HELPING PEOPLE ADDICTED TO AN EXTREME IDEOLOGY

Because of our book, *"Addictive Ideologies,"* we receive a lot of letters from people whose family members are in trouble ideologically. They see their loved ones are withdrawing from them, becoming angrier and more resentful, and building up a group of friends who seem more problematic.

The big question we are asked, is when someone they love or care about is obviously being drawn into an ideological framework that seems damaging to them, what can they do?

First, Let's Understand Addictive Ideologies.

Our book, "Addictive Ideologies" examines genocide, terrorism, and political extremism and asks some fundamental questions: How is it that "normal" people can participate in horrific events? How can they commit acts of violence, turn on people they know, including their family, and their neighbors in the pursuit of some ideological dream?

The thesis of Addictive Ideologies is: 1) genocides, terrorism and extremism are almost always linked to an ideology; 2) Those ideologies that turn violent almost always separate people by groups and see the world as the oppressed and the oppressors; 3) As individuals get involved in such ideologies, they become ostracized from their family and friends, either by choice, or aside from their choice leading people to associate predominantly with individuals who share the same ideology. This can lead to more violence; 4) Traits of an addiction are formed by those who continue to engage in behaviors that harm themselves and people they care about yet they cannot stop.

Addiction is often tied to smoking, alcohol or other mind- and mood-altering substances, sex, pornography, gaming and gambling. Worldwide this represents billions of people. What is not often associated with addiction is ideology. We believe to both understand and help people who are engaged in an extreme ideological organization, approaching it like an addiction is a useful model.

1 Bélanger Jocelyn J. (2021). The sociocognitive processes of ideological obsession: review and policy implications*Phil. Trans. R. Soc.* https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0144

Like other addictions, ideological addictions consist of the inability to stop engaging in the ideological thoughts even though it may be doing harm to oneself or loved ones around them. The obsession regarding ideology can be reliably measured with the obsessive passion scale. Research indicates that the more they agree with statements such as, "I can't stop thinking of my ideology" the more likely they are to support violent extremism.

There is significant evidence on addictions of alcohol and/or other substance abuse that the mental disorder stems from a form of self-medication, in that the individual is attempting to overcome emotional or mental issues through active substance use. Both substance use disorders and ideological addictions can be exacerbated by one's desire to fill a void in their lives, a desire to overcome beliefs that their lives are destroyed, insignificant, meaningless, and/or they are powerless to effect any prosocial change.

During times of loss, grief, and trauma, we can be confronted with deep existential questions at various times in our lives, asking, "Who am I? What is my life about? What am I meant to do?" We can find ourselves at different times in our lives feeling insecure, unsure of ourselves and questioning who or what we belong to and our greater life purpose. This process informs identity construction and conversely, can promote dissolution of the self.

Why Were They Drawn to the Addictive Ideology?

If the desire to fill a void is what draws one to an ideology, what motivates someone to become violent as part of an ideological group? Jocelyn J. Belanger identifies in his book, "The Three Pillars of Radicalization" three major reasons for radicalization that can turn into violent extremism. The first is the "need" of the individual for personal significance. The second is the "narrative," which is the ideology that guides the members quest for significance. And the third is the "network," which is the ability of the group to validate the narrative and reward the individual with respect and praise who follow the doctrine.

We found in our work, that when ideological groups classify people as the oppressed and the oppressor, promoting a victim mindset, it releases the individual sense of morality allowing for abusive behavior without feeling morally obligated. It is the process of objectifying others based on the group they belong to. Second, the individual creates a mental construct from the ideology rearranging their view of the world. This new world view becomes integrated into self-identification of the individual. Any criticism or even information that is contrary to the view leads to resentment, hatred, and possibly violent reprisal. Third, as individuals travel down the path of adopting the ideology, they create distance between them and their loved ones, and they are drawn towards individuals who are more ideological.

As this ideological addiction deepens, strategies designed to stop them from being violent become less effective. As they are radicalized, these strategies of non-violence often backfire, actually driving them

2 Bélanger, Jocelyn J. (2019). The Three Pillars of Radicalization, Needs, Narratives and Networks. Oxford Press.

The Effect on Society

Social conditions can also cause one to lose their identity and contribute to a loss of national pride. Will Durant, a sociologist said, "When our economy of freedom fail us at length, then the road to dictatorship will be open to any man who can promise economic freedom to all."

