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## INSIGHT

# To understand the Capitol insurrection, we need to understand trauma

By **Joanna Cheek** Special to the Star  
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The video clips of cruelty and chaos at the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot shown at Donald Trump's second impeachment trial left many observers around the world shocked as they saw uncontrolled hatred on their screens.

Many others felt relief that the inhumanity they had silently experienced too often in their lives had now been clearly seen and printed on our permanent record of history.

No, there are not "very fine people on both sides," as Trump infamously remarked when white nationalists and supremacists first attempted to "unite the right" by protesting — and killing a counter-protester — in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017. But there are people with trauma on both sides of the divided country.

Dr. Ruth Lanius, psychiatrist, professor and director of the post-traumatic stress disorder research unit at Western University in London, Ont., says the horrific behaviour of the rioters — and of former president Trump himself — is often rooted in trauma.

"The way we grow up and what we experienced throughout life really shapes us," says Lanius. "And the foundation of this is really the attachment relationship. If we have a secure base there and somebody that makes us feel safe, that's going to go a long way in helping us with our emotional development and our capacity to tolerate stress and reach out for social support when we need to," she says.

"But if we grow up ... without knowing what trusting in another is, what really knowing what feeling safe is like, we're going to grow up with a very different sense of self in this world."

Throughout our lives, many of us are exposed to trauma, from being told we are useless or not worthy of love to physical and sexual assaults, Lanius says. If we've felt safe with others as children, we can process these events more easily: We feel deserving of help, and safe to reach out for it. But without this secure base, traumatic experiences accumulate and cause problems.

"We know Trump grew up without a solid attachment foundation and that he was essentially a kid that wasn't seen, and put down," Lanius says. "And I think his entire presidency has centred around being seen — something he didn't have in his childhood."

Psychologist Mary L. Trump, who is Trump's niece, described her uncle's "malignantly dysfunctional family" in detail in her 2020 memoir, "Too Much and Never Enough: How my Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man."

She describes Trump's mother as emotionally absent and his father as a sociopath, with countless examples of his father's cruel, controlling and cold behaviour. She portrayed Trump as a child who did not have his emotional needs met; a child who coped by taking on his father's abusive characteristics to attempt to secure love.

Many people with a history of trauma were triggered by Trump — a symbol of the aggressor — being rewarded the most powerful position of elected president, and again after the recent attack on the Capitol, says Lanius.

She also describes many, even women, "drawn to him and I would hypothesize that it involves identification with the aggressor and that's what they know and so they identify with it," she says. Identification with the aggressor is a defence in which people who experience abuse, especially as children, take on the aggressor's experiences — learning and feeling the aggressor's desires and needs as their own, and gratifying them.

"Trump has this amazing way of drawing people in: When he says, 'I love you,' that's probably something some people have never heard," Lanius says. "If they identify with the aggressor and Trump says, 'I love you, we're going to do this together,' he creates a feeling of belonging, which of course is lacking in so many traumatized individuals.

"And he allows individuals to express their anger in a group setting where they belong, where they feel it's OK to be angry and project their anger into something that has nothing to do with the roots of their anger."

Elizabeth Stanley, a U.S. army veteran and author of "Widen the Window: Training Your Brain and Body to Thrive During Stress and Recover from Trauma," used her own experience of trauma to develop Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training for civilians and military working in high-stress environments.

Stanley says that after studying her own and others' recovery from trauma, "I realized it's our neurobiology doing what it does, and it helped me take it all much less personally."

Stanley, an associate professor at Georgetown University in Washington, describes our body's three lines of defence against stress and trauma: 1) socially engage; 2) fight or flee; and 3) freeze. When we face a highly stressful situation, social engagement may not feel safe, so we move to the second defence, and then the third, as our defences are overwhelmed, she explains. The accumulation of trauma, especially early-childhood trauma, narrows our window so we move down the line of defences more quickly.

"These defences help us survive but most of us aren't taught about them," Stanley says. "I certainly wasn't. And when they happen, it can feel really unfamiliar and lead to responses in our minds and bodies that we don't like and that we want to disown.

"When we begin to learn the language of the survival brain, by watching our emotions, watching our physical sensations, we can be aware of where we are in that process. And then we can begin to access choice to allow it to play out when it needs to, but then to recover from it after the stressor has passed."

Stanley describes an additional defence, the thinking-brain override, in which our brain suppresses physical pain and emotional distress to be able to push through to survive a short-term threat.

"It's good for extreme situations," she says. "The problem is in our culture we have romanticized this ... It has been socialized as what resilience is — a culture of grit .... But the problem is, when we're only focusing on pushing through, it's a very imbalanced way of living and it definitely doesn't work over the long term."

"You can only suppress it and compartmentalize it for so long before it starts coming out sideways, in physical symptoms, in chronic disease, but also in ... acting out with addictive behaviour, or adrenalin-seeking or violent behaviour.

"No one wants to admit that there was a time when they felt helpless, powerless or lacking control ... Especially for men, it's hard given the way they're socialized and raised," she says. "We need to start a collective conversation about doing it differently."

U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a progressive Democrat who the rioters targeted in the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, said in an Instagram Live speech on Feb. 1 that "all of our experiences make us who we are. I hope you know that you don't need to have experienced the worst thing or the biggest thing. If you've experienced something, talk to someone about it ... There is a community of so many people who can understand."

