

TRAUMA, TOXIC STRESS & CHILDREN

BY KAREN GROSS, TRAUMA EDUCATOR

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There have been a host of recent articles detailing the trauma and toxic stress that war has had upon the children in Ukraine.

Whatever one's political position, the price of war is high, and its impact on youth is one of its saddest manifestations.

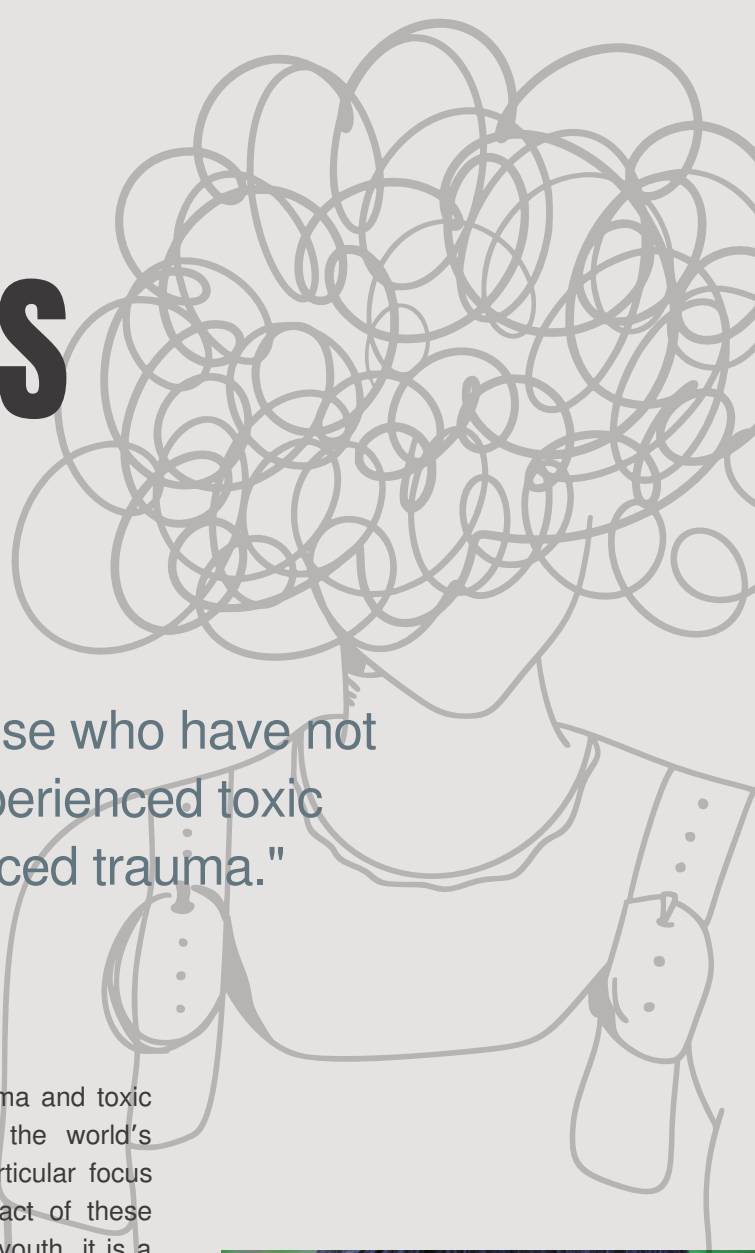
Children's trauma and toxic stress affect their mental and physical well-being and the effects will be felt moving forward — whether there is continued war or peace or something in-between. And even if the children leave Ukraine for other nations, they travel with their trauma. We are increasingly recognizing, too, the epigenetic transmission of trauma, an added worrisome aspect of damage to children across the globe.

What children experience will be with us for decades.

COVID

I worry about the trauma and toxic stress of COVID on the world's children. While my particular focus has been on the impact of these two T's on US based youth, it is a problem that knows no national boundaries — like a virus.

Children have been ill; children have witnessed illness and death; children have seen family dysfunction; they have lost caregivers (both primary and secondary); they have been in and out of school, masked and unmasked, online and in person; they have had relational disruption; they have seen political upheaval and natural disasters and food scarcity and homelessness and job loss. America's children — even those who have not been ill themselves — have experienced toxic stress and many have experienced trauma (these two T's overlap like a Venn diagram).



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And, with the passage of time, there are trauma anniversaries that serve as tuning forks to reactivate the earlier trauma and we have many youth who are already living with tuning fork orchestras playing in their heads and manifested in their behaviors.

I am concerned, as we start the new school year, that folks are thinking we are "going back to normal." There have been articles suggesting just that.

But, there is no normal to which to go back. Once the damage of trauma/toxic stress has set in, we can't erase it; we can ameliorate it; we can address it; we can create trauma responsive schools and pedagogy; we can work to recognize each student and what he/she/they bring into the school. And, we can expand our definition of schools so they do way more than just "educate" about substance where we test proficiency. Schools can become safe havens (something a risk with shootings) and they can offer a myriad of services oft-times considered outside the ambit of a school's obligation to those who attend. It will take some silo busting to accomplish this but 'bust around' is my motto.

SUGGESTION

Might we be wise to see the trauma and toxic stress in our world and the damage it is doing to the current and next generation of children? Can we please focus on how to help our children — for their sake and for the well-being of our nations?

Solutions and ameliorations are not easy to find. There is no one solution. Don Quijote cannot make it all go away as if it were a fantasy. But, with intentionality, we can address these issues, including the shortage of mental health workers, the training of educators and parents, the access without stigma to support systems and a belief — a profound belief — in hope. It is the latter item that help us move forward rather than being mired in the past or in quicksand.

HOPE

I am reminded in this context of what occurred in a recently ended relationship I had with a fellow widower. He could not move forward without guilt or anxiety and the presence of these feelings kept retriggering me because the future seemed clouded or overshadowed with the past. It is not about moving forward with grief as he suggested (see below); it is about moving forward with memories (both good and bad); it is about processing what happened and finding rays of hope for a better future. That is not to say one is never sad about prior losses and what has been; that is perfectly normal and understandable. One misses those who are going or are gone; that is for sure. But the perennial presence of grief serves as an anchor at the bottom of a pit and drags you down. It is impossible to move forward if you are anchored so tightly to the past.

And so it is with children. Prolonged grief impacts our mental and physical wellness. We can and should never forget (although our minds cabin some of the worst events and how we open those cabinets is tough sledding) but we can move forward and restore some joy and purpose and sense of wellness. Yes, remember but lift the anchor so one can move forward.

The goal here is to recognize the reality of where we are and have been and then carve a pathway forward in which we help children feel like they matter and belong and can take steps (large and small) to grow and flourish mentally and physically. We can give them hope.

We, the adults of today, owe it to our children and our children's children to help them — to enable them to grow up in ways that foster their well-being. Whether it is war or COVID, the need to help all our children is there. We can't waste time. We need to act now. As in NOW.

Think hope. We can't erase the past, nor should we. We can enable youth (and adults) to see the wonder of the future and the road there, howsoever curved. Let's not move forward with grief. Let's move forward with hope.