A.A. 2023-2024 **Reading Comprehension TEXT 2**

**The polarised discourse on the Middle East is hurting us. We must find ways to listen across the divide**

*As a trauma psychologist I understand the urge to pick a side and protect ourselves but we should try to acknowledge each other’s pain*

I’ve spent the past two weeks watching the news and my social media feed fill with horror, alarm and grief, and have listened to a range of voices to understand the historical context of this devastating conflict in the Middle East.

We usually only turn to psychology during conflict when dealing with the aftermath – \*PTSD, depression, anxiety, and addiction – but psychology can also explain the current dynamics in the world, especially through trauma literature. When we experience complex, intergenerational traumas, we build schemas (or templates) around how we think about ourselves and the world. Israeli, Jewish, Palestinian, Arabic and Muslim people all carry severe historical traumas, and trauma-based reactions are thus magnified. Recognition of the trauma of one does not negate recognition of the other. These traumas mirror each other and involve being hated, persecuted, isolated, abandoned and dispossessed.

When we experience strong trauma and it is triggering, we instinctively move into a fight, flight or freeze response to protect ourselves. We form in groups and out groups, and we quickly dehumanise those in our out groups. A response or emotional expression by one can be seen by the other as an attack. When we are strongly emotionally activated, our capacity to use our prefrontal cortex and engage higher-order processing skills such as consequential thinking (“when I do this, this may happen”), perspective taking, emotional regulation, respectful communication and distress tolerance is greatly diminished.

Over the past fortnight, I’ve listened to voices that arc across both sides of this chasm. Initially I refused to see it as a chasm, reasoning that one didn’t have to pick a side to be anti-war, anti-hate, anti-racism and anti-murder. Unfortunately, I quickly realised that the psychological currents at play in the world demanded polarisation, and that if you refused to pick a side, one could be imputed for you.

An online conversation between trauma therapists about supporting those in [Gaza](https://www.theguardian.com/world/gaza) rapidly attracted anger that the harms done to Israeli people were not noted in the post, which in turn prompted anger from those who felt the historical harms done to Palestinian people were disregarded by those who acknowledged the sadness and anger Jewish people felt. If trauma therapists could not contain and manage their emotions and interact kindly (including myself at times, I add), what hope could we have for the rest of the world?

While I can see all these views, I also see what is mostly being left out – an empathetic understanding and acknowledgment of the experiences and sorrows of each other. At some stage in the evolution of public discourse we’ve learned to treat conversation like a school debate: siloing off into our teams and bombastically rebutting points for the sake of winning the argument, without consideration of nuance (or that old-fashioned phrase – other people’s feelings). This conversational battleground comes at a massive cost.

When people feel invisible, invalidated and attacked they often retreat further into a defensively entrenched position. Using combat parlance, we might be winning the battle, but we are definitely losing the war. Thus the gulf in the world grows – the possibility of any healing collapsing into the rift.

None of this is new to me. In my work as a clinical and forensic psychologist, with perpetrators of violence and victims of violence, I straddle a similar divide daily. Victims and their supporters are understandably angered, sometimes furiously demanding that offenders be locked away for life. Offenders and their supporters often highlight the harms done to them which contributed to the offending.

“Yes, trauma can contribute to violence but it is a partial explanation, not the full picture. An explanation is not an excuse,” I say, for the hundredth time.

“Locking people up does not help rehabilitation, and often causes further harm,” I say, also for the hundredth time.

“I am not pro-incarceration, but we do need a policing response and incarceration at times,” I also say, to howls of outrage from those angered by my refusal to pick a side.

Holding dichotomies in mind is an essential human skill, but is one we all seem to have lost.

If we don’t find ways to listen across the divide between factions and acknowledge each other’s pain, the current conflict playing out so catastrophically will remain embedded in patterns of trauma for generations to come, almost certainly birthing even more violence. This task is more urgent than ever.

\*PTSD Post-traumatic stress disorder

*Adapted from The Guardian 24.10.2023*

**Now read the following statements and write TRUE or FALSE after each of them.**

1. The writer admits they have been forced to pick a side in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

1. According to the writer, the only way to prevent the engendering of further violence in societies torn apart by brutal conflict is to listen to both sides and to recognize their suffering.