The result of the loss of identity in nation states can lead to an over exaggeration of national pride. As an example, when Germany lost the war in World War I, and the outside world imposed reparations as a means to make them pay for the war. This in turn created an economic crisis that led to a devote nationalism. One where pride in being German began to search for corrupting influence inside of the state.

In a diverse state such as the US, where diversity is constantly evolving, the fragmentation of identity can be in constant flux. Challenges to identity can expose vulnerability, insecurity, and fragility. It can be caused by a loss in status or economic position, suffering a hardship, or marginalization. These conditions can impact people across religions, gender, age, and race.

We might note our observation is that white men today are in a predicament because of social change. In some regions of the US, economic losses have had a disproportional effect on blue collar workers. Workplace culture has been modified by affirmative action, environmental regulations, new employees entering the workplace, the MeToo movement, and changing normative social standards and the politically correct attitudes of employers, and enforceable laws.

We are not arguing about the morality of these changes, only an observation of which groups might see these issues as diminishing their social power.

Marginalized groups are susceptible to the victim language of ideological recruiters. These groups can include but are not limited to white men, blue collar workers, Muslims, and youth who have the inclination to be insecure in their developing identities. They can experience being socially alienated and invisible. If their conditions are further exacerbated through limited social power which exacerbate their existing position without social mobility, then it becomes an opportunity for recruiters to empower a social group who already believes they are powerless.

For these isolated individuals who feel invisible, it is inevitable, that someone comes along and sees them and validates them. And when they do, when they listen to them, identify with them, defend them, they will follow these leaders or recruiters regardless of what they demand, or immorality they promote. People can overlook flaws, deceit, and manipulation in their savior, readily justifying lies they may tell or crimes they may commit.

As stated earlier an addiction is a self-regulated purpose designed to restore fundamental needs. In this case the individual who feels invisible, insecure, or not respected because of societal norms looks for pathways to relevance. Ideologies, or other addictions can become the coping mechanism, and eventually the ideology itself becomes an addiction.

Ideology Helps Satisfy the Desire to be Right

All of us crave the desire to be right. When we argue and win, hormones including adrenaline and dopamine are released into the system. It is a feeling of being high and once you get that boost, it's tempting to want more of it. On its own, it can morph into an addition.

Ideologies create for us a set of values, ideas and beliefs. It does not have to necessarily become damaging. But ideologies designed to attract vulnerable individuals utilize an oppressor versus oppressed structure. They identify an oppressor who become objectified and dehumanized, using that to create a victim mindset. One that creates a view of people not based on their individual character but instead a view of them based upon the group they belong too.

This ideological framework will create arguments for who is the oppressor, legitimizes they are the oppressor, and what the oppressor is doing to prevent the oppressed from being successful. They will also create arguments for who is the victim, proof they are a victim, and the solution in the destruction of the oppressor to improve the life of the victim.

These arguments may be created by philosophers such as Giovanni Gentile who was described by Mussolini, and by himself, as "the philosopher of Fascism." Other philosophers include Karl Marx, the founder of communism, or Post Modernists, Michel Foucault or Jean-François Lyotard. Extremists may even create new secrete languages, like Incels (Involuntary Celibates), who promote misogyny, a sense of entitlement to sex, and the endorsement of violence against women.

These philosophies and languages make people feel special, entitled, and enhances their self-importance. While contentious, it enables the powerless to experience a power over another group, affording retribution in many situations. The dopamine and adrenaline it releases is addictive, contributing to a righteous, offensive, and violent disposition.

However, these arguments are really defenses for the group and can be bolstered when experiencing or perceiving an existential crisis. When the group sees their values being threatened from a real or imagined party, it can justify violence. And the individual can gain significance, notoriety, and fame as a hero by defending the groups values.
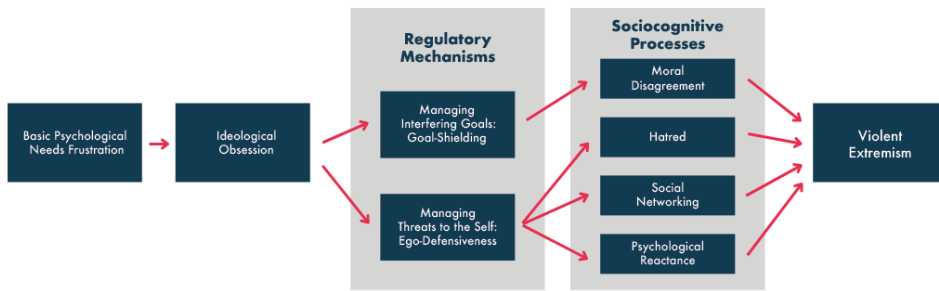
Figure 1. The theory of ideological obsession: from needs frustration to violent extremism.

