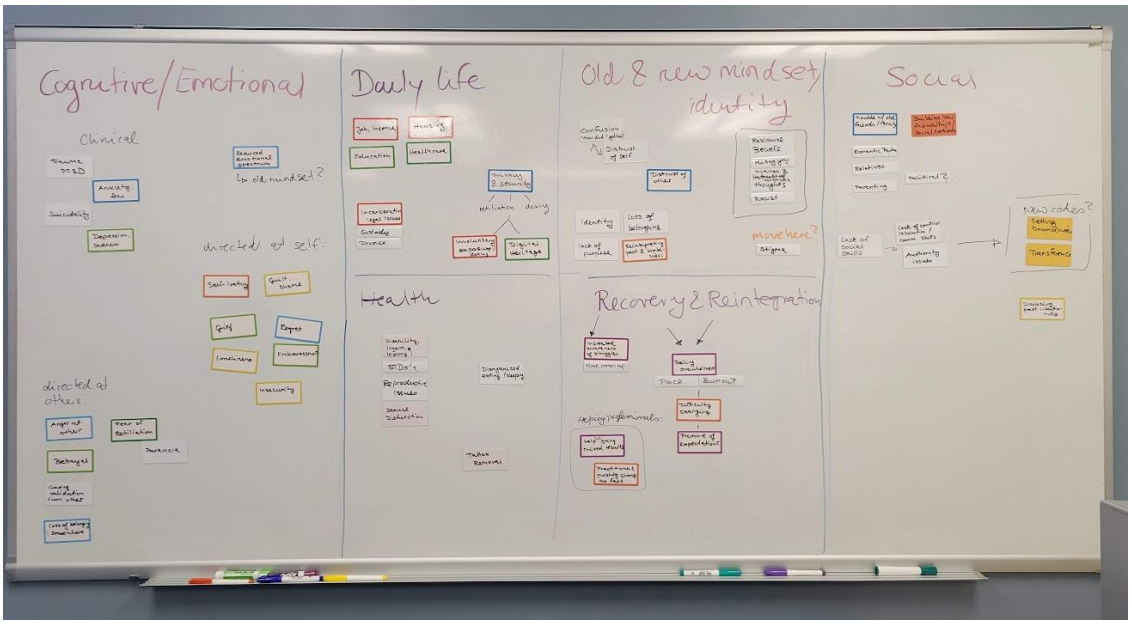

Figure 6 Post-exit distress dimensions and categories - round 2

After coding more interviews with the new codes, the categories were tweaked further on a blackboard.

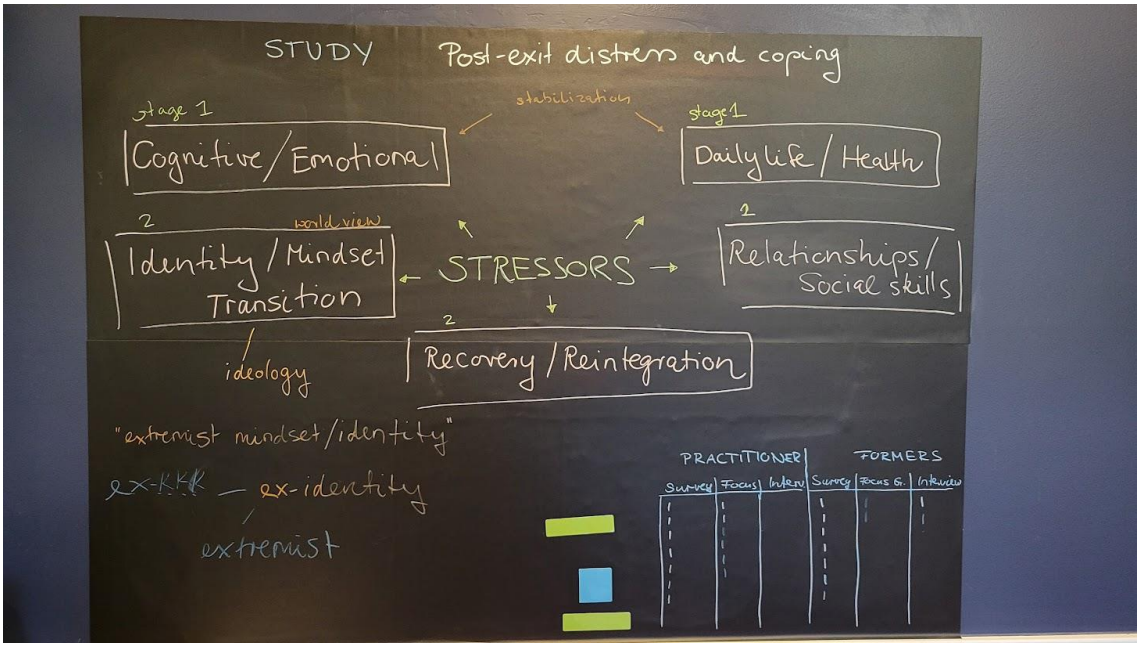

Figure 7. Post-exit distress dimensions and categories - round 3

The final categories and codes chosen will be presented under the section 5.1 Topic Summary 1 - Post-exit Distress Framework. The researcher used analytical memos from start to finish in order to document processes, such as what prompted the codes to be named or clustered in certain ways.

Phase 3: Generating initial themes.

As recurring subjects and sentiments were reported, the researcher noted potential themes and possible ways to explore themes more. This resulted in drawings exploring connections.

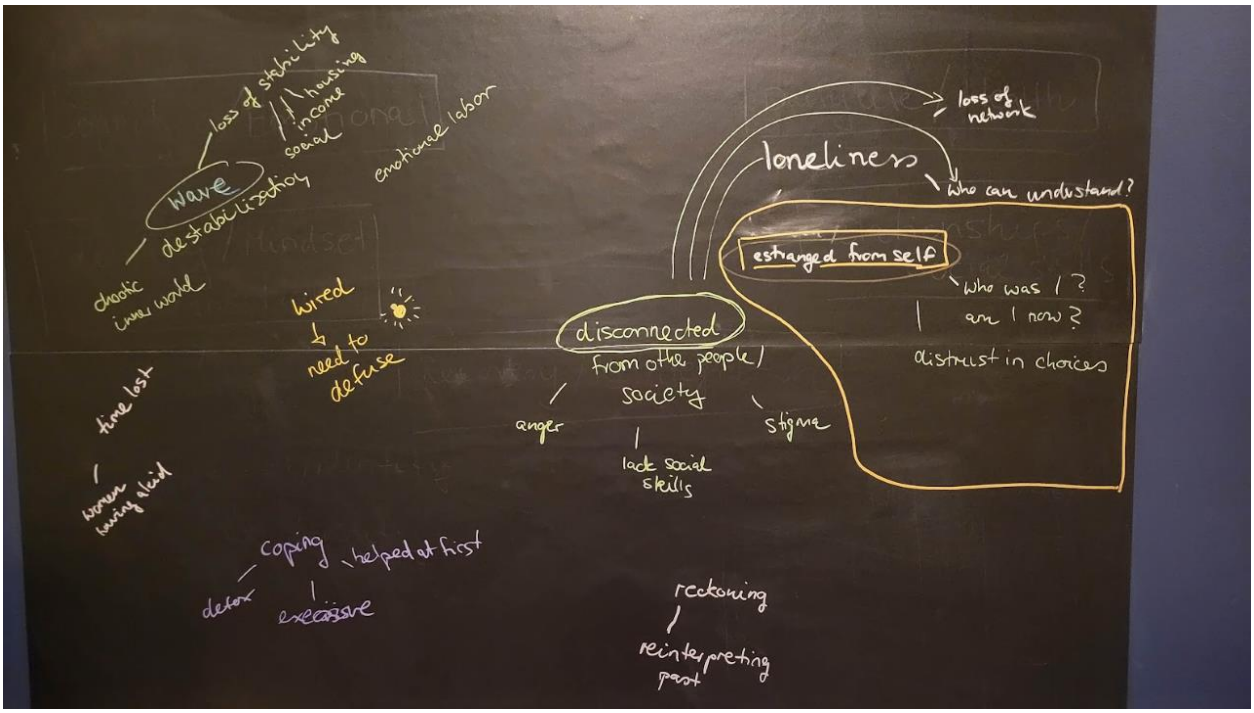

Figure 8 Exploration of themes - round 1

Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes

To test initial ideas for themes, the researcher followed Braun and Clark's recommendation of writing theme definitions to develop the core concept of each theme and test its quality.

Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes

The themes went through several versions. Three participants and one subject matter expert provided feedback on the final seven themes. The process was challenging at times, as themes had to draw from the data of two different populations. This meant shifting sub-themes back and forth, renaming the themes multiple times, cutting back a theme, or adding a new one, if a theme became unreasonably complex.

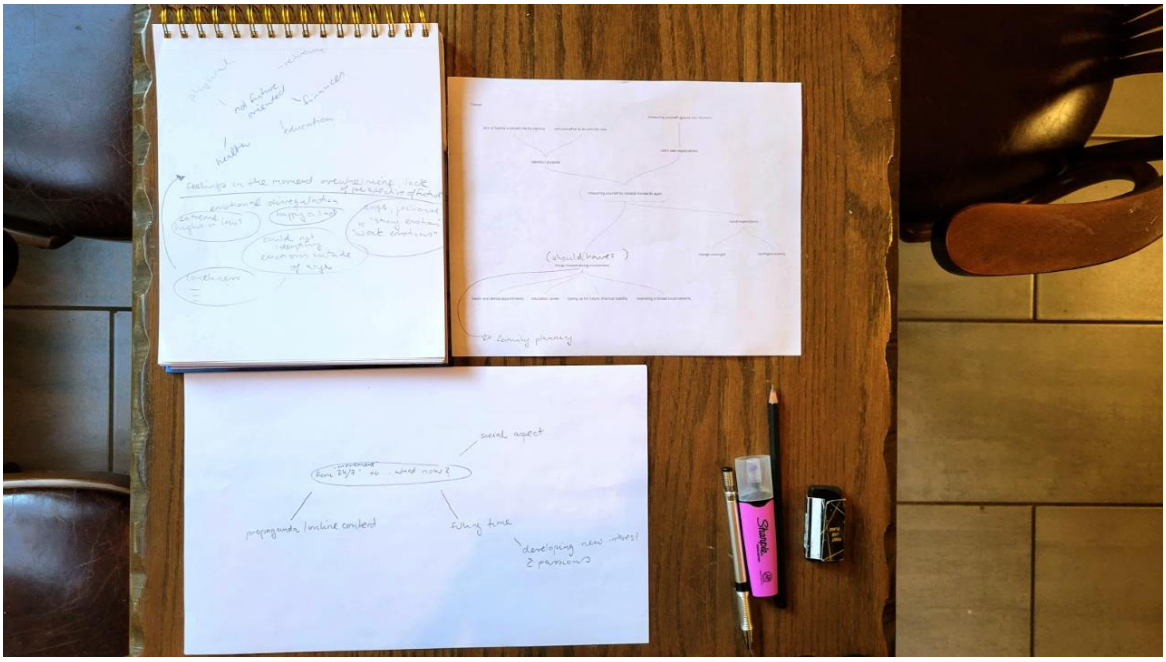

Figure 9 Exploration of themes, round 3

Phase 6: Write-up

The analysis continued during the write-up. As excerpts from the interviews were added to each theme, sub-themes kept changing.

5 OVERVIEW OF POST-EXIT DISTRESS

In reflexive thematic analysis, topic summaries report what was said about a certain topic (Braun and Clark, 2022). The overview of the 6 themes regarding post-exit distress will follow after the topic summary below.

5.1 Topic Summary 1 - Post-exit Distress Framework

From interviews and member checks, the researcher documented 97 codes for stressors (see Appendix D) organized into 12 topics that would be meaningful to practitioners, as well as easily understood by the formers who participated in the study, and beyond. These topics (referred to as categories forthwith) resulted in four dimensions of post-exit distress.

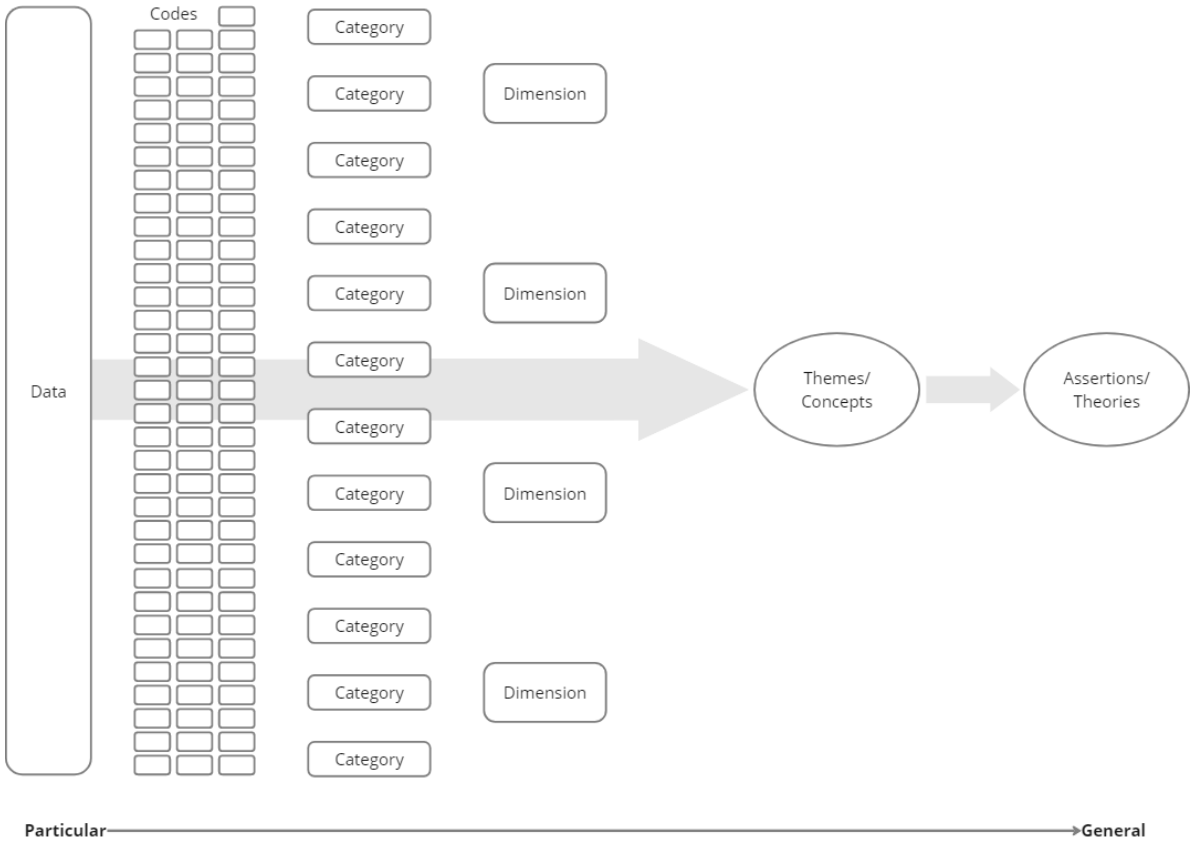

Figure 10 Flow of Codes to Theory (based on the streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry by Saldaña (2015).

The researcher created the *Dimensions of Post-Exit Distress Framework* below with the following dimensions:

Daily Life & Social Interaction covers 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). This dimension encompasses stressors that might have to be addressed early during post-exit to stabilize the individual. **Psychological & Physical Well-being** includes mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD); physical health (e.g. dysregulated eating and sleeping, disability); and overwhelming emotions (e.g., shame, anger, grief). Both of these dimensions include stressors that might occur in the general population during times of crisis, transition, or even everyday life. Helping professionals should be largely familiar with these stressors.

Safety & Consequences deals with stressors regarding safety (e.g., threats of retaliation); public image (e.g., doxxing, media requests); and the legal system (e.g., probation, legal fines). **Transition & Identity** relates to reintegration, change, and grappling with one's identity and worldview, as well as loss of belonging and purpose. These two dimensions include stressors that are more applicable to people leaving violent extremism and might not always be well-understood by helping professionals, although they are likely known to exit organizations.

The left versus the right half of the vertical axis can be understood as a quick, but not comprehensive overview of stressors for more practical concerns ("Stabilizing Life") versus stressors regarding internal struggles ("Stabilizing Self").

