Why People Radicalize

How did this happen to my loved one? What made them adopt violent extremist beliefs? Is this my fault? These are questions many families and friends have when attempting to understand what drove their loved ones to violent extremism. It's important to know that there is no single risk factor that causes violent extremism or pathway into violent extremism. Instead, it is a combination of vulnerabilities that cause them to seek answers and social networks or creates an openness to these beliefs. It is crucial to highlight that many people have the same or similar vulnerabilities and never adopt extremist beliefs.

VULNERABILITIES

Belonging

The need to belong and have a sense of community is a basic human need, and violent extremist groups and ideologies exploit this need. Extremist groups often draw individuals in with the promise of an immediate sense of community, connection, and friendship.

Anger Over Injustice, Real or Perceived

Oftentimes, experiences in our community or our personal lives can cause a feeling of unfairness or injustice. People may feel like their community, values, or their way of life is under attack. Individuals may experience economic stress, social rejection, losing a job, or the loss of a loved one. This anger and frustration at a perceived injustice can leave them searching for answers to their problems. Violent extremist ideologies provide an explanation of what is wrong, who is to blame, and what to do about it. They exploit people's need for answers and action. Violent extremist beliefs facilitate a vicious cycle by providing an answer and direction for their powerful emotions, while also feeding and encouraging the escalation of anger, frustration, and sense of injustice.

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Identity & Purpose

A person's desire to be part of something that is meaningful, to affect change, and to foster a feeling of significance in their lives is a powerful driver for embracing extreme beliefs. Fighting for a cause makes them feel like they matter, providing a sense of identity and purpose. There are natural stages in life when people are looking for identity and purpose, especially adolescence and young adulthood, but this search may also be driven by a recent loss of or perceived threat to a person's sense of self. As a result, they may be increasingly vulnerable to extremist groups who claim that their cause can give them identity and significance. Violent extremist groups exploit this need by promising to fulfill needs for identity, meaning, and personal significance.

Mental Health

Mental health is a complex yet vital element of our wellbeing. Some individuals who become involved in violent extremism may have un- or under-treated mental health conditions, engage in substance abuse (alcohol or drugs), have histories of trauma or have been exposed to violence. These issues may create a vulnerability that leads some people into violent extremism. However, it is important to emphasize that many individuals have similar life experiences and will never become radicalized.

AVAILABILITY

Most violent extremist beliefs are not new trends and have existed for decades to centuries. These beliefs are readily available online through the internet, social media, and more broadly in general society. Individuals may initially be exposed to less extreme forms of these belief systems, which may progress and escalate to more extreme and violent beliefs over time.

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