



What to do when a loved one sides with white supremacists.

A resource guide for friends and family

It could have started with a new type of music. Maybe it was a book, a certain website, a new set of friends. Someone you love was taking a deep dive into politics in a way they hadn't before. You weren't sure how to handle those points where you seemed to disagree.



But at some point you began worrying that this newfound interest became more extreme. Now the beliefs were turning angry, absolute, and violent.

Last year, more than half of the calls for help to Life After Hate were from concerned family and friends. While violent far-right extremism¹ is a growing problem throughout the U.S., people can feel blindsided by a loved one's involvement.

The good news is that families are at the core of helping individuals build new lives away from extremist and racist ideologies.

They can be a major source of motivation for people contemplating change. The best strategy is to focus less on the beliefs and more on what's happening in the background.

The techniques outlined in this guide are effective at starting—and maintaining—conversations. We encourage families and friends to remain involved to maximize the likelihood that the individual will recognize pathways to exit. But please seek help if you ever feel unsafe, or if you suspect others are in harm's way.

Suggested Communication Techniques

Explore what the ideology is providing



Your impulse may be to highlight how an extremist ideology isn't really constructive. But the reality is that it is meaningful for the radicalizing² individual.

Find out why. Is your loved one looking for acceptance, safety, confidence, love?

One of the most common themes expressed by former extremists³ is that the beliefs made them feel like they mattered.

Find a way to ask the question with an open mind: What is this new belief providing for you?

Sincere questions like this can show that you care, that you are willing to listen, and that your love is unconditional. Ultimately your objective is to create a pathway to healing.

Explore

how to best
express your
love and
support



If your loved one is open to talking about the perceived benefits of their new beliefs, you can follow up by asking how you can provide that type of connection.

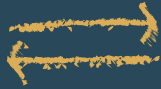
Think about how they prefer to receive love and support. Is it quality time together? Spoken expressions of love? Acts of kindness?

Extremist groups and ideologies convince people that they are unlovable and unwanted outside the so-called movement. Undermine this recruitment strategy by expressing love in ways a vulnerable family member is open to and can understand.

Communicating love isn't always easy when we are worried or scared. But your friend or family member doesn't need you to be perfect. They want to be loved and understood as they find acceptance, value, and safety.

Focus

on two-way
relationships



Extremism offers transactional relationships. If there is a real life component to the ideology, individuals are offered benefits on a quid pro quo basis. These new relationships are conditional and exploitative.

Families and friends on the other hand offer mutual relationships based on shared understanding, genuine regard for each other's health and happiness, and a willingness to accept one another, flaws and all.

Mutual relationships represent a powerful counter to one of violent extremism's most effective recruiting tools: The false promise that joining is the best way for an individual to belong, experience love, and feel strong.

Listen

with an open
mind and don't
challenge
the ideology
head-on



This concept is essential to the work we do at Life After Hate. The key here is to remind the individual that you still love them, and that the door will always be open for them to return.

Violent extremist groups bank on people trying to debate them. In fact, these types of challenges, however sound, are baked into the conspiracy theories that abound in these ideologies. They can reinforce the group's position that no one else will understand or accept the vulnerable individual.

Instead of debating the facts, sidestep these communication traps and get back to exploring the perceived benefits for your loved one.

Don't reduce your loved one's identity to their involvement



Violent extremist groups strip away the complex identities of their members. This traps them in the so-called movement and limits their external connections. Focusing on our vulnerable loved one's radicalization unintentionally strengthens their growing bond to the new beliefs.

Instead, recognize your loved one's full, rich identity. Remind them that they are already valuable outside the ideology. And help them connect to their fuller identity by exploring more positive activities from their past.

Don't reinforce their choice to push you away



If your loved one fights back or "pushes your buttons" as you show them love, this doesn't mean they are unreachable, resistant, or beyond healing. In fact, pushing your buttons is a common testing response for people experiencing pain. They want to see if you care.

Many people involved with violent extremist groups have experienced previous trauma, and are behaving in ways informed by that pain. People in trauma sometimes aren't sure if the people they love are going to be there when they need them. Testing you is a survival strategy: *If you can't handle this, then you definitely can't protect me when I need you.*

Stay consistent with your love, even if your vulnerable family member or friend appears to reject it. They are, in fact, listening.

They're not going to sound like your child. You're going to hate what comes out of their mouth, but try to keep your temper, try to remember that your child is still in there.

—Jeanette Manning,
Mother of former extremist

1. Violent far-right extremism:

Characterized by white supremacy, anti-government or single-issue viewpoints, including anti-abortion, misogyny, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim beliefs.

2. Radicalization to violent extremism:

The process of becoming more fixated on negative views of a certain group of people with violence as the ultimate goal.

3. Former extremist:

Someone who once held but now rejects extremist views.

To learn more, visit: www.lifeafterhate.org

This resource guide was created by Life After Hate and is intended to educate and empower individuals who may be concerned with a loved one's growing interest in far-right extremism. It is not intended to replace individualized professional advice.