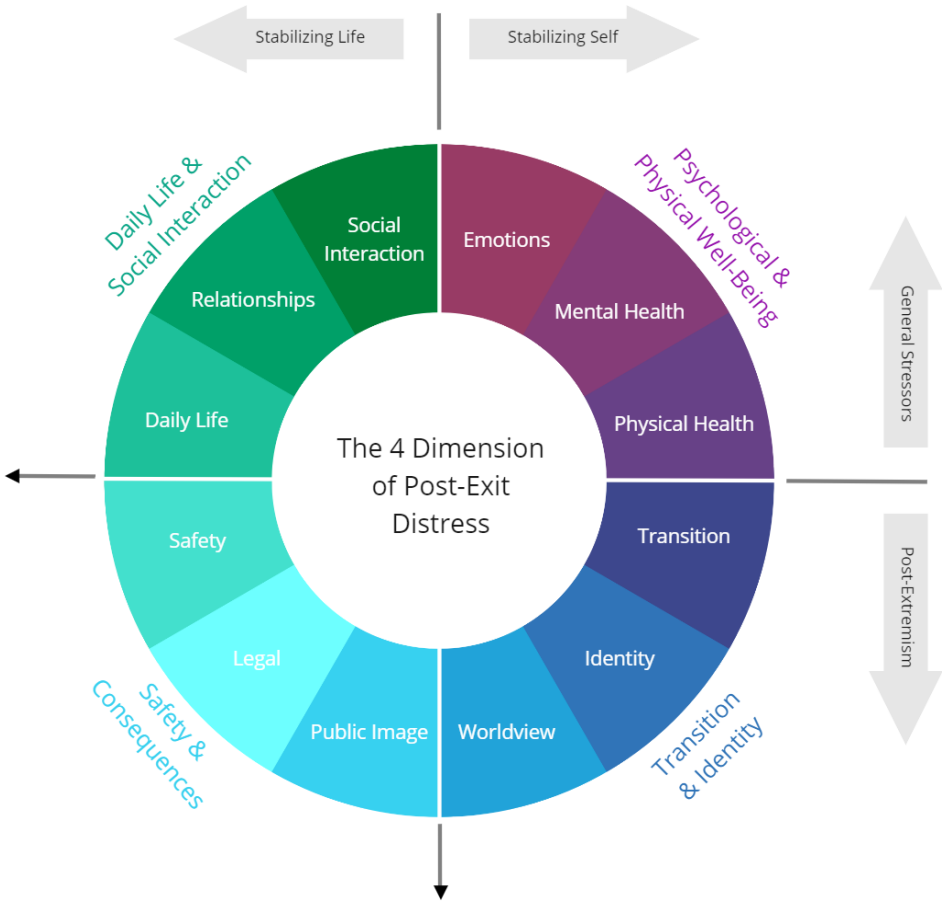

Figure 11 The 4 Dimensions of Post-exit Distress

5.2 Overview of the Six Themes for Post-Exit Distress

The researcher developed the following six themes to make sense of formers' experiences of post-exit distress during the transition to mainstream society: (1) "It's a Lot" - Post-Exit Stressors, (2) From 24/7 Movement to... "Now What?", (3) Milestones Missed During Involvement, (4) Continued Negative Impact from Involvement, (5) From Public to Private Battle (6) "Nobody Gets It." - Except…. For each theme, 4-8 sub-themes were generated.

Table 5 Summary of Post-Exit Distress Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
"It's a Lot" - Post-Exit Stressors	● Life turned upside down: instability & safety concerns ● Emotional chaos & mental health issues ● Identity crisis and loss of support network ● Early & late post-exit stressors - changes over time ● This transition is "individualized and complex" ● Protective factors
From 24/7 Movement to... "Now What?"	● Gravity of loss ● The void - now what? ● Switching to a "different flavor of extremism" ● Using time in new and productive ways ● (Re)building a life, identity, and purpose
Milestones Missed During Involvement	● Pursuit of a higher cause = rejection of mainstream goals ● Milestones and experiences missed ● Neglect of personal and social development ● Grief and regret ● Making up for lost time
Continued Negative Impact from Involvement	● Residual identity ● Impaired sense of self ● Impaired emotional regulation ● Impaired social functioning ● Practical Impediments

	• Trauma
From Public to Private Battle	• Group-mobilization toward anger and violence • Where does the anger go? • Pre-existing stressors beg to be dealt with • Going against conditioning of anger and hate • Maintenance of a non-violent identity
"Nobody Gets It," Except…	• Not sharing for fear of rejection or persecution • Experiences of stigma and social rejection • Therapists denying services • Knowing when to share • Supportive communities and peers

The themes will be explored in the next sections, along with a short discussion of each themes' findings and implications. This qualitative reporting model allows for the results and discussion sections to be a continuum of analysis, thereby highlighting the subjective role of the researcher, as well as the interpretive aspect of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022).

6 THEME 1: “IT’S A LOT” - POST-EXIT STRESSORS

6.1 Life turned upside down: instability & safety concerns

Post-exit stressors are numerous and complex. While they can be organized along certain dimensions, in reality, they are highly interwoven and influence each other. Besides the numerous practical or safety concerns, it can be deeply unsettling to leave one’s entire social circle or worldview behind. For formers who condemn their past involvement, a deep sense of guilt and shame might emerge, sometimes to the point of self-loathing or suicidality. Several factors were found to help mitigate post-exit distress, such as supportive family members and friends, exit organizations, helping professionals, or engaging in new pro-social roles.

One important finding of this study is a temporal component to post-exit distress. Initial stressors, such as fear of retaliation, housing instability, or job insecurity, often reduce or disappear as formers' circumstances stabilize. New stressors, such as questions around identity, reckoning with one's past, and dealing with trauma emerge or become more pronounced once practical stability allows for the time to think and feel.

Disengaging from violent extremism, especially for those involved offline, requires the person to make a series of life-altering choices. In many cases, solving one problem creates another. For example, one female participant mentioned how housing insecurity led to the threat of sexual assault while couch-surfing. Getting a job might force someone to disclose a criminal past or confront their lack of communication skills or issues with authority figures.

Safety is a main concern immediately after exit. Several formers interviewed shared constantly looking over their shoulders, being primed for fight or flight, and having high levels of anxiety and fear due to threats, hostility, and harassment from former friends who are still in

the movement or other organizations. For example, Former Arif was told, “You're an apostate, upon whom death is permitted.”

Former Kate described hearing similar insults at her public speaking engagements where former comrades showed up: “Afterwards, they reached out to me through Instagram, you know, all of them, basically and were like, ‘you are such a fucking sellout.’” She also described hostility coming from a different group:

> …what I am now is like, definitely distinctly anti-extremist, and also a queer person. And also, like somebody who, despite being a queer liberal now, like, owns a bunch of guns and is like, "hell, yeah, let's talk to Nazis! That way, we can help them be not Nazis anymore." You know, people don't like that. Nazis don't like that. Antifa folks don't like that. And so, I have gotten physically assaulted from both sides of the aisle, have spent a fair amount of time in the hospital for being just extremely open about who I am, what I used to be, what I believe.

Formers shared specific threats of retaliation that illustrate the validity of their post-exit safety concerns. Former Danielle spoke about rape and death threats made: “...they had already abused me in different ways. And they had told me that, you know, ‘they are monolith, they are everywhere, they will find me, they will break my legs, rape me and murder me.’”

When the researcher followed up on this, Former Danielle explained, “strangely, the physical threats, the rape, and the murder, I just kind of had to like, ‘you've already, you've already done some of that.’” She felt even greater concern for her family and community. Fear of physical safety for themselves and others came up for every male participant except for Former Mark, who was only involved online and was more concerned about the damage that might be done to his reputation.

Responding on a practical or emotional level to threats, harassment, and doxxing is emotionally exhausting and time-consuming. In some cases, it requires immediate relocation or other measures of safeguarding. Former Danielle took extra precautions to address fears of surveillance and retaliation, leaving a vehicle unregistered and avoiding signing a lease. Former Simon expressed how this turned into paranoia, "'Initially, like 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 in search of safety for him and others. Practitioner Tanja described this kind of caution that turned into habit:

> I know for some of our ex-combatants and until now, they, every morning before they leave their house, they look under their car if there's a bomb. So, um also the hatred that they have to deal with from within their own groups can be even more dangerous than hatred from the outgroups.

Extricating oneself from extremism while keeping the peace can also be taxing. Former Arif described grappling with how to find this balance: "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 a violent extremist group but also from interpersonal violence by their partner.

Even those not as concerned about retaliation took precautions. Former Mark explained communicating a bluff to his former group, saying, "I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone," despite not having real plans or information to use against them. Former Kate described agreeing to keep group information private in exchange for a peaceful departure.

6.2 Emotional chaos and mental health issues

Emotional chaos and mental health issues came up repeatedly. As Former Arif summed up, after exit, there are, “lots of emotions, none of them good.” This resonated across the board. Former Simon disclosed, “...the first six months were hell. I mean, that's the best way to describe it was just an emotional and mental hell.” He described waves of sadness, shame, embarrassment, and anger toward self and in general. Two other participants talked about intense emotional ups and downs. 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.

Former Kate explained:

> …the only remotely good feeling I had was like, a sense of relief, I guess. But at the same time, that relief was like absolutely negated, didn't even get to enjoy it. Because of like, the self-doubt that was coupled with the relief, and then also just the, the mechanics of like logistical survival, like, "oh, shit, I'm homeless now. Oh, damn, I have a part time job [...] that doesn't pay well [...] I don't live anywhere near any, you know, biological family that I can like, go back to.

6.3 Identity crisis and loss of support network

Despite the dehumanizing and violent worldview, an extremist group or movement often provides members with a support network and strong social ties. The loss of a fixed social group was difficult for all formers and during early post-exit, loneliness was possibly the biggest stressor, along with safety.

Even Former Danielle, who had feared for her life after leaving and had difficulty finding housing, spoke of loneliness being the most stressful and said, “I've already ostracized myself from the real world. And now [...] the very people that said they would protect me are now hunting me.”

This sudden loss of community and associated purpose can impact one’s identity and views about the world. 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.

6.4 Early & late post-exit stressors - changes over time

Broadly speaking, post-exit distress grouped around two phases: early exit of 1-2 years, and later exit at 2+ years. Overall, stressors seem to reduce within the first 1-2 years after exit. Some stressors found in this study were more dominant during the early exit phase and others tended to emerge during later exit. Stress seemed to occur along two variables, which were outside of the scope of this study - frequency, and magnitude.

Early post-exit. The first 0-24 months seem to be characterized by high internal chaos, emotional dysregulation, feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, exhaustion, fear, and anxiety. In addition, practical concerns loomed large, such as housing insecurity, financial instability, retaliation, and doxxing. This is not to say that stressors from the early phase post-exit may not also be present or dominant later, but from what the participants expressed, they were most prevalent in the first 1-2 years.

For most formers interviewed the initial phase after exit was dominated by finding safety, housing, a job, and then reconnecting with society. Former Felix expressed, “I was so concerned with the bare logistics of just survival, that I didn't get to process any other emotions.” However, those feelings showed up later: “I didn't realize until a while later that they had been there the whole time and were just waiting to cascade on me when I had the emotional bandwidth to deal with them.”

Former Danielle stated, “ I didn't know how to hold a job. I didn't know how to make friends.” Former Doug also said the first and second year were the hardest, as he was plagued with the things he had done during involvement. Mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, or PTSD were mentioned several times as being a big stressor during the early post-exit phase. Former Danielle said that about 1.5 years after leaving she experienced, “deep depression. Feeling like I wasted my life, I wasted my time. [pauses]. You know, I started to, I needed a therapist because I was reaching a point of, of suicidal ideation.”

An early, prevalent stressor that may be unique to those who leave violent environments is retaliation. Former Danielle explained that during the early post-exit phase, “my paranoia was at an all-time high. I was convinced I was gonna be found and killed. [...] for the first year, I was very nervous about rooms with crowds, about going to music concerts.” Typically, this threat subsides over time, as Neil explained, “when it comes to differences between first years and later on, I think there's both the actual practicality, so you leave a group it's usually very tense [...] but after a while, the movement moves on.”

While it takes time to get over extremist conditioning and learn new behaviors, which will be addressed more in Theme 6: From Public to Private Battle, distrust of others came up as a stressor during first 1-2 years. Former Danielle noted, “I didn't trust my friends when I came out.

I didn't trust anyone when I came out. It took me about a year after leaving for me to reconnect with people and then it took me even longer than that to like, let them see." In some cases, this distrust slowly dissipated, although practitioners mentioned seeing this even years later.

Later post-exit. As initial stressors stabilized, other stressors, such as questions around identity, reckoning with one's past, and dealing with trauma emerged or became more pronounced. Former Kate disclosed, “I spent a long time wondering who I was [...] I feel like my whole worldview was shaken.”

Identity was brought up repeatedly. For example, Practitioner Jillian said that formers she has worked with asked themselves post-exit, “‘what do I believe? Who am I? Where do I belong? What is what's my identity? What makes me important and special in this world?” She explained that for formers, “this ideology, told me who I am and what's important about me, and now I have to find some new answers to those questions, and I don't know where to find those.’"

Indeed, some form of prolonged distress is the norm for former violent extremists. Practitioner Neil said, “I think everything related to crisis and trauma is, is expected. I think what might be unexpected is when people kind of get out and they brush off a bit of dust, and they just move on.”

Visual depictions of stress over time. During the later half of the interviews, the researcher developed a hybrid pictorial scale depicting levels of stress spanning pre-involvement to post-exit. While approved by the IRB as an amendment to the study and sent to all former violent extremists who had participated, not enough were received back to warrant a full inclusion in the analysis. However, here are the three that were received, which were in line with the qualitative findings from this study. See the pictorial scale and instructions sent to participants in Appendix E.

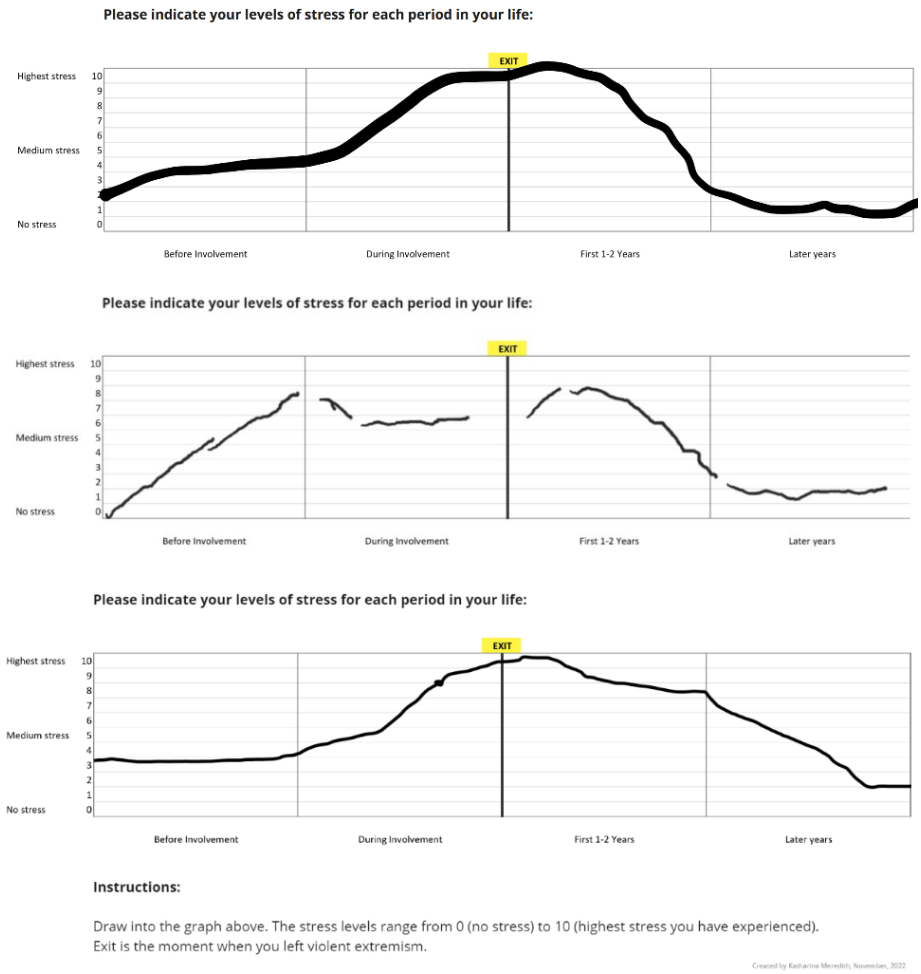

Figure 12 Pictorial Scale Results - Stress over Time

The following wave theoretically visualizes distress post-exit. Despite the hardships or intensity of involvement, the group provided support, and most likely practical needs were met. After exit, stressors might increase or stay at a high level for the early post-exit phase, then reduce in the later years.

