

## Synthesis

### KOFF Roundtable: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Sustainable Peace



In October 2025, the Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF hosted the Roundtable “*Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Sustainable Peace*” which provided a space to learn about and jointly discuss how Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) elements are – or should be – incorporated in project management in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to strengthen the path towards sustainable peace. It also gave the opportunity to exchange on self-care strategies for peacebuilding professionals.

#### Speaker:

- **Pamela Favre**, Program Officer Dealing with the Past, swisspeace

#### Moderation & Organisation:

- **Cornelia Tobler**, Coordinator of the KOFF platform, KOFF/swisspeace
- **Chatrina Schumacher**, Associate Program Officer, KOFF/swisspeace

#### Summary

While formal peace agreements may mark the end of violent conflict, societies often remain in a context that is better characterized as “conflict absent” rather than having achieved sustainable peace. Without processes that foster collective healing, including truth recovery, emotional support, and social reintegration, polarization and trauma can persist across generations. A Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) lens offers an entry point for sustainable peace by addressing trauma, strengthening social fabric, and fostering cohesion and reconciliation. Simultaneously, the mental health

of people working in the peacebuilding field should not be neglected as one can only help others if they are taken care of as well.

Why do you think paying attention to mental health and psychosocial well-being can make peacebuilding or development projects more effective?



*Participants' keyword answers on why MHPSS makes peacebuilding projects more effective.*

### Key Points

## Trauma-informed approach

A trauma-informed approach is a MHPSS approach which is particularly relevant to peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development programs and projects. While individual trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event, collective trauma refers to “[p]sychosocial injury resulting from shared experiences of violence, oppression, or social upheaval, particularly those inflicted by social structures and power imbalances” (Martín-Baró). A trauma-informed approach is hence a framework for understanding and responding to the impact of trauma on individuals. This includes acknowledging the widespread impact of trauma, recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma, integrating knowledge of trauma into policies and practices, and resisting re-traumatization through organizational policies and environments. While some projects actively seek to process collective trauma and foster healing, all projects should as a minimum objective avoid re-traumatization through their interactions and interventions. Key principles for a trauma-informed approach are:

- Safety: participants have to be in a context of both physical safety as well as feeling safe to express themselves and their emotions freely.
- Trustworthiness and transparency: be transparent and honest with participants on what you do, including what you cannot promise.
- Peer support: participants can support each other.
- Collaboration and mutuality: acknowledge the needs, wishes, and expertise of the participants.
- Empowerment and voice: ensure to also listen to the oppressed voices and cultivate empowerment.
- Cultural historical and gender issues: be aware of the respective context and dynamics from an intersectional approach.

A trauma-informed approach needs to be applied from the project or program design stage all the way to the implementation and post-implementation.

## Design phase:

- Understanding the context and past/present grievances before initial contact.
- Consider intersectionality of the population of interest: how do conflicts or grievances impact people differently?
- Critically reflect on own prejudices, opposing views of the world to the context, and how you are navigating them.
- Reflect on the needs within the context.
- Work with and integrate knowledge and views from the people in the context.
- Adapt any tool to the context: e.g. language, vocabulary, account for illiteracy, find creative ways for explaining what you do so that participants can take an informed decision.
- Consider the process: putting the well-being of the participants or “beneficiaries” first before your project objectives.
- Identify possible topics of your intervention that may be particularly sensitive for people in a respective context.

## Implementation phase:

- Preparing for an activity or interaction:
  - Choose spaces and settings that don't evoke traumatic reactions.
  - Consider: Am I the best person to facilitate? What topics will I cover that might be triggering to someone? Am I equipped to handle a disclosure during this activity? What would I need to be better prepared? Whose help can I enlist in the case of someone responding in an unexpected way? Do I need a co-facilitator?
- Preparing for the participants you interact with:
  - Consider: What historical or collective trauma do I need to be aware of? What are the relationships between participants? What power dynamics are there in the room? How do these affect the safety of people?
  - Recognize the expertise in the room.
  - Offer flexibility to leave at any time if needed.
- During an activity or interaction:
  - Explain the objectives of the project and the use of the information gathered.
  - Practice active listening and avoid judgement (verbal and non-verbal cues).
  - Balance between showing empathy and controlling own emotions: don't dismiss participants' emotions but don't take the space for your own emotions making them feel responsible for taking care of you.

To summarize, these do's and don'ts are practical reminders:

| DOs                                                     | DONT's                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Practice active listening                               | Ignore an emotional crisis                                    |
| Believe their experiences                               | View victims/survivors as weak                                |
| Validate their feelings                                 | Compare experiences                                           |
| Adjust the timeline to the survivor's / victim's rhythm | Pressure to obtain information, for instance for an interview |
| Have information on psychosocial resources at hand      | Make promises you can't keep                                  |
| Be respectful of culture and beliefs                    | Assume you know what's best in their situation                |
| Assure privacy and safety                               |                                                               |

In group discussions, participants reflected on situations where they have found it challenging to interact with traumatized people or understand a context affected by trauma and shared what tools were useful or they wished they had:

- Have an external facilitator for a workshop to enable an exchange on grievances and trauma.
- The whole organization to be trauma-informed to avoid tensions and conflict within the organization.
- Conduct basic training on psychological first aid for everyone working with populations exposed to collective trauma.
- Ensure that internal reflection on trauma-informed approaches and the work takes place within teams.
- Be aware that even in situations of collective trauma, everyone experiences trauma in an individual way.

## Self-care strategies

People working in trauma-affected contexts may also experience repercussions on their own mental health, which can lead to burnouts, as a consequence of work-related stress and overload or of vicarious trauma from being repeatedly exposed to others' traumas. In both cases, symptoms are manifested both in the workplace with, for instance, low work performance and in the private sphere, such as affecting sleeping habits or impacting family life as well. In cases of vicarious trauma, symptoms can even mirror those attributed to PTSD. Hence, prevention and self-care practices are key. Self-care strategies are manifold, ranging from physical to emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Participants collected practices for these five dimensions of self-care strategies to raise awareness on the breadth of practices available to them and inspire each other. Some include:

| Physical                        | Emotional                                                           | Cognitive                                                 | Social                                              | Spiritual                                                     |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Good food, healthy nutrition    | Exchange with colleagues and friends                                | Read a good book                                          | Meet or call friends, talk to loved ones            | Meditation                                                    |
| Exercise: stick to the schedule | Understanding and respecting own feelings, e.g. write in your diary | Learn a new language or skill                             | Talk with colleagues                                | Pray                                                          |
| Get fresh air                   | Talk, don't accumulate the hurt inside                              | Mental stimulation: dive into a new topic                 | Engaging with community, e.g. join a (reading) club | Finding sense of purpose and meaning of own life              |
| Keep hydrated                   | Sing or listen to music                                             | Paint (incl. by numbers, ceramics)                        | Baby-sit, pet-sit                                   | Consciously take "quiet time"                                 |
| Dance                           | Crying                                                              | Understand the truth of happiness                         | Have fun                                            | Connecting with nature                                        |
| Medical appointments            | Practicing self-compassion, e.g. write letters to yourself          | Only watch documentaries or read books on non-work topics | Healthy communication and boundaries                | Participate in activities aligned with own beliefs and values |
| Get enough sleep                | Say "no" to needs and requests from others                          |                                                           | Be nice to strangers                                |                                                               |
| Walk                            |                                                                     |                                                           | Meet new people                                     |                                                               |