

Essay by Mustafa Rfat, Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis

What is trauma? Trauma is not just a word; it is a profound reality that shapes lives in ways that are often unimaginable. Let me tell you, it is real. As someone born into the chaos of war, my life has been a continuous struggle for survival. Growing up amidst the relentless conflict in Iraq, I witnessed horrors that no child should ever see. The sound of explosions, the sight of buildings reduced to rubble, and the constant fear of losing loved ones became my everyday reality.

I lost family members and friends to the violence. I saw airplanes being shot down, a spectacle that etched itself into my young mind. These were not isolated incidents; they were recurring nightmares that my brain struggled to make sense of. The trauma of those experiences followed me even after I became a refugee, seeking safety and a chance for a normal life.

Recently, I faced personal issues that reignited these past traumas. I was scheduled to travel to New York for an important trip, something that would have been routine just a few months ago when I flew to Washington, DC, without any trouble. But suddenly, my perception of airplanes changed. The memories of seeing aircraft shot down in my childhood surged back, and I became consumed by an irrational yet overpowering fear that the plane would crash, and I would die.

I canceled my trip, unable to convince my brain that the past was behind me. Trauma has a way of consuming all your energy and valuable time, especially during critical periods of life. Despite my rational mind knowing better, the trauma was like a prison, trapping me in a cycle of fear and flashbacks. These weeks felt like an endless nightmare, where every day was a struggle against the paralyzing memories of war.



I found it impossible to open up about what I was going through. No one around me could truly understand the depth of my fear and anxiety. I felt isolated, as if I was the only one living through this torment. My daily activities, once sources of joy, became unbearable. Spending time with my family, engaging in hobbies I once loved—all of it seemed like a distant dream. It was as if a switch had flipped in my brain, taking me back to the war zone I thought I had escaped.

Living with trauma is incredibly lonely. I felt like I was screaming into a void, unable to find a safe haven or someone who could genuinely understand my pain. The psychological scars of war are invisible yet deeply ingrained, affecting every aspect of my life. This is the reality of trauma. It is not just a fleeting feeling but a persistent shadow that follows you, profoundly shaping your perceptions and experiences.

Understanding that trauma is real has significant implications for both the traumatized and those who interact with them. Acknowledging the reality of trauma is the first step towards healing for the traumatized. It validates their experiences and feelings, helping them understand that they are not alone in their struggles. It opens the door to seeking help and finding support systems to aid their recovery. Knowing that trauma is real empowers individuals to take control of their healing journey, fostering resilience and a sense of agency.

For the non-traumatized, particularly those in institutions like schools, workplaces, and healthcare settings, understanding trauma is crucial for creating supportive environments. It means recognizing the signs of trauma and responding with empathy and sensitivity. This awareness can lead to the implementation of trauma-informed practices that prioritize safety, trust, and empowerment. By fostering a culture of understanding and acceptance, we can break down the stigma surrounding trauma and mental health. In essence, understanding that trauma is real transforms how we interact with one another and shapes the policies and practices of our institutions. It is a call to action to create a world where everyone, regardless of their past experiences, can find support, healing, and hope.