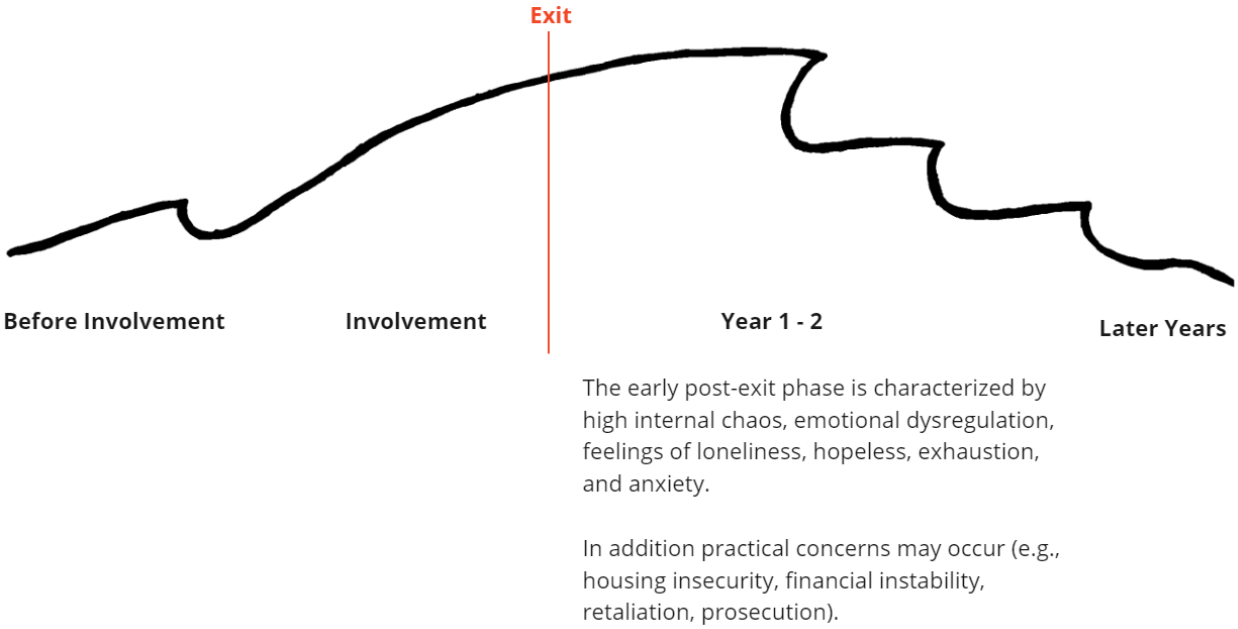

Figure 13 Hypothesized Visualization of the Wave of Distress

This is consistent with Corner & Gill's (2020) analysis of over 90 terrorist autobiographies, which found that membership increased psychological distress in participants with distress doubling between pre-engagement and engagement, followed by only a slight decrease after disengagement. After disengagement, distress did not return to the baseline level of pre-engagement, suggesting that engagement can indeed have long-lasting effects.

Prevalence

Mental disorder	Psychological distress prior to terrorist engagement	Psychological distress during terrorist engagement	Psychological distress during post-disengagement period
11.8%	23.1%	45.9%	41.9%

Figure 14 Prevalence of Mental Disorder (Corner & Gill, 2020, p. 509)

6.5 This transition is “individualized and complex"

Formers and practitioners alike described how taxing the transition out of extremism can be. Post-exit distress is individual, complex, and sometimes traumatic. Practitioner Neil discussed the sheer expanse of questions to be answered and life decisions to be made post-exit. All of the formers reported feeling overwhelmed at some point in their transition and needing to evaluate or change each and every part of their life. Former Arif described this as “turmoil,” stating that it’s “not a psychologically silent process; It’s very noisy.”

Formers are usually unprepared for the post-exit phase. Practitioner Fiona said sometimes they were “not really wanting those changes to happen or not being ready for those changes.” In addition, expectations by those around the person might exceed the person's capacity to change.

Former Simon expressed this frustration, “It's like, did they expect that change to happen like that, when you decide, ‘okay, I'm better,’ right? Like, it's not like that.” He continued, “the pressures that are put on you, by your community, and by the people you love and that love you, don't understand what you're going through. With the internal shit that goes on with you mentally, emotionally, physically, it's like, it's a lot.”

Practitioners expressed that for formers eager to reintegrate, the process might feel like it is moving too slowly. For others, it might feel too fast, with little time to process all the change that is occurring. There was agreement that the process is different for every person.

6.6 Protective factors

The following factors were mentioned by participants as having a mitigating relationship with post-exit distress. They include the presence of resources post-exit (e.g., stable housing, access to healthcare, financial stability), support (e.g., by family, partner, mental health

professional, societal organizations, exit organizations), and intrinsic motivation (e.g., openness to taking responsibility, openness to integrating the past, wanting a non-violent life). In addition, an absence or minimal presence of childhood trauma or stressors (e.g., abuse, neglect, juvenile delinquency, early engagement with drugs or alcohol, neurodivergence), adulthood trauma and stressors before and during involvement (e.g., assault, PTSD, incarceration) were also connected to lower post-exit distress.

Table 6 Potentially Protective Factors against Post-Exit Distress

Presence of:			**Absence of:**
Resources	**Support**	**Intrinsic Motivation**	**Pre-existing**
stable housing	partner or family	open to taking responsibility	childhood trauma
healthcare	mental health professionals	open to integrating past	neurodivergence
finances	exit organizations	Wanting a non-violent life	juvenile delinquency
			early engagement with drugs or alcohol
			incarceration

Support from family and others is incredibly important, not just for resources, but also to address loneliness and self-doubt. Former Kate mentioned, “having people around me, who validated my ability to trust myself, was really meaningful.” Similarly, Former Danielle said, “everyone was just more than willing to be gracious with me, and to be kind and just be happy that they didn't really lose me, that I just lost myself.” Sometimes families facilitate change by

calling their loved ones out on thought patterns or behaviors developed during group involvement. Former Timothy gave an example:

> I was like, trying to tell [my brother] that, you know, "this is the way life is, and you're doing this and it's wrong" and you know, being very, like, um, very binary thinking with him.[...] In one of these conversations, he said, you know, you know, "your sense of superiority is, is really gonna, you know, bring you down one day." And when he said it, I was offended, but it sank in.

Practitioner Jillian discussed the difference between people whose entire social network was within the group and those who had some social network beyond the group:

> So, for those who had family who were not involved, who had still had some social connections, outside, maybe partners or friends, there's a different process of exiting and different challenges to exiting. Whereas someone whose entire world is wrapped up in this movement, maybe, maybe their entire family was involved as well, but, or they were totally rejected by their family and isolated from everyone.

Practitioners and formers align in the view that exiting without social support is incredibly difficult. Beyond family members or friends, exit and reintegration organizations, faith institutions, and communities were helpful to some as well. Former Simon described, “when I decided to go public [...] I really underestimated just how forgiving and loving, and compassionate communities can be.” Former Doug benefited from time in a rehabilitation center, saying, “they would help us come off those, those memories, those bad memories.” While Lara found help from her pastor, who she described “didn't look down on” her.

New roles**,** such as parenting, can give a person's life new meaning, and help someone move on. Former Felix explained, "searching for a higher, higher cause kind of diminishes when you got a child. Because what is your higher cause? 'Well, I'm a parent.' That's my cause. Now and from now on and forever." He paused, then reflected on his involvement, "I used to have a higher cause but it was selfish."

In addition, practitioners and formers acknowledged different variables associated with involvement that can affect the intensity of post-exit stressors.

Variables discussed include: type of involvement (ranging from online, to offline, to moving to another country), length of involvement (ranging from less than a year to 15+ years), role in the group (ranging from peripheral, anonymous, to central, to known figure), use of violence (ranging from verbal, agitator, to perpetrator of pronounced violence, to killing), criminal activities (ranging from no engagement to incarceration), and relationships outside the group (having kept up relationships during involvement, to having cut off all contact). Other factors such as leaving alone versus with others and involuntary versus voluntary disengagement were brought up as well.

6.7 Discussion - Theme 1: "It's A Lot" - Post-Exit Stressors

The theme "It's a Lot" - Post-Exit Stressors explored not only what is stressful to formers post-exit (isolation, fear of retaliation, instability, etc.), but how these stressors might change over time. Adding a temporal component to post-exit stressors gave the findings more context and is especially relevant to practitioners working with this population.

The sub-themes identified are 1) life turned upside down: instability and safety concerns, 2) emotional chaos and mental health issues, 3) identity crisis and loss of support network, 4) early & late post-exit stressors - changes over time, 5) this transition is "individualized and complex," and 6) protective factors.

Post-exit stressors might prevail for any length of time, but the early post-exit phase (first 1-2 years) seems to be dominated by high internal chaos, emotional dysregulation, feelings of loneliness, loss, hopelessness, self-doubt, exhaustion, and anxiety. These may be accompanied by concerns such as housing insecurity, financial instability, retaliation, and doxing. The loss of a support network, a sense of purpose, and the worldview that accompanied group identification are sometimes more consequential than practical stressors.

While some stressors are more poignant to those disengaging from violent extremism, others overlap with the general population. Unique stressors include the dual isolation from both former group and mainstream, fear of violent retaliation, and guilt for the past role. Other challenges, such as "social isolation, anti-social associates, limited education, drugs, alcohol, mental health, or poor family support," might be similar to the overall population (Cherney, 2021, p. 125).

Practitioners interviewed suggest that social workers and therapists are likely familiar with at least half of the stressors former violent extremists may experience. Yet, as will be discussed in Theme 7, therapists regularly turn this population away when help is sought.

Several protective factors were mentioned that might mitigate post-exit distress. Among them are internal and external resources, having access to mental health professionals, governmental services, or exit organizations, and an absence of certain trauma or life

experiences. Roles and experiences during involvement and disengagement also might heighten or lower post-exit stressors.

The transition out of violent extremism is complex and no two paths are alike, yet, enough overlap in stressors was found to warrant a follow-up quantitative or mixed-methods study. Additional research will be necessary to see if the dimensions and categories of post-exit distress hold across a wider range of ideologies, personal attributes, styles, and length of involvement, and countries with varying degrees of post-exit support. This will expand and possibly validate the post-exit distress framework.

7 THEME 2: FROM 24/7 MOVEMENT TO … "NOW WHAT?"

People joining violent extremist groups initially gain companionship, belonging, or purpose (Doosje et al., 2016; Kruglanski et al., 2017).[11] Building on the newfound purpose, groups begin to take up an individual's time. Participants stated that during involvement, most of their time was spent in relation to the group, such as going to social events, performing tasks, listening to podcasts, reading ideological texts, engaging in online chats, recruiting people, or engaging directly in violence. Common tasks and goals can provide a sense of importance or social rewards for members, while also inundating them with extremist content, thereby keeping them locked in a mindset congruent with the group's ideology. As Former Mark explained, "One thing about being in the alt-right is like you are listening to the podcast all the time. Like on the bus, walking around, like your ears, at the gym, your ears are always full of these people talking to you." Former Neil articulated that members might focus on the movement "24/7."

Similarly, Former Kate expressed with some frustration, "I had spent almost every waking hour with the people in this group." Former Timothy described this immersion in radicalizing activity as "feeding into my whatever, savior complex or whatever it was," while Former Lara likened it to a bodily addiction.

Extremist groups thrive on what Latif, et al., (2018) describe as the "rush of collective emotional energy" (p. 487). Formers and practitioners described the intensity of connections during involvement and feeling like everyone had your back no matter what. Members feel excitement or a 'rush,' while being in the group, as illustrated by Former Felix: "I mean, there

[11] Even when the person has lost faith in the ideology or politics of the group, those ties are reason enough to stay (Altier et al, 2014, p. 308; Bjørgo & Carlsson, 2005).

were low points that were horrible, but the high points and the intensity is kind of hard to, to, uh, to find in civilized life." The addictive mix of adrenaline, excitement, a deep sense of belonging, and feeling like you are central to a turning point in history, all fall away after leaving the group.

7.1 Gravity of loss

A few of the formers interviewed said they missed this intensity. Normal activities did not get their adrenaline pumping in the same way and some turned to extreme sports, such as skydiving, or other activities to compensate for the loss of adrenaline.

Reflecting on this, Former Felix said, "The closest I've ever come after exiting was when I almost, uh, me and a coworker, almost got run over by a semi. [...] And that's like the best high I've had in like 15 years. I just was smiling for three, three days afterwards."

Another crucial loss for formers was the disappearance of their social life and support system. The group had become the new family, which was apparent by participants referring to fellow group members as brothers or a brotherhood. 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. [...] I did not find that unity so much in the current lifestyle." This resonated with Former Simon's "sense of, like, emptiness, a lack of belonging, like I didn't, I didn't fit into a specific, like, place in society [...] there was this feeling of being like a bird without a flock to belong to."

Even Former Mark, who had been involved in extremism exclusively online, experienced this loss: "They were my friends, even though I've never met most of them. [...] they were the closest thing I had to a support structure." Most participants described not being able to salvage

relationships within the group after exit, a change that can be enormously disorienting and sometimes frightening.

Additionally, after leaving, many felt their purpose and importance in this world fell away. Former Timothy described “being adrift and like not having any, like, role or purpose,” and no sense “of having any value.” Similarly, Former Mark described initially feeling that his life was pointless now, which led to immobility. and destructive thoughts.

7.2 The void - now what?

The “void” refers to the moment a former finds themselves without their social circle, friends, or even family on which they relied while in the group (Berube et al., 2019). After exit, time spent on extremism significantly reduces and is usually limited to safely extricating oneself from the group or, if applicable, reacting to threats. Directly after exit, formers might be preoccupied with survival, but once their lives stabilize, the absence of everything that once mattered becomes clear.

Practitioner Jillian described formers she works with asking, ‘"if I don't believe that, what do I believe?’” and wondering how to make friends, how to meet new people, and how to “build a life outside of what was formerly a very all-encompassing identity.”

Formers and practitioners expressed that the void threatens people’s entire sense of self. Former Arif had asked himself:

> "Am I, am I abandoning, you know, the correct interpretation?" Because I believed at that time that that was the correct interpretation of Islam. So, I kind of asked myself, like, am I, am I actually turning on the religion? Am I? You know, am I, am I am, I doing the wrong thing by having these thoughts and these ideas?

7.3 Switching to a “different flavor of extremism”

All interviewees acknowledged that the void is uncomfortable. During involvement, binary thinking (good or evil, enemy or supporter) might have acted as a self-defense mechanism against increasing levels of uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2013). If the person exiting is unable to tolerate uncertainty, they might jump into another extremist ideology. Sometimes this is a migration to an opposing ideology, while other times it is to a compatible or even more extreme ideology (Koehler, 2020).[12] Practitioners interviewed confirmed that this is not an uncommon phenomenon: “In the initial phase, I think a lot of people look for something to hold on to. They left a very intense lifestyle and environment, they shifted to something new. [...] I think there's a lot of searching” (Practitioner Neil). Practitioner Anna, in a later focus group, also brought up the risk of relapse or getting involved in other extreme ideologies. This sentiment was shared by Practitioner Jillian who said that formers might change “from one flavor to another flavor” or move “from the far right to the far left.”

Former Danielle mentioned side switching when asked about unproductive coping: “I know a lot of people that leave the movement, they will go straight to the opposite end. And like go into like super leftist places.” Former Arif remembered thinking, “Alright, maybe I should be going to a different group, maybe it's not the overarching ideology, that's wrong. Maybe it was just that particular group."

[12] Referred to as “side switching” for terrorism studies (Koehler, 2020), the concept has been used for years in the cultic field and is referred to as “cult-hopping” (Singer & Lalich, 1996).

7.4 Using time in new and productive ways

Practitioner Fiona observed that what helped formers was “active shifts in behavior,” such as deciding to spend less time online and more time with friends, and family, or going out in nature. Former Simon described using the time he previously spent with the group and in the online forums to get back into things he used to enjoy. Other formers mentioned developing an interest in something new, ranging from artistic, to athletic, to intellectual, and beyond. Former Arif remembered realizing, “‘I don't know that religion, I don't know the language, I need to go and study this properly.’[...] So, I was very, very busy. No time for negative stuff.”

Former Mark reflected on starting college right after exit, and spending “all my day, all day like learning new things, just for the fun of it. Um, to keep my mind off of, you know, [chuckles] white nationalism.”

In some cases, seemingly small changes can signal a big step forward in terms of deradicalization and reintegration. Practitioner Jillian shared that one former she worked with made a commitment to trying a new type of food every week, as the movement had imposed strict dietary rules. Practitioner Jillian expanded that it was in part “changing his identity and his beliefs in that deradicalization process, but also, he found it really exciting and enjoyable.”

In addition, Practitioner Fiona mentioned that “part of the coping is just like literally finding how to spend your time differently, right?” She continued, “If you've spent all of your time kind of focused on focused on the ideology, either, either online or offline or a combination of the two, you now find yourself with an abundance of time to fill.” She further explained that these new activities then become part of imagining and building a new identity. Practitioner Neil mentioned that it is something the person is passionate about.

7.5 (Re)building a life, identity, and purpose

Practitioners expressed that post-exit transition is less about ‘finding’ oneself, and rather ‘creating’ oneself anew - step-by-step, one choice, one behavior at a time. This may include developing pro-social identities by connecting with family or pursuing education or employment (Ferguson & McAuley, 2021).

Former Simon expressed, “I felt that I had created this gap or this gaping hole, where my previous identity sat. And now I had to create this new identity.” Former Felix reported forcing himself to go outside of his comfort zone to develop a more social personality, “I tried Krav Maga. And the first couple of times coming to a new club, and I didn't bring anyone, I didn't want to be dependent on someone else to do this, because I've been dependent on a group and a group thinking, and so I wanted to do it on my own.”

The next theme, “Milestones Missed During Involvement,” explores how the pursuit of a higher cause means a rejection of mainstream goals. In reverse, when leaving violent extremism, formers usually decide to measure themselves by societal standards again. Practitioner Neil explained that the more successful formers build something new, thereby separating the past from the present.

Purpose can be found in a variety of ways. Talking about an ex-combatant that had struggled after the war ended, Practitioner Tanja said she “returned to Lebanon, and became a teacher and women's activist. [She] found a different role and purpose.”

