

## US: Training on Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR)

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Experiencing violence causes trauma for individuals, organisations, communities and whole societies, including the security sector. Both victims and perpetrators of violence experience trauma. Trauma affects the body, brain and behaviour, as well as the ability to make meaning or make sense of the world.

Security forces who participate in violence may experience “participation-induced trauma syndrome” and may suffer from “moral injuries” for participating in violence. Psychosocial healing and resilience help people to recover, and are important elements in assisting organisations and societies to function in the aftermath of violence.

In the US, trauma is widespread amongst both military and police personnel. Military personnel returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as those in other regions of the world are suffering from high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This affects the communities and families where they return to live as civilians.

### **The challenge:**

War creates “moral injuries” for those who participate in it.

### **Theory of change:**

Increasing awareness of trauma and ways of building resilience are important, particularly for veterans returning to their communities.

Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) is an educational program, based at Eastern Mennonite University’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, to strengthen the capacity of leaders and organisations to address trauma, break cycles of violence, and build resilience. The programme began for religious and community leaders in New York and Washington DC after the 11 September 2001 tragedy. The weeklong programme now runs for community leaders all over the world and includes work with the US military. A 2.5-day seminar called “Journey Home from War” was designed to help veterans, primarily from Iraq and Afghanistan, and veteran’s families and communities understand the impact of trauma and how to foster recovery, resilience, and reintegration for veterans returning to their community. Military chaplains also attend.

All trainings include information on the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual impact of trauma, awareness on different types of trauma, insights on the brain’s response to trauma, and strategies for coping with trauma and stress.

STAR wanted to help military veterans and their families and communities. But they also had reservations about helping to reduce PTSD symptoms that would allow soldiers to be redeployed, where they would both experience and participate in more trauma for themselves and others. STAR also felt it would be necessary to be as independent as possible, and not work directly under contract with the military. This independence was deemed as important for protecting the relationships STAR trainers have with communities in other parts of the world, who may oppose US military interventions in their countries.