

What to expect at the end of war?

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Usually, the first actions of war survivors at the end of a war are to look for their loved ones. They will find some, learn about the loss of others, and continue looking for those that will become long-term missing. Sadly, the families will look for decades for their missing loved ones, as evidenced from past wars and conflicts around the world, including testimonies from our own documentary with survivors of the Kosova war.

At the end of the war, individuals also start looking at strategies for surviving financially, addressing health needs and establishing safety. They have to find solutions to feed their families, and find places to live if their homes have been destroyed. Meeting financial, health and safety needs will be ongoing challenges because wars destroy economic, health and political infrastructures of whole countries. Wars also significantly reduce or destroy social capital, including key social resources such as families (Kellezi et al., 2021) and communities (Kellezi et al., 2012; 2023), which our research has shown to be essential to dealing with war and trauma.

These attempts to address the loss and destruction of war often take place as individuals deal with internal and collective psychological trauma, pain and distress. The way others react to this trauma matters. For some survivors, in order to end their war, pain and trauma, they will need validation of their reality. They need validation for what has happened in their lives, the atrocities and the losses they have experienced. As such, some survivors want to tell the stories out loud, document the atrocities that have happened, and fight for justice.

For other survivors, because they want the peace negotiations to go well with all sides and end of the fighting, they need those other people to stay quiet. So, some people are screaming to tell their reality, while other people are asking them to stay quiet because they cannot allow for the pain to go on. Because the end of war must happen, often with the negotiation of all sides, this can mean that sometimes that validation of the suffering does not happen. It clearly does not happen for families and communities of missing people. And without validation, people cannot heal or have closure because they feel that the reality presented is not their reality. Their reality is not supported by others around them.

This division causes a schism within the very communities that have gone through that war. However, those communities need that emotional reparation, societal reparation, and relational reparation. The need for reparation is not often discussed when we think about the end of war, but our research shows that it is very important with survivors (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012; 2014) for validation and provision of much needed support.

Meanwhile, at the societal and international level there will be attempts to establish and maintain peace between parties in conflict. This often involves negotiated compromises and amnesties which for the survivors represent a move away from justice and reparation for their individual and collective harms. Attempts to establish and carry out any form of justice can take decades and as our research shows, become an additional source of distress and even trauma (Kellezi et al., 2023) for survivors.

As the example of the missing illustrates, families will continue looking for their loved ones for decades, and they will feel that they are still fighting, as one of our participants describes '*Fighting with their souls*'. They explain that the war is continuing in their souls, while they continue to make sense of their loss, rebuild their lives, raise their children, and work towards avoiding conflict in the future.

For those who are willing to listen to the suffering of others, there can also be a stronger connection bringing people together. These groups (e.g. families or communities) will unite people who have gone through shared atrocities and shared the same fate. The member of such groups will support each other and encourage each other. The power to achieve justice and overcome the impact of war and conflict can begin, and is enhanced by these groups. This resilience however is not universal and it can co-exist with collective harm. As our research shows, on the one hand, groups can become a source of strength and resilience, and on the other (Kellezi et al., 2023) they can silence the voices and needs of the most vulnerable.

These are powerful psychological processes that can impact recovery from war, including trauma and fears about future war and conflict. We really need to start thinking about what happens while the infrastructure is built up again, what happens after the fighting stops and peace is established. Even while peace is being negotiated, we need to develop and support strategies that can help repair these families and communities, because the hurt and the pain is transgenerational. Research, including our own (Kellezi et al., 2021), shows that the pain and trauma can move on into the next generation and the next generation. We need to include psychological thinking into rebuilding countries after wars.

References

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