7.6 Discussion - Theme 2: From 24/7 Movement to …. “Now What?”

The theme From 24/7 Movement to…. “Now what?” focused on the expanse of post-exit loss in terms of companionship, intensity, and being part of something larger than oneself.

During involvement, members dedicate an inordinate amount of time to the movement, whether online or offline. Disengagement then creates a vacuum. While at first the stressors of transition might take up new-found time, in the long-term, one's time has to be utilized in new, and hopefully prosocial, ways. The following sub-themes were explored: 1) gravity of loss, 2) the void - now what, 3) switching to a "different flavor of extremism," 4) using time in new and productive ways, and 5) (re)building a life, identity, purpose.

The impact of this vacuum seems difficult to overstate. This study's findings indicate that after exit, four paths are likely to occur. Formers may a) go back to their own group, b) join a group that adheres to an adjacent (sometimes more extreme) ideology, c) join a group with a differing or opposing ideology, or d) find new ways to fill their time, thereby creating new meaning and a non-violent path forward.

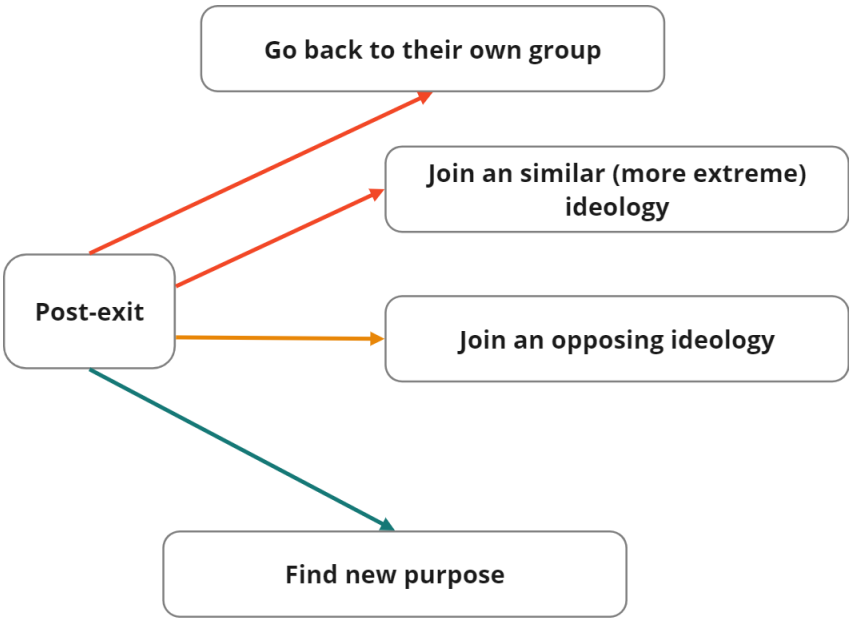

Figure 15 Post-Exit Purpose Options

Future research might inquire into what factors (e.g., lack of prosocial activities or difficulty reestablishing oneself in society), might make formers consider going back to their group, as well as what they find attractive about other extremist ideologies. A better understanding of recidivism and side switching can aid in building better reintegration programs.

8 THEME 3: MILESTONES MISSED DURING INVOLVEMENT

Social and developmental milestones are regularly neglected while members of extremist movements pursue a higher cause. Group belonging typically limits relationships outside the group, as well as the breadth of other roles and social identities. After people leave violent extremism, they may experience grief over relationships lost, roads not taken, and who they would have been had they not adhered to a violent ideology. Formers interviewed employed various coping skills in response, such as trying to enrich their lives, engaging in self-exploration, and developing new social roles and identities.

8.1 Pursuit of a higher cause = rejection of mainstream goals

Extremist involvement alienates members from mainstream society as they neglect or reject common goals of emerging adults, such as education, career, financial stability, and romantic relationships (Rante et al., 2014). Instead, extremism redirects members' focus toward perceived injustices and the goal of rectifying them. This can create a motivational imbalance of one need dominating over other concerns (Kruglanski et al., 2019) and is often achieved by promising rewards and salvation (Perry & Hasisi, 2015).

Former Timothy explained why mainstream goals did not seem important anymore, "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, you know?"

The pursuit of the group's goals can lead members to reduce their ties to mainstream society by distancing themselves from family and friends who are critical of the movement and in some cases, this has meant joining "the fight" in another country.

Severing connections to nonviolent society isolates members, while simultaneously trapping them psychologically (Koehler, 2015). In addition, Former Kate expressed that women in her group were expected to stay at home and start a family, bake, or otherwise support the cause, which she deemed, “an outright attempt to create a sense of financial dependence.”

8.2 Milestones and experiences missed

Overall, cultures have a shared understanding of what one might accomplish by a certain age. The researcher wanted to get a better understanding of how extremist involvement disrupted interviewees’ milestones and experiences. By the second interview, the researcher started asking formers whether they went to dental and medical checkups. In countries where healthcare is readily available, most people have at least one of each annually. This prompt, about something relatively mundane, often took participants by surprise. Former Felix responded, “Oh (pauses). I haven't thought about it in that way. I think I missed (pauses) a lot.” He continued, “I'm not sure what I was supposed to, um. I mean you missed school, you missed social activities, you missed, um, doctor's appointments at school.” He expanded on why he deemed it unimportant:

> [...] like a lot of things didn't seem to matter. Like, uh, curriculum, dental appointments. I mean, you were supposed to die the martyr's death before 25, anyway. So, I don't need to know the answer for Jeopardy. I mean, I don't need to start a pension fund. It's not applicable to where I'm at. Like if you look at like, if you work with criminals, they don't have a long-term plan. They might get shot tomorrow or in a week. So what's the point? Get a dental appointment. It doesn't matter if you're gonna get shot in a week. You've got other focuses.

Several other participants responded in a similar manner. In addition, while discussing post-exit stressors, participants repeatedly mentioned their neglect of financial and retirement planning during involvement. Most of the formers interviewed did not pursue a career outside of the movement. This ties into existing research by (Latif et al., 2020), who state that many formers do not have meaningful careers because they were discouraged from pursuing education. Some interviewees reported not working outside of the group at all, while others expressed holding jobs that required little dedication.[13] Former Danielle described working primarily to support her partner in the movement, an arrangement that was technically hypocrisy: "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."

Several participants mourned that they did not pursue education and therefore had few skills qualifying them for employment after disengaging. Former Doug said, "It was one thing that was real stress for me, how I would survive because I had not learned." Similarly, 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 sooner."

While some were able to pursue education after they left, for others that time had passed, limiting their job options. Practitioner Tanja, who works with ex-combatants, said that many had been very young when they got involved, and after it was very hard for them "to reintegrate into working life."

Another missed milestone expressed by many formers was building long-term relationships. Some did during involvement, but those relationships rarely lasted once they left.

[13] This is in line with Barrelle (2015), who writes that "organized white supremacism deeply affects the ideologies, identities, social networks, and occupations of those who become associated with its groups and networks" (p. 369).

In terms of dating, several expressed being strongly encouraged to date or ‘hook up’ within their group or ideology. Several participants who had been involved in the far-right explained that ideology dictated that couples ‘save the white race.’ Former Danielle was told she “‘was going to be the first person in their Lebensborn program’” and was only useful as “‘good breeding stock.’”

Two of the female interviewees conveyed immense relief over not having gotten pregnant during involvement. However, that meant that they were older when leaving and worried about their “biological clock.” For example, Former Kate stated, “I always wanted kids, but I'm really grateful I didn't have any with that, with the guy I was with.” She followed up by saying, “I'm not getting any younger. And I have to 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.”

Even if participants did start a family during their time in the group, the relationship was usually tied to a shared worldview. Unless the family disengages together, this is bound to create problems. Former Timothy, said that during involvement, “‘I had four kids, not because I loved this person, or, you know, but because I was trying to, you know, correct the mistakes that my father had made. Also, and also, like, trying to, quote-unquote, ‘save my race.’” When he left the movement and his wife, he lost access to his children, which was very disorienting, severed his tie to what his purpose had been, and remains a point of grief to this day.

Other milestones often connected with adulthood, such as buying a house, settling down, or preparing for old age, were not addressed specifically as part of this study, but are likely to fall to the wayside in pursuit of extremist goals.

8.3 Neglect of personal and social development

In addition to limiting the attainment of cultural or shared milestones, spending formative years inside violent extremism can mean missing out on important experiences and personal developmental phases. Ultimately, this can result in feelings of not knowing oneself, as Former Simon described:

> A lot of people built that sense of self in their adolescence, in their youth. They get that like their own person, 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, how they wanna vote. And it's like, I never did that.

Similarly, Former Felix said:

> You kind of missed some parts of your [adolescence] because you were in a fixed environment, which had set parameters. [...] And you have to kind of catch that up. And that feels strange when you're not, you're not in that, um, in that age group anymore.

He expressed that he felt lost when other social identities, which had taken a backseat during involvement, became more pronounced after exit. He emotionally exclaimed, “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?”

While there are no easy answers, Practitioner Tanja discussed using a type of biography work “to engage in this process of critical self-reflection of inner transformation and of rebuilding identities that were probably neglected.”

8.4 Grief and regret

Grief and regret, as well as a sense of having thrown their life away, can be common experiences for formers. Formers Danielle and Lara spoke to this in similar terms, with Danielle describing “feeling like I wasted my life,” and Lara stating “I felt like they wasted, they wasted me.”

Grief seemed to show up in three different areas a) grief over relationships lost, b) grief over paths not taken/opportunities missed, and c) grief over the person one could have been.

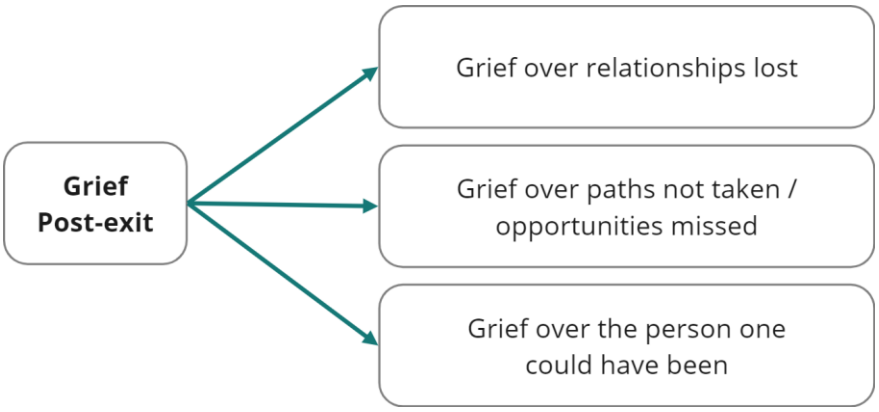

Figure 16 Post-Exit Grief

Participants mentioned relationships lost with parents, siblings, childhood friends, and others, as they became more involved in violent extremism. Former Mark expressed, “to this day, I haven't repaired any old relationships. They're dead and gone.” Former Lara reported that: “after the exit getting to get everyone back was not so easy cause everyone moved on with life, no one waits for you.” Former Danielle recounted how it was too late to fix a relationship that was lost during involvement, “the person I was closest with in my life, [...] had passed, and I never grieved it until I left. [...] I left the movement because she died, and I realized that she had nothing to be proud of.”

Several of the formers interviewed mourned the paths not taken and spoke longingly of seeing people around them whose lives were not derailed by extremism. Former Simon described both a sense of loss and an acute awareness of how far being involved in extremism sets one back: "...you start your life at a 100. Because you have all the opportunities and possibilities in the world to make your life whatever you want it to be. And then you throw everything away, and you're negative a 100."

Several formers interviewed reported comparing themselves to 'normal people.' Former Lara said, "I thought there was no hope for me, that I was never gonna live a normal life, be like every normal person I see in the streets. I felt like I was never gonna achieve things." Participants expressed significant grief for the person they might have been without extremist involvement. Most described a phase of reckoning post-exit, where they struggled with how involvement had changed their trajectory in life and affected who they are now. Former Danielle recalled mourning who she was before the movement, "For the first few years, I only wore black. I was mourning myself and my identity and who, before I joined the movement, who I thought it was gonna be." She shared that identity exploration and questioning are ongoing parts of her life, "because of how profound of a loss it was."

8.5 Making up for lost time

Several former extremists expressed trying to make up for lost time as part of experimenting with who they are now. They engaged in behaviors typically associated with adolescence and early 20s while being well past that age. Former Simon said:

> [...] here I am at 39 years old, and doing shit, that like 18 / 17-year-old kids are doing like, I go to the dirt tracks on weekends and drink beer and I'm like, wooahr (sort

of a roaring sound). And it's like, "Dude, you're 40 fucking years old. Why are you doing this shit?" It's like "cause I never got to do it as a kid. And I need to do it to figure out who I am today."

Former Dannielle exclaimed, "That's what my brother actually said to me. That it was like watching me go from like a bratty kid to like to like a petulant teenager [...] I felt like, like having to regrow up."

Three formers talked about experimenting sexually after exit, from sleeping with those they were not allowed to sleep with during involvement, due to gender or race, to general promiscuous behavior.

While it is impossible to make up for all milestones missed - especially when it comes to career and general stability - making up for developmental milestones as much as possible seems to help formers feel more grounded in their new life. This might require socialization, communities open to that reintegration, and support from mental health professionals and peer specialists.

8.6 Discussion - Theme 3: Milestones Missed During Involvement

Developmental and emerging adulthood milestones get neglected as members of extremist groups focus on the higher cause of the movement they subscribe to. While not uncommon in certain professions (priesthood, veterans, Olympians, etc.) this puts formers at a significant disadvantage when reentering mainstream society, as their extremist past is generally reviled. During radicalization, mainstream goals get rejected; during reintegration, they might get (re)embraced.

In regards to mainstream goals, even veterans who give up or delay personal milestones for a socially acceptable cause report feeling behind due to their military service (Orazem et al., 2017). In theory, they should experience less stigma for their past and have an easier time transitioning back into mainstream society. In practice, their early transition period can be plagued by difficulties, such as community integration or work barriers, especially for those who experienced combat (Kukla et al., 2015).

In some cases, formers strive to catch up with their peers or the rest of society overnight. One practitioner mentioned that there is little patience or understanding that personal growth takes time and that there are no instant fixes. Rushing through the reintegration process (such as quickly settling down with the first person one meets post-exit or going public about one's involvement too soon) was mentioned during a member check as being counterproductive in the long run.[14] Quickly accomplishing mainstream milestones might look like successful integration at first, but is not necessarily a sustainable way of finding one's footing in mainstream society. Rushing ahead and ignoring underlying issues (further explored in Theme 5: From Public to Private Battle and Theme 7: Coping: Balance Instead of Extremes) does not diminish difficult feelings, and if not processed properly, they could show up as anger or violence instead.

Lastly, former extremists might not be aware of personal and social development they missed - "you don't know what you don't know." As such, developing an understanding of what was neglected is a logical first step in identifying opportunities for growth. A follow-up study focusing specifically on missed milestones and developments might provide more insight and

[14] In addition to which, one practitioner expressed that formers interested in becoming "professional formers," sometimes want to be an 'expert within months, not realizing that becoming a subject matter expert in any field takes time and requires varied qualifications.

become the basis for a questionnaire that practitioners can administer to identify and address these gaps.

9 THEME 4: CONTINUED NEGATIVE IMPACT FROM INVOLVEMENT

The immediate and long-lasting impact of violent extremism on its victims, their families, and societies has been studied and is well-established.[15] Understandably, little research exists on potential negative impacts experienced by formers themselves. While insignificant in comparison, the suffering they experience is an important finding and can tie into prevention efforts. During involvement, as has been discussed, members of violent extremist groups see their actions as necessary and the resulting sacrifices as worthwhile. The researcher was curious, on the premise that perceived benefits ceased after exit, what would be left in their wake?

Multiple areas of negative impact were identified during the interviews. It is important to note that while there may be other causal factors, such as personality or pre-existing trauma, several participants clearly stated not struggling with these issues before involvement, and attributed them to their time inside violent extremism.

9.1 Residual identity

At its core, extremism moves members away from a balanced personal identity with varied interests and roles and toward a rigid and single-minded group identity (Marsden, 2015). For formers, there is most likely a myriad of unpleasant residuals connected with their past role.

Ebaugh (1988) wrote in her book *Becoming an Ex*, "To be a nonmember of a group is essentially different from being an ex-member in that nonmembers have never been part of the group." (p. 4). *Residual identity* or *hangover identity*, both terms used by Ebaugh, can therefore

[15] E.g., Barrelle (2015) states, "The damage inflicted on a person's community as a result of their involvement in political extremism can be enormous, ranging from economic disruption, to hate crimes, to large-scale attacks, as well as the significant policing and social resources that go towards preventing and responding to acts of political violence" (p. 130)

not be completely separated from a former's identity post-exit. That's not to say they cannot consciously form new behaviors and identities over time, but it is not an easy process.