Acknowledging trauma does not take away from the concurrent need for justice, accountability and boundaries against behaviours that harm others: The [longstanding systemic privilege](#) of a lack of consequences for white men's bad behaviour only worsens these behaviours.

"Every time a Republican gets on television and says, 'We need to move on and forget about it,' they need to be reminded about what they're trying to absolve and excuse," Ocasio-Cortez said.

Bruce Hoffman, also a professor at Georgetown University and a counterterrorism expert, says we systemically ignore domestic far-right extremists because of unconscious bias and racism, despite the fact more than 75 per cent of terrorism-related deaths in the U.S. in the last decade were perpetrated by them. This number was more than 90 per cent in 2019.

"The impact of the desire to externalize is not the same, but the trauma underneath that might be driving people to act out and externalize their pain might be the same," says Stanley of her colleague's work.

The rioters included far-right militants and white supremacists, many heavily armed and carrying neo-Nazi and Confederate symbols, from organized groups such as the Proud Boys, Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers, says Hoffman. But most were fervent Trump supporters, including Republican Party officials and political donors, who believed (or benefited from) Trump's fraudulent claim that the election was stolen, he says.

In fact, of the 193 rioters first arrested, 89 per cent had no clear connection to far-right militias, The Atlantic [reported](#). An analysis done for the magazine concluded that the "Capitol riot suggests a different and potentially far more dangerous problem: a new kind of violent mass movement in which more 'normal' Trump supporters — middle-class and, in many cases, middle-aged people without obvious ties to the far right — joined with extremists in an attempt to overturn a presidential election."

Another large group of rioters, including Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by police for breaching the Capitol, were supporters of QAnon, a cult whose supporters believe that high-profile entertainers and Democrats are [Satan-worshipping pedophiles](#) running a global sex-trafficking ring that Trump is fighting to stop.

An Air Force veteran from San Diego who served 12 years and four tours, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to Air Force records, Babbitt tweeted frequently about QAnon conspiracy theories. "We have to #SaveTheChildren," she posted, referring to the QAnon sex-ring conspiracy.

Karen Douglas, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent in England, [says](#) the research describes how people often adopt conspiracy theories to feel safe and empowered in situations where they are powerless or disillusioned.

"Absurd conspiracy theories are put out there and it's not the ones disseminating them who're going to do anything. They're hoping a guy like Edgar Madison Welsh (the '[pizzagate](#)' QAnon supporter who fired a gun at a pizzeria in Washington, believing that he was saving children from a sex-trafficking ring) becomes so angry that he's going to take up arms himself," says Hoffman.

The path to healing and reconciliation is acknowledging our histories of collective and individual traumas to see that we are all human and vulnerable — recognizing that some of us are more vulnerable because of our backgrounds — and learning how to rebuild trust in one another, says Lanius.

"We need to unify and stop dividing," she says.

"There's a longstanding history of discrimination and intergenerational transmission of trauma (in the U.S.) — the African-American population with their history of slavery and lynchings and the medical experimentation they experienced and consequent distrust.

"How do we unite — not just Republicans and Democrats, but also the different racial populations within us? I think the country really needs to face (its) history and come forward and acknowledge what happened, how wrong this is, and have open discussions about what each group needs to really unite more."

Just as trauma accumulates and compounds in our bodies and brains over time, recovery and resilience also accumulate with repeated experiences, says Stanley. We need both individual healing and collective healing, says Lanius. And collective healing has the most impact when led from within the community, she says.

Politician and activist Stacey Abrams and other Black leaders in Georgia have facilitated healing by mobilizing their community to vote and prevail, creating new experiences of empowerment, instead of powerlessness, says Lanius.

In Canada, we are facing our own long-overdue reckonings, especially with our history of systemic racism and oppression, colonialization, residential schools, and the consequent intergenerational trauma of our First Nations people and other people of colour.

Patricia Vickers, of Tsimshian and Heiltsuk nations, studied ancestral law and healing through Indigenous cultural teachings and ceremony for her PhD. As a trauma specialist in Haida Gwaii, off the coast of B.C., she developed a program to facilitate healing within the community, in addition to creating the award-winning First Nation Health Authority's Healing Complex Trauma program.

"When there's harm done there's a spiritual imbalance," she says. "And how balance is restored is with a process."

Their process includes the perpetrators acknowledging and owning what they did wrong, and then the people who were harmed sharing what harm was done and the perpetrators listening and acknowledging that they see the damage, she says. Then she describes a potlatch where the perpetrators own what they did in front of the community.

"And then they'd be washed from it," Vickers says. "These are the things that are missing in our society today. If you have no way of making it right, what you have is this state of imbalance.

"It's about humility, which is about owning that I'm human ... I'm not always right in what I do. I have hurts. These hurts come up and they come up in anger. They come up in hatred. They come up in bitterness and resentment and jealousy and envy," says Vickers.

We also need to support the next generation, says Lanius. "Understanding how our background and attachment and trauma history can really leave a long-lasting imprint throughout life is critical in schools," Lanius says.

"Traumatized kids who maintain the fight-or-flight response are often labelled bad kids because they're disruptive. And if we don't understand where this is coming from and how we need to address that — which is making them feel safe, helping them learn to regulate their emotions — if we don't see the context, I think we've really missed the boat."

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