How Ideology Draws One Towards Violence?

In Jocelyn J. Belanger's theory of ideological obsession, the psychological pathway is illustrated showing how ideologies can lead to violence (See Figure 1). The beginning of this journey is that an individual's basic psychological needs are frustrated. This can be the result of personal failures or because one's self identity is effected by economic, social or political order. As the individual becomes marginalized or invisible, as we explain above, the individual faces a state of humiliation, distress, or shame.

In general, people do not turn to violence as the primary solution, because the psychological needs are more tolerant to frustration. Individuals are very resilient and will seek to gain social status through a variety of means including employment, athletics, family and other social structures. However, if these means fail the individual and a sense of hopelessness sets in ideological violence can become a last resort to promote social mobility. The engagement in the ideology feeds the desire to be superior, and ideological groups or organizations can satisfy the need to belong.

Belanger's studies examined different factors that caused individuals to lose the ability to self regulate to avoid violence. The first was as individuals obsess over the ideology, the conflicts with family, education and work become more profound. As individuals manage the conflicts between these, they begin to minimize the value of all other goals other than the ideological goals. This is called goal-shielding.

Goal-shielding plays an important role connecting ideology to violence. As other goals are neglected and minimized, the goals of socially advancing the ideology have no self-regulated constraints. Evidence exists that even moral constraints become secondary to the ideological pursuits. This leads to dehumanization of individuals cast as part of the opposing group and the justification for immoral acts.

The second regulatory mechanism is ego-defensiveness. This occurs when one's self-worth is tied exclusively to their ideological pursuits. As the individual becomes more isolated, and singularly focused with little other pursuits, their identity becomes much more fragile. This in turn causes the individual to become easily threatened by any information that challenges their worldview.

More importantly, individuals who become ideologically addicted find anxiety in social conditions where self-doubt is more prevalent. Radical organizations are very good at providing the member with a clear sense of purpose. Short of finding meaning outside the ideology, the radical group provides an important psychological foundation to most individuals. The group often provides strict boundaries for members that constrain critical thinking, and pushes beyond cognitive dissonance, resolving an internal conflict with morality by compromises already made by the group member.

Breaking Out

Individuals who are attracted to extreme ideologies are often isolated, stressed, emotionally vulnerable, or have failed financially or emotionally. But it is a mistake to believe that those who take part suffer from serious mental illness. This usually is not the case. All of us, to a degree are vulnerable, and much more vulnerable to radical ideologies than into an actual cult.

The most prevalent place one is recruited into a radical ideology is online. Online gamers seem to be especially vulnerable because of the online communications by people who can remain anonymous or conceal their agendas through a bond formed via playing the game. The recruiter may ask questions, and seduce the target through affection, flattery and validation. They do everything they can to make the target feel special, unique and establish a best friend type relationship. They will fake interests, and emotions to connect with the target.

This makes it extremely difficult for a family member who wants to help the individual break out of the addictive ideology. Often the recruiter or leader has the perfect combination of what is known as the dark triad of personality traits: machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. They are charismatic, convincing, magnetic, but also deceptively self-serving and without limits, often legal or otherwise.

In a world of conspiracy theories, alternative facts, a common held theory is that individuals radicalize because they were seduced by fact-distorting ideologies. The solution for this would be to create an equal force of credible sources and community leaders that undercut these radical ideas. But as we have seen, facts and legitimate sources have little impact on effecting the mindset of individuals drawn into these ideologies.

In our experience with radicalized individuals, a direct challenge to the narrative of extremists is a failed theory. In our work with radicalized Muslims, Alt-Right members, Politically Correct Authoritarians, regardless of the right or left, this strategy usually produces the opposite result. Members become even more committed to the radical cause.

Once a member gains a sense of self-worth from an ideology, even if they are not fully a part of the radicalized part of the movement, any threats to the belief system fails, and in fact often exacerbates the situation. Confronting the ideology with facts, counter evidence, or opposition can actually produce a more harmful effect by damaging relationships and further alienating the individual who drives further towards to the extremist group for comfort, support, identity, and validation.

The key to providing help is not to counter the narrative but to find opportunities for connection with the individual. Help them reconnect with their previous identity, hobbies, interests, self-worth, and activities that brought meaning and joy that were prosocial prior to the extremist trends.