While not a complete list of role residuals that formers may carry with them after exit, the following examples were mentioned by participants:

Table 7 Examples of Role Residual

Role Residual	Examples
Extremist mentality that was cultivated	● Us-versus-them thinking ● Prone to continued "in-grouping and out-grouping ● Feelings of superiority ● Distrust of others ● Biases and stereotypes against previous out-groups ● Disbelief in media and mainstream sources of knowledge ● Disinformation about history (e.g., denial of Holocaust) ● Misogyny ● Racism ● Belief in an absolute truth ● Black-or-white thinking ● Group values (e.g., parenting style, the role of man and woman)
Byproduct of Involvement	● "Wired" for conflict and violence ● Hot-headed, anger first emotion ● Always being "on" - hypervigilance ● Fear of missing out ● Defensive, sensitive to real or perceived rejection ● Distrust of self and others ● Reduced emotional spectrum

	• Dichotomy of “weak” vs “strong” emotions • Either-or emotions (happy or angry), emotional extremes (elated or depressed)
Physical manifestations	• Tattoos

Extremist mentality. Another way of understanding role residual is by looking at automatic behaviors and thought patterns that were conditioned during involvement. In some cases, these patterns build on existing biases. For example, Latif et al. (2020) 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. White supremacism also reshapes the identities of its adherents, as they learn to regard whites as victims. (p. 369)

Whether building on existing biases or not, Practitioner Neil describes the conditioning of involvement as being trained in “almost a way of thinking, responding, you hear, if you're in a right-wing extremist group, and you hear immigrant language, you can automatically react to this, or you just see certain things and you automatic reacted.” Practitioner Greg referred to a lingering worldview as the framework a former interprets everything through. For example, watching the news:

> I'm guessing quite difficult to not interpret those events through that ideology. If you've been doing that for, you know, a decade of seeing "look another injustice against Muslims," [...] "Another example of why the West is at war with Islam" it's probably hard to get out of that if that kind of neural pathway is so entrenched.

Practitioner Fiona followed his statement during the focus group with this remark, “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?"

Distrust. One of the most mentioned role residuals was continued mistrust and distrust of others and outgroups. Practitioner Jillian stated that even for people who have disengaged and deradicalized for 20-plus years, "there's this kind of automatic ingrouping and outgrouping that still goes on, constantly being vigilant for people being a threat to them, not knowing who to trust."

Former Joel specifically mentioned that "relationships were a part of the reasons why I joined this group in the first instance. [After exit] making friends was not so easy." Former Felix described how his brain is fixed on mistrust and he has to make a conscious choice to go against it.

9.2 Impaired sense of self

Members of violent extremist groups share a worldview and cause that creates a sense of oneness. Barrelle (2015) found that 61% of participants indicated that their "sense of self was almost totally merged with the group" (p. 131). Un-merging one's sense of self from the group can be challenging, requires restructuring, and can be detrimental to psychological well-being (Ferguson & McAuley, 2021; Swann Jr. et al., 2012).

Former Lara spoke of not being able to identify herself or know who she was, while Former Arif spelled out, "'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 spoke strongly of this experience, "It was absolutely devastating to not have any idea what was real and what wasn't really about me. Like I was the propaganda."

She remembers asking herself "'what was the show? And what was sincere?'" and that it wasn't until a year and a half post-exit that she began to have a bit of an idea of who she really was.

It can be very hard for formers to reconcile who they were before joining violent extremism with the hateful things they said, did, and condoned during involvement.[16] These issues align with the moral injury model which describes the harm and impact of "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectation" (Litz et al., 2009).

Former Lara described the inner tension around conflicting senses of self: "It's like they put this thing in you, you get, like it's like they put it in you, and you get so violent. You can start to behave, like you start to behave the way they behave. You start to do the things they do." She asked herself, "'Did I, did I do this? I did this.'"

Practitioners confirmed seeing these experiences with many who sought help at their organizations. However, they were quick to point out that they see only a small number of those who leave violent extremism, and mostly self-referred clients. Others might have no interest in examining their past role in violent extremism, or only feel regret over how involvement affected their own life, not what they did to others.

Participants also described formers' distrust of themselves. Former Arif pointed out, "I didn't feel like I could trust my own critical thinking and judgment and sense of belief anymore. Because I let myself get wrapped up in, uh, the things that I was involved in." Practitioner Jillian explained this as follows:

[16] Arguably, someone whose pre-involvement values already condoned violence and hatred against an outgroup, might not struggle as much with guilt and shame after.

> They are, are trying to decide “do I keep this, do I reject this, do I change this? [...] But can I trust myself to, to make these decisions? [...] Who can I trust to give me feedback that that's, that is going to be healthy for me and helpful to me?”

9.3 Impaired emotional regulation

Formers’ access to or interpretation of their own feelings may be altered during involvement. One distortion that stands out is a dichotomy of “strong versus weak emotions.” Former Felix described that, “the three dominant emotions that I had until exit was anger, hatred, jealousy, indifference. And any other emotion that came up, uh, I invalidated.” He reasoned, “you don't have time for anxiety when there's a mortal attack. You just transform that into something that makes you, that gives you power to act or to save yourself.”

Practitioners agreed that emotional regulation was a considerable concern post-exit. Practitioner Neil mentioned, “These groups validate anger, aggression, jealousy, or kind of controlling emotions. And they invalidate what they would perceive as weak emotions, fear, uncertainty, happiness, perhaps or love.” He said many need to relearn those emotions.

During the early post-exit phase, several formers had reduced access to, or vocabulary for, the spectrum of emotions. For example, for some the first emotional response to a variety of issues was anger. Former Felix illustrates this well: “the go-to emotion, if someone hurts me, or if someone makes me sad or anything, the first option in my head is ‘You're pissing me off.’ And I have to concentrate to go to ‘Okay, so what are you really feeling?’” He followed up with an example:

> I have really bad road rage and if a car kind of cuts me off and doesn't signal, um, my first emotion is that someone is trying to kill me. He's my enemy. And then I

> dehumanize them, and then you can commit violent crimes against that person. [...] So, I have to concentrate into going, well, maybe he didn't want to hurt me. Okay, so I got pissed off. But I was really scared of dying. So maybe if I go, I stop that guy. I should say, “Holy shit, you really scare the shit out of me. I'm really lucky. Well, I'm really glad we're both alive.”

A few formers mentioned feeling either happy or sad right after exit, with not much in between. Former Danielle said:

> [...] everything felt different and new, and there was no emotional regulation. If I was happy, I became euphoric. But that was so quick to be drowned out by depression. [...] I mean, I felt every emotion, at all times. It was just a matter of which voice was screaming loudest in my head.

Another former also expressed having emotions that were not appropriate for the situation, such as wanting to laugh when everyone else was solemn.

9.4 Impaired social functioning

Many formers experience impaired social functioning post-exit, such as issues communicating and interacting in non-violent and constructive ways, struggling in relationships, or lacking the art of small talk and polite conversation. Former Felix discussed the first impression he felt he made on others:

> I have a resting warface. So, people usually say that “you're pissed off.” And that, me looking pissed off, and not being really social, is not the best, the best place to start when you're supposed to establish a new social circle.

He followed up by saying, that it can be hard to connect with “non-radicalized people” because, “some of the experiences that they have, seem trivial to you. [...] they may interpret you as insensitive, but you're not. You're just used to a higher level of intensity. And you're normalized in that. And you have to kind of dial down the volume.”

Several formers reported having friends before involvement, yet struggling socially after exit. Former Danielle described, “I came off as like threatening and strange because I saw everyone else as a threat and strange.” Former Doug, who had gone through a reintegration camp after disengaging, found it helpful, but still relied on his wife to tell him when he did not act in socially acceptable ways after leaving the reintegration camp.

Several formers discussed difficulties with close relationships after exiting. While all types of violence, such as experiencing a natural disaster or witnessing a death, can have traumatic effects on the individual, traumas that take place in interpersonal relationships with people one depended on violate basic trust and are especially detrimental (Freyd, 1994). This can have an impact on future relationships. 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 find a problem.”

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.

Practitioners and formers agree that these interpersonal patterns are both significant stressors and, as Practitioner Jillian emphasized, “really, really hard to break.”

9.5 Practical impediments

Most former extremist participants expressed practical negative consequences. Usually, they related to finances (often influenced by lack of career or savings) and affected the options they currently have available to them, such as housing or healthcare. Former Kate shared not being able to go to the hospital because she did not have health insurance and having lingering health issues as a result. Former Lara stated, “Till today I have not been so, say, financially stable to the extension which I want to be financially stable. I've not had acquired enough that I really want.” This also related to a lack of career planning and education, as discussed in Theme 3: Milestones Missed During Involvement.

Practitioners mentioned that legal fines resulting from involvement could add to a financial burden and, conversely, having a criminal background makes it even harder to achieve financial stability.

9.6 Trauma

All of the formers interviewed had exposure to stressful events or trauma during involvement or exit.[17] Experiences shared by formers that may lead to trauma and long-term negative consequences included rape, domestic violence, psychological abuse, seeing friends die, physical injuries, the emotional toll of violence or murder, witnessing violence, being scared for their life due to physical threats or medical neglect, and fear of being caught by the authorities.

[17] According to the DSM-5 definition, trauma involves “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (p. 271). Many events experienced by formers would be categorized as stressful, but not traumatic.

On top of these, the exit process can be stressful or traumatic, especially if there are continued threats of retaliation, ongoing legal issues, or housing or food insecurity.

Former Danielle discussed being raped during involvement, and how her initial response after exit was still denial, having been taught it was her duty as " breeding stock." Former Felix described early exposure to mortal threat as a 12 yr. old pursued by police and dogs, which in turn instilled a need to escalate violence to counter it. He also expressed great loss that people around him died: "There's been so much loss that it kind of gets blurred and you kind of get normalized to that too unfortunately. You kind of go, 'well, people die. They always have. It's normal.'"

Several participants expressed housing instability, which for one female meant the threat of sexual assault. Injuries were common during involvement or disengagement, and post-exit, many feared that the group would retaliate against them, leading some formers to make peace with death or be hypervigilant at all times.

Practitioners discussed how offline involvement might be more traumatic than online involvement. Practitioner Jillian said that for "those people who are involved in the offline, the real world, there is an additional layer of trauma and exposure to trauma and threat and that hypervigilance that comes from a place of lived experience." Practitioner Fiona spoke about the general risks of violence and incarceration during involvement, but also the risk of deradicalizing while being physically unable to leave an extremist group.

Formers and practitioners mentioned trauma responses they experienced or observed, such as flashbacks and nightmares. 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. As far as

what helped, he attributed the reintegration program, saying, “they would help us come off those, those memories, those bad memories.”

Practitioner Tanja spoke of a former combatant who for the “ first couple of months, she just cried and cried and cried and cried all the time and everywhere. And so that was her immediate response, to cope with all that trauma.” She also saw exposure to violence impacting life-long behaviors, such as parenting: “I think in the longer term, what happens between the ex-combatants and their children, for example, there's this, this overprotection, you know, the will the desire to protect your children from any kind of danger.”

Indeed, trauma responses can have a pronounced effect on daily functioning. This notion was underlined by an example by Former Danielle who felt the need to get a car with keyless ignition in order to start it remotely, lest there be a bomb planted there, as her former group had discussed doing. Speaking further of trauma impacts, she recounted:

> [...] my boss came behind me and put his hand on my shoulder to try and tell me that he could console me, and I turned around and like just started wailing, having a panic attack of just like, holy shit, you're gonna kill me and then I realized it was him. And, needless to say, my employment there was not much longer. It was just that, it's that paranoia like you just completely, it's, it's awful.

Practitioner Tanja spoke to the risks and need for balance in delving into historical trauma, recognizing that it is not always immediately appropriate or helpful to formers. Thankfully, more exit programs have started including psychological elements and the importance of mental health professionals has been recognized in recent years (Kizilhan, 2019; Koehler, 2020; Koehler & Popella, 2020). It is essential to note that trauma requires specialized

attention that differs from other stressors mentioned in this study. Judith Hermann, of the seminal figures in trauma work, writes:

> Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the, the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Treatment must be appropriate to the patient's stage of recovery. A form of therapy that may be useful at one stage may be of little use or even harmful to the same patient at another stage. (Herman, 2015, p. 156)

9.7 Discussion - Theme 4: Continued Negative Impact From Involvement

Involvement in violent extremism often results in negative impacts that may linger after disengagement, such as role residual and automatic thoughts, impaired sense of self, impaired social functioning, financial instability, and trauma.[18] All of the above contribute to post-exit distress. While this study is exploratory, there might be a difference in stressors that are tied to transition and reintegration, but are most likely temporary, as opposed to stressors that started during involvement and might permanently alter someone's life.

One of the main findings from this theme is that even if members of violent extremist groups never perform a single act of violence, involvement can change their life trajectories to their own detriment. They are likely to lose relationships, respect for themselves, trust in self and others, as well as education and career options. Some negative impacts might turn into static

[18] Simi and colleagues (2017) write that a "whole other layer of unwanted and involuntary thoughts, feelings, bodily responses, and behaviors may persist and continue to shape a person's life" (p. 1168).

stressors, for example, someone might be stuck with a criminal record, experiences of sexual assault, or being disabled from a wound received during involvement or exit.

Few studies have looked exclusively at what negative impacts linger post-exit. Corner & Gill (2020) summarized some of the negative consequences of involvement (physiological distress, guilt, regret, trouble with role and actions, and burnout), but beyond that, negative consequences are typically not the primary focus of studies, which are more likely to examine disengagement, deradicalization, or reintegration. However, the findings of this study tie into the existing literature on disengagement, reintegration, role residual, and automatic thoughts (e.g. Ebaugh, 1988, Simi et al. 2017).

While the impact on victims of terrorism is well-established, these findings suggest that involvement in violent extremism has detrimental consequences for perpetrators, too. This claim needs to be explored in more depth. A life-course perspective, which has been applied to study criminals and former violent extremists' arc (e.g., Simi et al., 2016; Berube et al., 2019) would be well suited. This was outside the scope of this study, and as such, there is no claim to causation, just that participants perceived involvement and certain negative impacts to be connected.

10 THEME 5: FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE BATTLE

"Hate is a learned outcome of group membership."

DeMichele, et al. (2021)

Formers described how hate and anger were cultivated during involvement and turned outward against a common enemy. An extremist movement 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). A movement may also tell members they are being victimized and blame an outgroup for perceived injustices in order to justify violent means against the perceived wrong-doers.

After exit, as extremist views lessen, formers might not know where to direct their anger and turn it against themselves if they don't explore the origin and deal with it. This was termed by the researcher "from public to private battle," to show a change in the directionality of anger and, at the same time, highlight that the battle against one's conditioning, while invisible to most, is a major struggle for many formers.

10.1 Group-mobilization toward anger and violence

Rituals in a group can foster strong emotions, such as anger, fear, and hate, all of which tie the group together (Jasper, 2011; Sullivan, 2007). During involvement violence and hate speech quickly become normalized. For participants, this ranged from being on the *politics* board on 4chan - which promoted "gas chamber memes, Holocaust memes. You know, idolizing mass

shooters and stuff like that" (Former Mark) - to listening to podcasts promoting hateful ideas, to being physically in a group that fostered anger, to using violence against others.

Former Felix disclosed that when he was a teenager, the group validated and directed his anger.[19] 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. If others don't suffer, then my suffering is worthless."

After being radicalized, some of the participants reported feeling 'wired' for a fight and said that socialization within the group and a steady stream of propaganda had kept their desire for action and violence burning. It seems that this does not immediately diminish with exit. Former Felix said "it was hard to switch off. [...] it was hard to not look for violence."

10.2 Where does the anger go?

Two paths forward were identified: 1) formers might continue to turn anger outward (e.g., finding a new out-group to blame, interpersonal violence, senseless aggression), or 2) they might turn it inward, at least until they learn to process it.

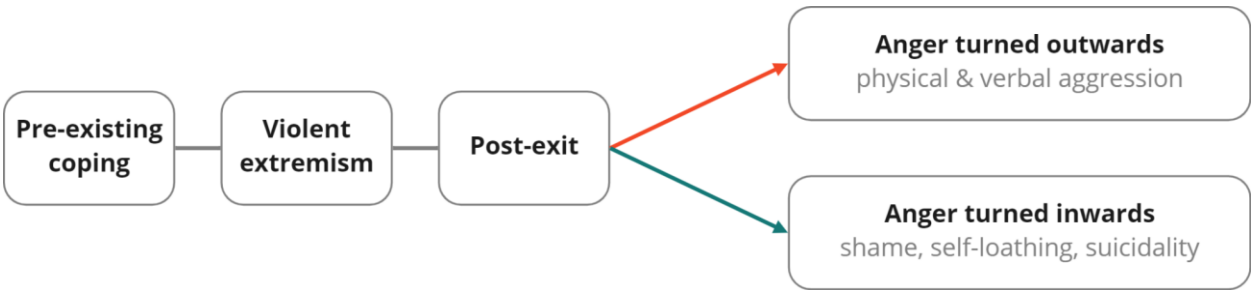

Figure 17 Post-Exit Anger

[19] Especially for children and adolescents, the socialization and often deliberate creation of trauma and "toxic stress" may lead to "fast life strategies," such as "increased aggression, anxiety, impulsivity", benefiting the violent extremist environment, but not the individual (Hornor, 2015, p. 192; Koehler, 2020, p. 464).

Anger kept persisting after exit. For example, Former Doug stated that after exit he still found himself being very angry at people over small things. Practitioner Neil shared that formers sometimes turn aggression against their family. 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."

The other path expressed turning anger inwards. Interviewees stated that it was essential for formers to take responsibility for past and current actions and feel adequate guilt, as some of their actions directly resulted in physical injury and death of others. For the formers in this study, it seemed that a reckoning had taken place for all of them, although likely to varying degrees. Several expressed disbelief over having perpetrated or condoned violence. In addition to a sense of regret, they might experience "confusion over, you know, 'what did I do? How did this happen? How did I end up in this place? This is not what I intended'" (Former Neil).

While feeling guilty is a healthy emotional reaction to having been a part of violent extremism, excessive shame can turn into self-loathing and even suicidality, thereby crippling progress.[20] Former Danielle described being unable to forgive herself and being suicidal as a result. She further described a sort of atonement by becoming a public figure against extremism: "That was my own punishment to myself. I was like, 'Well, you got to hurt other people. So now you get to be uncomfortable for a long time.'"

The idea that one had to hurt post-exit also came up with Former Simon, who described it as having to "pay the piper" for what he had done. He experienced overwhelming shame and contemplated that as a result, "you almost start to target yourself. Like, like, 'you're not good

[20] Moral injury, discussed earlier, can "impair the capacity for trust and elevate despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence" (Shay, 2014, p. 182).

enough. You're a piece of shit. You're a loser. You're a fucking drug addict. [...] Like, that's all you are.'"

Some participants also mentioned pre-existing trauma and violent coping mechanisms that helped lead them into violent extremism. Former Felix explained that violence had been a way of dealing with his own pain and that it diminished his suicidal thoughts as a teenager. He stated, "the only time that I had self-harm behaviors was when I was hindered to commit violence against others." He continued to describe self-harm behaviors and how he and other guys around him had engaged in back then, but did not know that's what they were doing.

10.3 Pre-existing stressors beg to be dealt with

Baaken et al. (2021) write that the point of deradicalization is not a reversal per se, but rather a reckoning with what led to an extremist worldview. As discussed previously, deradicalization often brings an individual back to the difficulties or stressors that made extremism appealing, to begin with (Baaken et al. 2021).

Former Simon stated, "the things that I experienced, that led me into extremism, were still present [...] all of that shit that I used extremism, and ideology to kind of mitigate was still there." Trauma, past hurt, isolation, and other factors that had led to involvement need to be dealt with. If not, anger can remain the conditioned response to any given stressor.

A good way to visualize this is with anger at the top of an iceberg as the visible emotion. Below the surface simmer deeper issues. The following figure is an example of feelings and personal factors shared during the interviews with formers. These range from genetic predisposition (e.g. neurodivergence), to trauma, and feelings that the movement might have exploited during radicalization, but that could also be a result of involvement. In practice, this is

most useful to practitioners as they help a former identify and address these issues that are not presenting as clearly as anger.

Figure 18 Post-Exit Anger Iceberg

Exploring underlying issues is part of the following coping strategies: problem-solving and seeking understanding. Former Simon explained how this process helped him understand how he became radicalized. He shared how few times his father had expressed love or pride toward him growing up and how, in contrast, the extremist group made him feel wanted. As a result of that vulnerability, he said, “I didn't just want to be a white supremacist. I wanted to be

the worst white supremacist, the meanest one. And I wanted to get the praise and the props for that.” After exit, he described being stuck alone with the "ghosts" of his past: an emotionally absent father, a molesting uncle, domestic violence, and later trauma he experienced as a young adult.

10.4 Going against conditioning of anger and hate

Going against conditioning for anger and violence requires formers to confront underlying issues and find new ways of engaging with themselves and the world. However, unlearning subconscious behaviors formed during involvement can take significant time (Simi et al, 2017). Former Simon expressed, “Anybody in an extremist movement is screaming out for help, for somebody to acknowledge them and to help them [...] You wanna quit. You don't like it, but you become wired for it. And then to unwire that is, is really hard.”

Former Timothy also discussed that it is hard to break patterns from involvement and said, “I don't believe the [formers who] a month or three months [after exit] say that they're changed. You know, it just, it takes a lot more work than that.”

This shift toward changing themselves, rather than the world, includes recognizing conditioning, identifying factors that kept conditioning alive, and then actively going against conditioning. Once someone recognizes that they are likely to respond in certain ways, they can change their behavior. Former Danielle explained, “I still have paranoid thoughts that pop in my head, I still get really bad anxiety, I can't control that first thought. That's who I was conditioned to be. But the second thought that I have is who I want to be.” She continued, “I can soothe myself and say, ‘That's not who I am anymore.’”

The next step is to stop engaging in violence and hateful content. Sometimes this requires going on a full-on detox. Former Mark described having to completely disconnect from social media, podcasts, and other online content and the effect the disconnection had. He expressed that once he stopped listening to far-right podcasts, it was hard to believe the hateful message. In real life, he encountered a black cashier at the grocery store who was “normal,” or a Hispanic person at Starbucks who was “nice.” He realized podcasts had reinforced the message that “these people are subhuman. You can't trust them." He described stopping belief in the ideology just a couple of months after he stopped consuming extremist content.

Some interviewees described how established psychological interventions, such as cognitive behavioral or exposure therapy, helped them change behaviors. Others surrounded themselves with new people, as exemplified by Former Kate: “I knew that I needed to surround myself with people that I would have never hung out with, when I was an extremist [...] racially diverse and ideologically diverse environments.”

10.5 Maintenance of a non-violent identity

The ten formers interviewed seemed to all recognize their previous conditioning toward anger and hate. However, there is no single activity for coping, stabilizing, or ‘detoxing’ that can act as a universal fix. Rather, it is a continued effort to disarm their anger, work on balance, create new purpose and belonging, and shift one’s identity to something free of the group’s influence (as discussed in previous sections). New, pro-social roles came up again. For example, practitioners agreed that parenthood gives formers a chance to reshape how they interact with the world.

The researcher created the following one-pager for practitioners to use, based on the study's findings. All the bullet points listed were mentioned directly by participants.

Extremist Environments

(turned into a ticking bomb)

Group influences that turned up anger and hatred, mobilized to violence

One's insecurities or traits that were utilized to increase hatred and group dependency

Exit

A time of drastic change, uncertainty, questioning, instability, and emotional turmoil. Often while feeling alone, overwhelmed, depressed, or confused. Accompanied by lack of social support, lack of coping strategies, and anger.

Step 1: Cut the connection

- Social Media detox
- Podcast, news, etc. detox
- People that are still involved detox

Step 2: Take actions to dismantle or reduce explosive feelings after exit

Distraction Coping:

- Hobbies (e.g., cooking, knitting, fishing, gardening)
- TV, video games, reading, podcasts, music
- Volunteer (e.g., animal shelter)
- Working, school, learning new things

Active:

- Working out
- Running, hiking, walking
- Martial arts
- Sex, self-pleasure
- Stretching, Yoga
- Skydiving, adventure sport

Inactive:

- Sleep
- Relax and rest

Step 3: Rebuild a non-explosive core

Self:

- Evaluating worldview; trash what's not a fit anymore
- Stepping away from anger
- Broad emotional spectrum
- Practicing self-regulation
- Finding new passions
- Defining own morals and values

Community:

- Exploring new social groups
- Trying new roles in society
- Meaningful relationships
- Finding a fulfilling career
- Shared hobbies, sports, etc.

Seeking support

- Sharing past with friends
- Contacting exit organizations
- Peer support from others
- Engaging with therapists or social workers
- Physical checkups

Figure 19 One-Pager for Practitioners - 3 steps to "disarm" yourself

This guide based on formers' experiences is expected to grow with follow-up studies. Three former extremists provided feedback on it during the member checks. One said that this felt more real than telling a former extremist that they are a flower and need to nourish the soil they grow on. In her words, "I'm not a fucking flower."

10.6 Discussion - Theme 6 - From Public to Private Battle

The theme From Public to Private Battle explores the origins, mobilization, and defusing of anger and hate. During radicalization, anger gets directed at an outgroup. Upon disengagement, the tendency toward anger and violence does not simply vanish. Formers are likely to either continue directing their anger at others or direct it at themselves. Realizing what pre-existing trauma or stressors might have contributed to involvement, how one's existing anger was weaponized, and going against conditioning by the group, can allow formers to take charge of their feelings and develop more agency moving forward.

In the sub-theme "pre-existing stressors beg to be dealt with," the iceberg metaphor and image (which has been used in domestic violence and other fields to understand anger, depression, and more), might help both formers and practitioners alike better interpret feelings of anger (whether resulting in violence or not).

While continued shame can turn into self-loathing and become a barrier to recovery, taking personal responsibility for past involvement is a positive step. Formers, like ex-prisoners, often want to convey to others that they are "Not Who [They] Used to Be Then" (Toch, 2010, p. 4). This may motivate some to publicly "confess" or otherwise take public action (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020).

Future research might address how formers experience and conceptualize the move away from anger and violence. In addition, it would be helpful to compare formers with perpetrators of interpersonal violence. In the research literature, interpersonal violence within violent extremism has been noted and many recent perpetrators of violent extremism were known perpetrators of interpersonal violence before they executed an attack (Díaz & Valji, 2019).

11 THEME 6: “NOBODY GETS IT,” EXCEPT…

Former extremists may keep their past hidden for fear of stigma or ostracization (Mattsson & Johansson, 2020). This further alienates them from society and impedes meaningful new connections. Most formers interviewed for this study expressed relief over talking with someone “who gets it," such as peers with similar lived experience, exit programs, or others willing to meet them where they’re at, so to speak.

Former Danielle pondered, “the biggest stressor was not having someone else who really got it. You know, I think anyone, we can go through truly heinous things and come out, okay, if there's, if we don't have to do it alone.” She continued to say, “Having no community and to have such a unique experience outside of the normal world that most people either don't relate to and don't want to relate to, made it really difficult to find ways to open up.” However, finding others with similar lived experiences, can be extremely validating and help in reducing stigma.

11.1 Not sharing for fear of rejection or persecution

Formers may keep many aspects of their past to themselves for fear of being rejected or persecuted. Former Timothy expressed that most people don’t understand what it’s like to be a convict, much less having been a member of a Skinhead extremist group. He continued on, “I didn't really feel like I could connect with people because I had this whole like, past that people wouldn't understand, you know. Like, it would be horrifying to your most average people [...] it was very isolating.”

Others were worried about how their community would look at them. The fear of stigma is not helped by the fact that some groups make their members paranoid, turning them against

mainstream society. Former Danielle described how she was told that the left-wing and "polite society" more broadly would never accept her.

Keeping the past private has implications across many settings, including sometimes hindering ongoing healthcare. Former Lara felt she "couldn't even go to the doctors most times" because they would ask how she got a scar; an answer that would involve disclosing group involvement. Practitioners said that privacy anxieties can persist long term, as formers are afraid of being doxxed, outed in some way, and generally not being accepted back into society. Fear of rejection and prosecution can create a barrier between former violent extremists and the rest of society, thereby increasing loneliness.

11.2 Experiences of stigma and social rejection

When interviewing former violent extremists, the researcher at times asked whether feelings of rejection were based on experience or just a general sense of stigma from the public. This was inspired by Practitioner Jillian's point that sometimes formers may experience anxiety about stigma, which can change the way they approach people. If they are awkward during social interaction, they might experience rejection that has nothing to do with their ideology or their past behaviors but rather is a reflection of their current anxiety or social skills.

Participants recounted experiences of stigma from family, spouses, and the community more broadly. Former Felix, who joined at age 12, said that family members almost wanted him to fail in his recovery process so that he could stay the black sheep of the family and they did not have to address their own issues. In addition, he conveyed the distress of being told by someone that they could see in his eyes that he was still a radical, to which he responded, "I can't poke out my eyes I can't change that. These are my eyes."

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 where he campaigned against her. The past becoming known can have direct consequences to income, as illustrated above, as well as to living arrangements. Former Lara said that after talking with her landlord, she thought that "word got out" and couldn't stay in the neighborhood for long.

Referring to fellow former extremists, Former Mark 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 went on:

> We were like, a group of snotty kids who were in way over our heads [...] pretending to be the white nationalists in a way. [...] I feel like once a lot of people were confronted with the realities of it, that's when these movements, these, this movement, shrank [...] But there is no, there's no handbook out there for what you're supposed to do. Because a lot of these Antifascist groups say like, "you need to take accountability." Well, what does that mean? Do I need to go and tell people in my community? Do I need to make a YouTube video? Do I need to go and tell the New York Times?

Former Simon also lamented how overwhelming the pressures can be when trying to heal, change, and meet the desires of those who love you while so much transition is occurring. Practitioner Neil conveyed that some of the pressure from communities is because people are 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."

11.3 Therapists denying services

Formers may reach out to therapists and find someone willing to take them on, while others are denied services and still others never reach out because of a lack of healthcare or not thinking a therapist could help.

During a focus group, Former Kate turned to the other former and the researcher and said:

> I was gonna ask [...] if either of you have, have had any difficulty, like, if you've sought therapy, had difficulty in finding a therapist who is willing to take you on, because they feel like they are not equipped, personally to deal with someone who either comes from a cult background, or is or is a former?

She explained that she was turned down by every therapist except one, all others giving a reason related to not feeling safe or able to help her. Some were people of color, and she expressed understanding of their decision, while others felt they could face secondary retaliation or simply did not want to proceed.

Former Danielle echoed this in a later interview: “I went through three [therapists] that basically were either like, I don't agree with your past, and I can't help you or I don't know how to help you. So that was extremely difficult.” Getting these responses within her first 6 months of leaving felt like a reminder of how alone she was.

Former Lara explained formers might not know how to start telling people about their experience, which in turn might also make it more difficult to find a therapist.[21]

[21] Psychoeducation might help former put their experience into words, learn about psychological concepts, see that some of their experience are reflected in other populations, and help them communicate better with therapists.

Former Felix received 5 years of mandated therapy and said he was assigned 7 or 8 therapists before getting one that he liked. He shared:

> None of the helpers wanted to start where I was at. They were uncomfortable with that. They were scared. They wanted to start where they're at. So, it takes guts to kind of put yourself in "who is this guy? Where is he coming from? I'm gonna follow them from there onwards." They don't even want to go near [emphasis] that place.

Practitioner Jillian echoed the need to meet formers where they're at and described the stress that can come from being pushed toward "ideology change before you're ready for ideology change." When there are basic needs that have to be taken care of first, she warned that it is not helpful when practitioners focus on long-standing patterns or new social connections before the person is ready.

11.4 Knowing when to share

For those wanting to open up to people, there are questions regarding how much to share, when, and with whom. Even determining how to introduce oneself can be a source of anxiety when most or all of your recent past has been tied to extremism, as one practitioner pointed out.

Former Kate explained, "I've always made a practice of, like, coming out of the gate with it almost as soon as I meet someone [chuckles], like, for better or worse, because I don't wanna have to come back and tell them [about my past] later and it seemed like something that I was hiding from them." She admitted that this approach has cost some would-be-friendships, but strengthened others, and sometimes she has inadvertently met someone with a similar background.

Formers Felix and Simon both discussed the need for discretion in settings or communities that involve their children, so their past would not reflect negatively on them. Two participants discussed not sharing because it can unexpectedly lead to people asking for help with a relative or friend who they worry is being radicalized.

What makes disclosure of past involvement even more difficult, is when the choice to share is taken from someone. In some cases, formers' fears about retaliation proved accurate, such as the multiple instances of hospitalization that former Kate experienced after being beaten up by Antifa and by Neo-Nazis on separate occasions.

11.5 Supportive communities and peers

In most cases, formers interviewed found some combination of family members, friends, exit organizations, or therapists who were willing to listen, educate themselves on violent extremism, or otherwise show support. In addition, several of the formers expressed great relief over speaking with peers without feeling judged or having to explain things in great detail.

Some participants disclosed having supportive family and friends. Such relationships might not be able to understand the exact experience but can help greatly with reintegration and resocialization. Former Kate described being "loved out of white nationalism" when new acquaintances treated her with kindness and invited her into their home before she had disengaged This countered how the group said the broader world would act toward her.

However, other formers were completely on their own, in circumstances where exit organizations prove useful; offering a variety of services ranging from mentoring, peer support, and referral services, to practical assistance. When such resources are available and effective,

they can propel reintegration. Community support, active reflection processes across former enemy lines, and support groups were highlighted as being helpful by Practitioner Tanja.

Formers Mark and Katie each described the positive influence of a good therapist, even when in Katie's case they did not have specific expertise. Even just skilled listening and encouragement were helpful.

Former Doug described the unique value and relief he felt in meeting with people from similar backgrounds during his time in the reintegration camp and being able to share openly things that they all did in their past. Former Timothy also said that finding others with similar experiences served to validate the healing he had done alone over 10 years and gave "a sort of concreteness" to the changes he had made. He credited being able to speak openly and find community with playing a major part in getting to where he feels mostly like "a whole and healthy person."

When asked what was valuable about differences in sharing with other formers vs non-formers, Timothy said, "you don't have to explain, like, the routine parts of it [...] because they understand the mechanics of it." He also expressed the encouragement exchanged between formers when they see each other's progress.