We believe these things are important to helping someone through an addiction to an ideology. First, regardless of how ridiculous the ideology you may never break them from the ideological construct. Understanding that countering their reality with facts or evidence may make it worse, the approach is to seek understanding. Don't alienate them, listen to them, identify with them, try and understand them. Dig into why they believe in the ideology, what have they seen in their life that made them believe that was true? Drive towards giving them respect, even if the ideas you hear seem damaging to them.

3 Bélanger Jocelyn J. (2021). The sociocognitive processes of ideological obsession: review and policy implications*Phil. Trans. R. Soc.* https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0144

Second, while you may not be able to get them to break with their addiction to the ideology, you may get them to reconnect with the other goals they minimized. Not through shaming or guilting them, but through helping them re-build self-worth through reengagement with the other prosocial goals. Setting daily goals that help them discover other passions. Belanger pointed out that those who focused on exercise habits had helped reduce dependency on the obsession, finding a reduction in the frustration of unmet needs and the individual experiencing greater control of their life.

We believe that the single greatest tool for long term success is to help the individual find meaning not tied up in the ideology. Meaning is found in who or what we love, what we create, service and the ability to endure struggle. But each person's meaning is different. For addicted members of an ideology, this can be difficult because the individual found purpose in the ideology. Helping them discover other ways they experience meaning and purpose will be critical to replace extremist ideologies and break out of the obsessive trends.

Helping Others Break Out

Supportive System: Bolster a support system of people who surround the individual. This could include teachers, psychologists, other family members, spouses, community supports, etc.

Don't Alienate Them: Research tells us confronting people who have become addicted to ideologies with facts and counter evidence not only drives them away, it can actually result in more violent outcomes.

Connect With Them

Love: Show them unconditional love. Listen to them. Empathize with them. Ask honest questions through curious led inquiry. Don't assume you know better and treat them with respect and dignity. Affirm your acceptance of them, despite their behaviors or views you may disagree with.

Meaning: Let them know you think they are special. That you believe they have a unique purpose in life. That the purpose may not be completely evident to them today, but it is a purpose nonetheless. Help them explore the 4 places they find meaning: who and what they love, what they want to create, servicing others, and navigating struggle.

Belief: They need to be seen, understood and validated. Let them know you believe in the good in them. That you believe they will help others. That they have great potential.

Last, Let's Talk About What Can Happen in Professional Therapy.

We believe these same concepts above are necessary for professional therapy. We believe that the tools in Motivational Interviewing *(See Figure 2)* is a superior way to accomplish this. Certainly you will receive different results if the individual is in voluntarily for help. But Motivational Interviewing can help understand the stage they are in and help establish a Prioritization of Needs and Risk & Safety Planning. Treatment through deprograming has shown limited success. But Identity Recovery, helping them understand the value they place on completing goals, the creation of rituals, and scaffolding is the right place to begin.
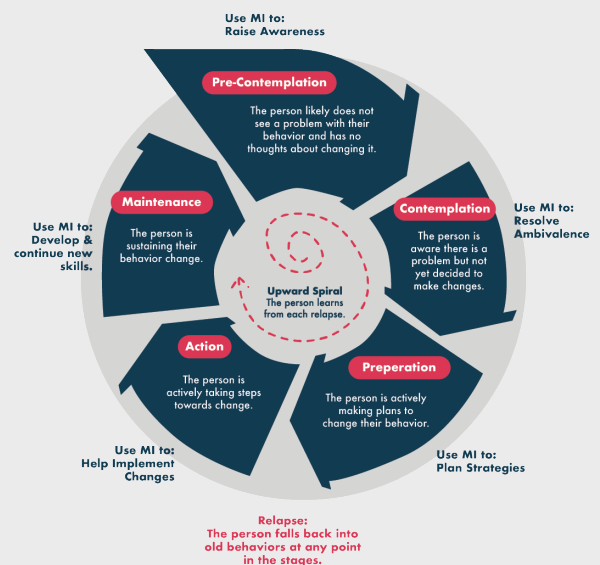

Figure 2. The Stages of Motivational Interviewing.

4 Beckwith, Vickie & Beckwith, Jennifer. (2020). Motivational Interviewing: A Communication Tool to Promote Positive Behavior Change and Optimal Health Outcomes. NASN School Nurse. 35. 1942602X2091571. 10.1177/1942602X20915715.