11.6 Discussion - Theme 7 - "Nobody gets it," Except…

Formers have safety and stigma-related reasons for keeping their past hidden but might share it in order to create connections or aid in recovery. Deciding when to share is not straightforward. Past experiences of stigmatization and prosecution can make it more difficult to open up. Speaking to deradicalized peers with a similar lived experience is often helpful, as they are likely to be non-judgmental, able to quickly understand the experience, and encourage

reintegration efforts. The sub-themes for this theme were: 1) not sharing for fear of rejection or persecution, 2) experiences of stigma and social rejection, 3) therapists denying services, 4) knowing when to share, and 5) supportive communities and peers.

Formers can experience support from those who are not peers. Indeed, being understood and being helped are two different things. For example, a peer might understand, but not be able to help (e.g., help in reducing stigma, but have no qualifications for addressing trauma). Likewise, a therapist might not fully understand deradicalization, but can still help with a lot of stressors that overlap with mainstream society and help the former stabilize.

Some of the practitioners and formers interviewed seemed to agree that judgment or a call for accountability by society is well deserved. This includes formers owning up to past actions, facing the consequences, and publicly signaling change. However, interviewees differed as to what those things meant. From all sides, the continued experiences of stigma were seen as counter-productive, as it might not allow someone to step away from the role of 'former' and could hinder the development of new pro-social roles and relationships.

Friends and relatives can play a vital role in helping a person leave violent extremism and reintegrate (Koehler & Ehrt, 2018). However, when relatives or others do not show support, they can hinder reintegration efforts by making the former doubt their ability to ever be something more than their past.

An important, but perhaps not surprising, finding was the difficulty several formers experienced when trying to find a therapist. Two formers reported not one but several therapists turning them away because they did not feel safe working with them (fear of becoming a target during retaliation) or because the therapist expressed not knowing how to help. Even if a

therapist is not familiar with violent extremism, showing a willingness to talk to a former violent extremist might signal to the person the possibility of change.

As mentioned, therapists might be uncomfortable and decide not to engage with this population for safety reasons. However, often the risk is perceived as higher than is reflected in reality. The lack of therapeutic training on radicalization, involvement, disengagement, and deradicalization might be the main reason they turn clients away. Future research might work to assess baseline comfort/understanding of these issues among the general population of therapists. Gaps and concerns identified could lead to the creation of continued education hours and other training to improve readiness.

12 OVERVIEW OF COPING

Six styles of coping strategies were identified from the literature and are depicted below. When the interviews were analyzed, 34 different codes were created (see Appendix F) and assigned to a coping style, although categories may not be mutually exclusive.

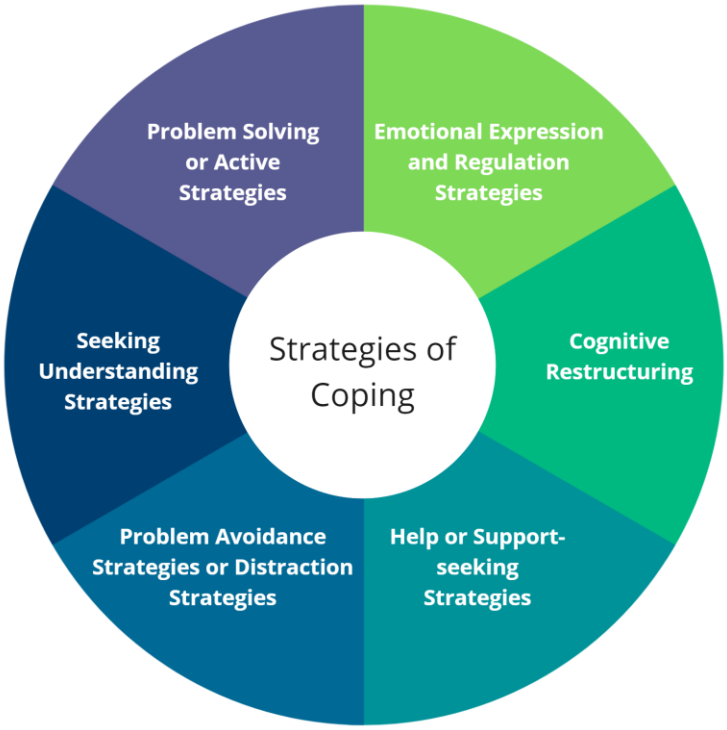

Figure 20 Six Post-Exit Coping Strategies (Based on Jason et al. 2019; Clarke, 2006; Skinner, et al., 2003; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2005)

The following are examples of coping strategies expressed by the interviewees. See Appendix G for a selection of quotes from participants.

Table 8 Coping Strategies and Examples

Coping Strategy	**Examples**
Problem Solving or Active Strategies	● Focusing on new hobbies and interests ● Developing new prosocial roles and identities ● Developing agency, actively pursuing change ● (Re)connecting with friends and people ● Disclosing past to foster connection or promote recovery ● Practicing healthy eating and sleeping habits ● Setting boundaries, shutting down toxic messages and people
Emotional Expression and Emotional Regulation Strategies	● Learning to identify and regulate one's emotions ● Expressing a range of emotions (beyond anger) ● Allowing time for grieving, sitting with hard feelings ● Practicing "stop and pause," being less reactive ● Finding physical outlets to reduce "explosive" feelings
Seeking Understanding Strategies	● Practicing curiosity and self-reflection ● Acknowledging "this is not where I want to be," taking stock ● Coming to terms with one's past and current circumstances ● Understanding what lead to past and current life choices
Cognitive Restructuring	● Taking charge, recognizing and going against conditioning ● Focusing on progress made and one's ability to deal with stressors ● Focusing on good things in one's life ● Integrating skills and positives from the past into current life ● Practicing self-compassion, forgiving oneself

Help-seeking Strategies and Support-seeking Strategies	• Seeking out help (e.g., therapist, exit organizations) • Seeking out success stories by other formers • Contacting other formers • Accepting help
Problem Avoidance Strategies and Distraction Strategies	• Avoiding overwhelming triggers until ready • Distracting with social media, TV, music, etc. • Isolating for physical or emotional safety • Doing things in excess to avoid feeling/thinking • Numbing with legal or illegal substances • Recidivism, joining another extremist group, engaging in crime • Suicidal fantasizing or ideation • Locking past away, pretending it never happened • Avoiding decision making by overly relying on others • Focusing on partner/others to avoid focusing on self

13 THEME 7: COPING: BALANCE INSTEAD OF EXTREMES

Former extremists cope with post-exit stressors using a variety of strategies, some more helpful than others. Early after exit, coping strategies are often questionable, as formers grasp for anything that might help relieve distress. Later, formers might engage in more purposeful and productive coping as they find their footing in their new life, become less reactive, and have more resources available to them.

Table 9 Theme for Coping

Theme	**Sub-theme**
Coping: Balance Instead of Extremes	• Spectrum of coping strategies • Early post-exit coping • From excessive or compulsive behaviors to balance

13.1 Spectrum of coping strategies

Participants demonstrated that there is not always a clear distinction between productive and unproductive coping, but rather coping styles exist on a spectrum. For the most part, coping was seen by interviewees as ranging from productive to questionable. However, substance abuse and suicidal ideation were mentioned as destructive. While substance abuse may be seen as a dangerous and unproductive attempt to cope with distress, suicidal ideation speaks to a hopeless sense that distress will never be significantly resolved.

The spectrum of coping is demonstrated by a few contradictory statements from the interviews. Help-seeking was generally seen as productive, but not if the person is overly reliant on someone else for guidance and sacrifices autonomy in the process; similarly, physical exercise was described as a healthy outlet, but working out five times a day was not.

The researcher came into this study thinking there would be a clear distinction between what coping style or specific behavior is productive and which is not, but it seems to be more nuanced than that. Smoking came up as an example of something that is not considered healthy, but at the time was the "only tether to sanity or comfort," thereby preventing more serious consequences (Former Danielle).

13.2 Early post-exit coping

What is deemed productive depends as well on the phase the person is in. The early stage post-exit requires a lot of stabilization. Avoidance or distraction coping is often utilized to manage overwhelming stressors. Former Simon expressed that he was scared to start the recovery process because he did not want to "feel the feelings." However, he found a motivator: "the idea that I would be able to help somebody else is really what got me through the, the hardest part of it."

Avoidance and distraction strategies can indeed be helpful in regulation during the early post-exit phase, taking someone's mind off the practical or emotional challenges of reintegration. However, long-term, this might impede active problem-solving strategies.

Practitioner Jillian described how formers might be distracting themselves from "confronting their discomfort. [...] those deep, heavy questions of 'who am I? What do I believe?

Where do I belong? What am I doing in this world? What have I already done? What do I need to feel guilt and shame about?'"

Two formers specifically spoke about losing themselves in relationships in order to take care of or focus on someone else. For example, Former Danielle convinced her first boyfriend to move in with her in order to "take care of him and not have to focus on [herself]."

Sexual activity was discussed by three participants, but not all deemed it productive. Former Felix discussed engaging in physical exercise and self-pleasure several times a day. He said "I was doing anything [emphasis by participant] to relieve stress at that point, and I didn't have enough time. I didn't, there's 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But I slept not so much, and I did a lot of stress relief. And I was still kind of on the brink of losing it."

Social media and TV came up repeatedly. Practitioners Anna and Jillian said social media was an example of avoidance coping, while Practitioner Tanja contemplated that while it wasn't harmful to anyone, the person could probably do something more useful with their time.

Activities that demand focus and are helpful in shifting attention away from one's past or current problems. Former Danielle described:

> [...] it had been a bit since I really cooked anything. I wasn't really eating, I wasn't really doing anything. And I think getting back into tasks like that, where you have to focus on that, you can't focus on something else, like crocheting or knitting or something like that, where that is your singular focus was also really helpful in both escapism and me proving to myself that I can do things and just getting out of all of it.

Two other formers talked about finding relief in listening to music. Former Mark focused his energy on learning, while formers and practitioners alike discussed work as being a welcome

distraction. Former Joel explained, “Going to work every day really helps emotionally. [...] I need to focus on other things aside from my extremist group.”

The early post-exit phase was primarily dominated by avoidance coping and included things that would numb the pain or distract from it. While coping strategies do not clearly fall into a specific timeframe, as the dust of disengagement settles, formers seem to engage in more problem-oriented coping strategies.

13.3 From excessive or compulsive behaviors to balance

Several interviewees mentioned that an activity could be productive to a point, but unproductive if used in excess or over a long period of time. At the same time, a strategy first used to distract from uncomfortable feelings and facts, such as focusing all your energy on a new hobby or school, can evolve into a pro-social identity over time. Moderation seemed to be the key.

Productive coping mechanisms can turn unproductive by sheer excess. Practitioners attributed this to a lack of emotional regulation, trying to avoid intense feelings, having no idea which side is up and which side is down after exit, and having a lingering extremist mindset.

Practitioner Jillian expressed that trying to dive into questions of identity when you’re not even eating right might be premature. She continued, “I think everything in moderation [...] you can make anything good could be too much. So there's just so much variability in this. It's so individualized.”

In terms of activities, practitioners mentioned social media as being both a distraction and being used in excess. Practitioner Anna stated that hyper-engagement with social media seemed

compulsive. Practitioner Jillian was concerned that for many formers when using social media, “there is no pause before they react.”

During involvement, motivational balance, work-life balance, and self-regulation are disrupted. Transitioning out of violent extremism and resocializing means stepping away from extremes and practicing balance. Working, which was talked about as a productive coping strategy and potentially pro-social identity, can veer into excessive behavior, as Practitioner Fiona pointed out “If someone becomes like a workaholic, or, you know, if someone starts doing kind of mentoring [formers] and they dedicate 12 hours a day to that, that doesn't become healthy, that becomes unbalanced.” She concluded, “finding that balance in life is kind of a struggle for a lot of people, which again, is not distinctly a former's issue.”

Former Felix touched on how important becoming a parent was to him. Parenting gave him a bigger purpose, but he cautioned, “you have to have a balance between being self-sacrificial because that can be easy to do because you self-sacrificed for the radicalized environment. So, you have to have a balance.”

13.4 Discussion Theme 7 - Coping: Balance Instead of Extremes

Theme 7 set out to explore what ways of coping have helped and not helped former extremists post-exit. While initially conceptualized as productive versus unproductive coping, participants discussed unexpected nuances. This resulted in the following sub-themes: 1) spectrum of coping strategies, 2) early post-exit coping styles, 3) later post-exit coping styles, and 4) from excessive or compulsive behavior to balance.

As far as categorizing coping strategies, participants expressed strategies that fall under categories established in prior research. Yet, coping strategies are fluid and may fall under

different categories and can help during one phase and be unhelpful during another. For example, during the first 1-2 years stressors tend to exceed formers' capacities. Subsequently many engage in otherwise healthy coping activities (e.g., physical exercise) in excess, use distraction coping at the cost of building new pro-social roles, or may use legal and illegal substances to numb. There is little self-regulation and balance during this phase.

Problem-focused coping strategies and others such as help-seeking or cognitive restructuring may be more prevalent once the former stabilizes and has breathing room, so to speak. The changes in coping styles over time found in this study are relevant to practitioners working with this population. They also relate to Theme 5, specifically the sub-theme "maintenance of a non-violent identity."

The goal of coping is to replace feelings of distress or lack of agency with the mastery of new roles (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). Failure to recognize or deal with psychosocial distress is a distinct possibility for those who disengage. This is understandable since the extremist lifestyle legitimizes and normalizes experiencing high levels of stress and violence, paired with unproductive coping. Former violent extremists might not adequately recognize that they are in distress, or lack the tools to deal with it. Barrelle (2015) writes, "Coping skills and self-care are necessary for an individual to move from surviving to thriving in society; this is especially so for former extremists and needs to be incorporated into any referral and support programmes" (p. 140). Along these lines, a prison intervention for former extremists in Australia aims to improve psychological coping, promote self-reflection, and development of support systems and prosocial activities (Cherney, 2018).

Helping formers stop, pause, and actively choose a coping style, rather than unconsciously reacting to stressors, might instill a sense of agency and result in more productive

coping and balance. In regard to help-seeking, peer support in a professional setting has the capacity to model recovery (Davidson et al., 2012), show that redemption is possible (Tapley & Clubb, 2019), and increase agency, social support, and functioning.

14 LIMITATIONS

As with many qualitative and exploratory studies, this one is limited to conceptual generalizability. As such, this research puts post-exit distress and coping on the map, making the findings relevant to subsequent research and contributing to the wider knowledge of the field (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Sandelowski, 2004). These qualitative findings will allow for follow-up mixed methods or quantitative studies, which can incorporate more participants.

As this was a master's thesis research project, a second coder was not available. While inter-coder agreement is often used to evaluate qualitative studies, Braun and Clarke (2020) deem it incompatible with qualitative research values and do not recommend it for reflexive thematic analysis. Rather, the researcher set out to achieve validity by showing the "extent to which claims are supported by convincing evidence" (Murphy et al., 1998).

As discussed in the methods section, qualitative studies inherently involve the subjectivity of researchers. To account for this, participants were drawn from two populations, findings were checked across the two populations and triangulated with existing literature, and ample excerpts have been quoted, including when contradictory statements arose. In addition, findings were regularly shared with the researcher's advisor and committee chair. Including practitioners in the study also addressed social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020), as it is imaginable that formers might present themselves in a socially acceptable way.

As expected, the formers interviewed spoke largely from their own perspective and described their experience. While the inclusion of practitioners expands the range of regions, movements, and ideologies that inform this data, it still does not address formers who have no interest in seeking help. This population is incredibly hard to reach.

To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study with former violent extremists that includes a member check. As such, the limitations of a member check are not well known, although a member check is only useful if participants can understand the findings. The researcher addressed this by taking great care to produce, interpret, and conceptualize the data in a way that is recognizable to participants (Braun & Clark, 2022). This step ensured that member checks were fruitful and as such, can add to the credibility of findings (Elliott et al., 1999; B. Smith & McGannon, 2018). Participant validation was essential to the development of the topic overview, framework, and theme development.

The two focus groups with practitioners had two and four people respectively. Traditionally focus groups are recommended to be around 8-12 people but is considered too large when discussing complex topics (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Given the willingness to engage and the breadth of knowledge practitioners wanted to share, small groups proved to be high-yielding. There are greater barriers for focus groups with former extremists.[22] Three formers signed up for a focus group but did not show up. The one focus group where two formers showed up (different ages, gender, ethnicity, and group ideology) indicated that there is incredible value to them discussing what was similar and different in their experiences in a real-time setting.

As discussed previously, the researcher's analogous background could bias the process. At the same time, it likely provided access and rapport that was beneficial. Additional steps were taken, (e.g., analytical memoing, regular check-ins with the advisor, as well as confirming findings via member checks) to ensure that researcher viewpoints were not taking things in unfounded directions. Reflexive thematic analysis, which acknowledges the researcher's

[22] While we do not know for sure, this might be due to fear of being recognized, someone from the same group showing up and critiquing them, being uncomfortable talking in front of other formers about issues.

subjective lens in meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2022) inherently is a method that seeks to address and promote the researcher's points of view.

15 CONCLUSION

Most violent extremists eventually leave behind the activity that routinely threatens to destroy them (Bjorgo, 2013), yet little is known about what happens after disengagement. This study set out to explore former violent extremists' post-exit challenges, causes and impacts of distress, and how they cope with them. This resulted in the development of a framework of post-exit distress, clustered into the four dimensions of Daily Life & Social Interaction, Psychological & Physical Well-being, Safety & Consequences, and Transition & Identity. These four dimensions have four sub-categories each. The member checks with formers and practitioners showed that the 97 stressors identified are relevant and the way the researcher categorized them made sense of a highly complex experience. The findings begin to inform our understanding of what former violent extremists experience post-exit. While previous studies have sporadically mentioned post-exit stressors (e.g. Berube et al., 2019; Barrelle, 2015; Koehler, 2020; Simi et al., 2017. Corner & Gill, 2020), the focus has typically been elsewhere. Still, the findings of this study tie into the limited research available, meshing well with previous findings. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first attempt to create a comprehensive overview. This overview of stressors is essential to evidence-driven exit work.

Participants recounted the variety of stressors formers face during transition and reintegration. As this was an exploratory qualitative study, participants were not asked to rate their levels of distress, but looking at nearly 100 codes of different stressors developed, it's safe to say that they are numerous. This research shows that the exit and reintegration process itself is stressful, on top of which prior involvement in violent extremism might have continued negative impacts of past extremism, adding to or heightening post-exit stressors. Some stressors result specifically from involvement, while others are a byproduct of transition and not unique to this

population. This research shows that former violent extremists from different backgrounds have shared stressors and coping mechanisms.

This was also reflected in the 7 themes that make sense of formers' experiences during the transition to mainstream society: (1) "It's a Lot" - Post-Exit Stressors, (2) From 24/7 Movement to... "Now What?", (3) Milestones Missed During Involvement, (4) Continued Negative Impact from Involvement, (5) From Public to Private Battle (6) "Nobody Gets It." - Except…, (7) Coping: Balance Instead of Extremes. For each theme, 4-8 sub-themes were generated, which give a detailed impression of this phase.

The implications of this study are manifold. Anyone working in the exit, reintegration, or reentry field, such as exit practitioners, clinicians, social workers, or probation officers, may benefit from a unified overview of post-exit stressors and how they might impede reintegration. In addition, these findings can support the development of evidence-based programs that reduce post-exit stressors and increase productive coping in order to foster timely and lasting reintegration.

Understanding different coping strategies might explain erratic behavior in the early post-exit phase and examples of coping activities can inform practitioners working with former extremists. Realizing that unproductive coping might be utilized during early exit can also be important to probation officers, in order to differentiate between a person reacting unproductively to stressors and someone unwilling to reintegrate. Helping formers identify more productive coping strategies might help them "defuse" anxiety, anger, and other intense and overwhelming feelings, reduce conditioning of anger and hate, and move toward self-regulation, a sense of peace, and prosocial identities.

Some might argue that all negative consequences former members experience are well deserved. However, if stressors outweigh a former's capacity to cope with them, the individual might fall back on destructive coping styles (e.g., continue to turn their anger outward), rejoin violent extremism (even if it is another group), or otherwise negatively affect their community. Considering the great societal harm that can result when those vulnerable to acting out violent extremism end up doing so, the need to promote reintegration and reduce recidivism is one that we all share.

16 FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND USE OF THE FRAMEWORK

This exploratory study provided foundational knowledge on the post-exit process of former members of violent extremist groups. As such, it can serve as the foundation for a needs-based assessment tool for former violent extremists. Rather than assessing the risk of (re-)engaging in violence, a needs assessment, if properly and appropriately informed and formulated, would allow practitioners to gain a quick overview of the nature and extent of distress in the person seeking help. Such a tool could help practitioners in providing and referring to relevant services, in an area that has hitherto lacked empirical support.

While risk-assessment tools exist, they are not very useful for the practical work of helping someone with the deradicalization process (Baaken et al., 2020). However, a needs-assessment tool can help practitioners quickly assess what challenges must be overcome for an easier transition. The tool could be used at intervals from the beginning to the end of an intervention or probation period to see how stressors might diminish or shift over time. No widely known or used post-exit needs assessment tool currently exists,[23] but it is a logical next step as practitioners working with this population "seek to assess their target group(s) with regard to the risks they face and which might warrant pedagogical or psychological intervention." (Baaken et al, 2020, p. 7).

Awaiting the development of a validated needs assessment tool, practitioners seeking to help former members of violent extremists in their reintegration efforts, have the option of using the exploratory beta-version of the post-exit distress framework developed during this study. While the post-exit framework cannot be used as a diagnostic tool (nor is it intended to), it provides an overview of common post-exit stressors and can help practitioners explore these in

[23] Although exit organization might have created their own ways of assessing someone's distress.

conjunction with former members. In its current form, the framework serves as a simple overview and cannot attest to or be used to assess prevalence or severity of stressors a former member might experience post-exit. In its beta-version, it can only be used to ascertain whether a stressor is present in a person's life (incidence of stressor), via verbal feedback. This can help in gaining an oversight of which stressors might have to be overcome when working with a former member of an extremist group in order to foster reintegration. The framework is not a diagnostic tool, nor is it a risk assessment tool. There is no known correlation between stressors and any other outcomes. The framework simply aids as a guide to the question of, "what is stressful for you right now?" and as such, can get the conversation started. Practitioners in the exit field are usually equipped to take it from there, connecting the former member with relevant resources or providing peer support.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Qualtrics Sign Up for Former Extremists

Please enter your first name, initials, or alias.

_____

Please enter your email address (we need this to schedule the Zoom meeting).

_____

Please re-enter your email address.

_____

Please check all that apply.

__ I am a former extremist (belonged to an extremist movement or group)

__ I am currently involved with an extremist movement or group

__ I am neither

If you have left, how many years has it been since your exit?

__ 0-1

__ 2-5

__ 6-10

__ 10+

If you have left, how did you exit the group/movement?

__ On my own, I decided to leave while the group/movement was still active

__ Someone else left, and I followed them voluntarily

__ The group/movement stopped existing

__ I was forced to leave by the group/movement by people in it

__ I was forced to leave by outside agencies (e.g., arrested by law enforcement)

Age

__ Under 18

__ 18-25

__ 26-35

__ 36 and up

Please describe what former extremist movement(s) or group(s) you were a part of, either by name or by the overall ideology.

_____

_____

Please select all potential focus group dates which you would be able to attend (you will only be asked to participate in one focus group)

__ xx/xx/2022 at xx am/pm EST

__ xx/xx/2022 at xx am/pm EST

__ neither date work for me (we may contact you for additional times)

This study mainly consists of small focus groups and will take place on zoom. The audio will be recorded and transcribed, and all identifiable information will be removed. The audio will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Other former extremists will be in the focus group with you. We ask that you do NOT share your last name, what group you were in, or any activities you participated in during group involvement.

__ Yes, I am comfortable with that

__ I would rather set up a private interview with the researcher instead

You will receive an email with more information and a Zoom link closer to the time of the focus group. Please do not hesitate to reach out to kmeredith1@gsu.edu if you have any questions.

SEND

Appendix B Qualtrics Sign Up for Practitioners

Please enter your first name or initials.

_____

Please enter your email address.

_____

Please re-enter your email address.

_____

Please check all that apply.

__ I am a practitioner working with former extremists

__ I am involved with an organization that works with former extremists

__ I directly speak with former extremists

__ I do not directly speak with former extremists

Please describe which ideologies you or your organization interacts with.

_____

What country/countries do you work in?

_____

Please select all potential focus group dates which you would be able to attend (you will only be asked to participate in one focus group)

__ xx/xx/2022 at xx am/pm EST

__ xx/xx/2022 at xx am/pm EST

__ neither date work for me (we may contact you about additional times)

All focus groups will take place on Zoom. The audio will be recorded. You will receive an email with more information and a Zoom link closer to the time of the focus group. Please do not hesitate to reach out to kmeredith1@gsu.edu if you have any questions.

Appendix C Interview Guides

Table 10 Interview Guides

Interview Guide Formers	Interview Guide Practitioners
<u>Post-Exit Distress</u> ● In your own words, can you describe some of the challenges you experienced after leaving? ○ What was an unexpected hurdle? ○ What presented a minor challenge, what presented a major challenge? ○ What were you able to overcome in a short period of time, what took a long time, and what are you still struggling with today?	<u>Post-Exit Distress</u> ● In your own words, can you describe some of the challenges you see people experience after leaving extremism? ○ What are unexpected hurdles? ○ What presented a minor challenge, what presented a major challenge for individuals you have worked with? ○ What were they able to overcome in a short period of time, what took a long time, and what are they still struggling with today?
<u>Coping</u> ● How were you coping with these challenges or stressors at the time? ○ Are you still dealing with some of them today? ● What helped you cope?	<u>Coping</u> ● How do people you work with cope with these challenges or stressors? ● What helps them cope?

○ Was it something you did, some resource you were able to use, or someone reaching out (e.g., a service offered, someone being kind)? ● What has not helped? ○ Is there any behavior or activity you engaged in that might have made things worse ○ Did you do things to avoid dealing with issues?	○ Was it something they did, resources available to them, or someone reaching out (e.g., a service offered, someone being kind)? ● What has not helped someone? ○ Is there any behavior or activity formers engage in that might make things worse ○ Do formers do things to avoid dealing with issues? ● More generally speaking, what services do you wish existed to help people after they leave extremism? ○ Do you feel that any needs of former extremists go unaddressed? If so, which?

Appendix D Codes for Post-exit Distress

Table 11 Codes for Post-exit Distress

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				

Table 11.

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	Doxxing 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)		

Appendix E Hybrid Pictorial Scale and Instruction

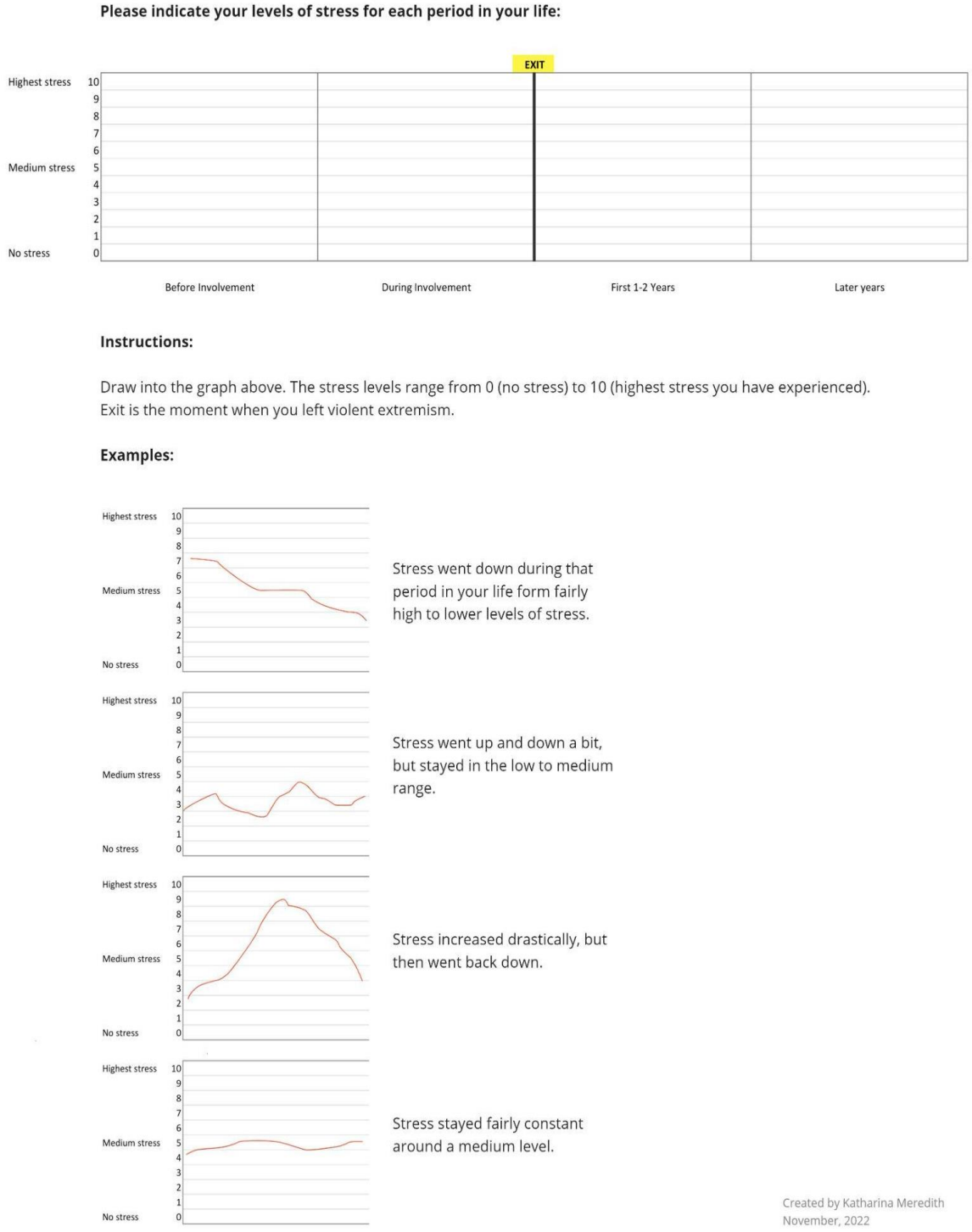

Figure 21 Hybrid Pictorial Scale and Instructions

Appendix F Codes for Coping

Table 12 . Codes for Coping

Problem Solving or Active Strategies	**Emotional Expression and Emotional Regulation Strategies**	**Cognitive Restructuring**	**Seeking Understanding Strategies**	**Help-seeking Strategies and Support-seeking Strategies**	**Problem Avoidance Strategies and Distraction Strategies**
Healthy eating and sleeping	Doing things in balance, practicing moderation	Focusing on progress made and one's ability to deal with stressors	Curiosity and self-reflection	Seeking and accepting help	Avoiding people, isolating
Helping others, giving back	Learning to identify one's emotions and regulate them (less reactive)	Focusing on good things in your life	Acknowledging "this is not where I want to be"		Numbing with legal substances
Focusing time and energy on new hobbies and interests		Integrating skills and positives from past into current life	Coming to terms with your past and your current circumstances		Illegal drugs
Developing new prosocial roles and Identities		Self-love, self-compassion, forgiving yourself	Honestly taking stock of current circumstances		Joining another harmful group, engaging in crime, or rejoining old group
Developing agency, actively pursuing change			Learning about human psychology, understanding		Suicidal fantasizing or ideation

			past and current choices		
Connecting and reconnecting with friends and people					Stalking old group online or via old contacts, being caught up in group drama despite having left
Intentionally disclosing past to foster connection or promote recovery					Locking past away, pretending it never happened
Learning new things					Being stuck in what feels comfortable, even if it's harmful or unproductive
Maintaining secrecy to protect self or others					Relying too much on others, becoming dependent
Spending time with kids and family					Doing things in excess to avoid feeling/thinking

Appendix G Examples of Coping Strategies

Problem-Solving or Active Strategies. Practitioner Jillian conveyed that apart from serving as a distraction, new activities, “sometimes the healthy coping things are actually some of the things that are promoting that ongoing positive change.[..] like getting, art and creating things, painting, writing music, exercise.” Former Danielle mentioned, “journaling was helpful. I hated doing it, because I was, I had a lot of rage. But journaling ended up really helping in helping me put words and names to things.”

Developing new pro-social roles was mentioned by nearly every practitioner. For example, Practitioner Jillian stated, “parenting can be a really important coping mechanism or positive behavior that they're engaging in, that continues to facilitate that exit.”

Emotional Expression and Emotional Regulation Strategies.

Former Simon and others expressed that accepting what they had done in the past allowed them to move forward. Former Simon expressed how he looked at the situation in a new way:

Like, there's nothing I can do about what happened to me. But what I can do, is I can take the lessons I've learned [...] I can take the power away from what's inside. And I can take the power away from that, and control that situation and use it to help somebody else.

In some cases, formers decided to work at exit organizations. For many formers, similar to those desisting from crime, learning from the past, “relinquishing an old self,” and finding a reason for accepting conventional values allows them to generate new goals and plans, also called “making good from the bad” (Maruna, 2014, p. 411). In other cases, suppression of

emotions was deemed necessary until they were in a mental space where they could handle difficult feelings.

Seeking Understanding Strategies. Former Arif expressed, “I remember asking myself "How did I end up supporting a group that produced this? Like, where did it, where did it break down?" He concluded from that internal dialogue that he did not have the correct knowledge of Arabic and Islamic Studies and went set out to learn more. Former Kate responded to his statement by saying, “I very much did the same thing. [...] What knowledge was I lacking that allowed me to get into this space?”

Cognitive Restructuring. Former Neil said that after exit, “you have to reevaluate all your standpoints and all your decisions,” which can shape how the former sees the world going forward. Going against an extremist mindset and conditioning toward hate were mentioned several times. Looking at the world in a new way, not seeing danger everywhere, and perhaps accepting that humans can be kind and are equal, might also fall under this category.

Help-seeking Strategies and Support-seeking Strategies. Nearly every former talked about reaching out and receiving help. For example, Former Felix noted that going to therapy helped him address trauma and engage less in distraction coping.