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Family**Breaking the silence**

Arlene Healey works with traumatised families in Northern Ireland, disentangling each family's history from the wider political history of the conflict. Her job is far from over

Dave Hill**Saturday March 24, 2007****[The Guardian](#)**[Search this site](#)**In this section**[Love, part 2](#)[Domestic dispatches:
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In Belfast there is much talk of regeneration, rocketing house prices and the prospects for renewed self-government in Northern Ireland as Monday's deadline for a power-sharing deal approaches. And there's another conversation going on too. Though often fearful and painfully private, it is, in its tentative way, just as much a sign of hope, because the silence that went before it was so deadly. Families that have experienced fear and isolation, violence and mortal loss as a result of the Troubles have begun breaking that silence, coming to terms with their agonies. "It's difficult to overstate how deep and how damaging the silence has been," explains Arlene Healey, consultant family therapist and manager of the city's Family Trauma Centre. She's worked with the hurt of Belfast, the city where she grew up, for 27 years, initially as a social worker. "It's only since the situation here started to improve that people have had the confidence to speak about the things that they've been through."

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The NHS centre employs nine therapists and its reach extends across the whole of the north with more than 250 families referred there every year. It was set up in 1999 to treat children psychologically damaged by the Troubles but, as its name suggests, its policy is to extend its service to whole families - a grim recognition of the conflict's intensely domestic nature.

"Sometimes the trauma is of a multiple or ongoing kind," Healey, 49, explains. "Maybe a home has been attacked or a parent has been attacked because of their or their partner's occupation, and this may have been going on over many years. Different members of a family may be distressed in different ways and there's a complicated chemistry going on. Sometimes it's like a jigsaw - you just have to sit everyone down and put all the pieces together."

In other instances, a family's trauma stems from a specific incident. The years following the signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998 saw a fall in the number of bombings and murders but a rise in the incidence of localised sectarian attacks, feuds within paramilitary groups and punishment beatings, sometimes of children barely into their teens. The centre's users have included some of those brutalised in such events, along with their closest relatives.

"The beatings could be very extensive," emphasises Healey. "If they were done with a baseball bat full of six-inch nails, the damage could be greater than by a shooting." Such punishments have always been defended by the paramilitaries as a means of curbing antisocial behaviour such as joy riding. "By the age of 18 most of these kids would have grown out of it," says Healey, who has three children of her own. "Most kids settle down given time. Instead, they end up physically disabled and psychologically injured, and using drugs or alcohol to cope with it."

Such violations have often intruded into the very heart of family space. "Quite often when people were subjected to beatings or shootings, the perpetrators came to the family home to remove the teenager. So the first person who was really upset was the one who opened the door to them - 'It's all my fault, I shouldn't have opened the door,' and so on.

"Then all the other people in the house are left to sit and wait until an hour or so later when they'd be told to go to such and such a place, usually an alley, where they would then find the child and have all that to cope with."

Then there are the children who have seen parents killed or assaulted before their eyes, in their own home. Healey mentions one such beating during which the household's dogs began barking at the intruders only to be quieted by gunfire: "They just shot the dogs dead in front of the children - their pets."

A child's anguish can affect their parents in powerfully corrosive ways. "They're very frightened for their children, obviously," Healey says, "and despairing about the culture of the community in which they live. They wish they could afford to live somewhere else, wish they hadn't been bringing their children up in such a neighbourhood. So there's guilt and there's depression and you have to try to give them strategies for coping."

Long-term civil conflict entangles family history with community history, and wider political histories, frequently

to ruinous effect.

More and more Belfast children have no direct experience of life before the mid-90s, when a series of ceasefires began the fitful, yet continuing de-escalation of hostilities. This, though, does not mean their lives aren't darkened by the shadows of yesterday.

"At the moment," Healey explains, "we have a lot more hope than in the last few years, but we still have people affected by Troubles-related trauma - it can take many years to be ready to come to terms with it, and it can be trans-generational. The murder of a grandfather can still impact on a grandchild who may not know why their mother cries so often. We sit down with a family and may find that when certain things are spoken about unwritten rules are being broken. It's something that no one talks about and yet it's omnipresent."

Sectarian territorial demarcations have enclosed communities, making them harder to escape in every way. One long-term user of the centre is a survivor of two bombings in the same locality, the first in 1972, the second in 1993 as he walked to a football match with his son. Despite his own injuries he helped fellow survivors, including one he later learned to have been among the bombers. The bomber was jailed but released early under the terms of the Good Friday agreement, consuming the man who saved him with a sense of injustice. He also attracted threats from his "own side" for speaking against their retaliation for the second bombing. For him, the promise of peace does not yet include release from the past.

The work of Healey and her colleagues has mirrored Belfast's political mood: the greater the optimism about the future, the more long-buried family stories will be disinterred. When the peace process falters, it has the opposite effect - traumatised families become less confident about speaking out. Staff at the centre are affected too: "We can feel more tense and reluctant ; we live here as well, and we too have stories and histories."

The silence that has engulfed communities once also

extended to the authorities and agencies whose task it would normally have been to create therapeutic spaces where harrowing stories could be safely told and come to terms with. "For all those years when the conflict was at its worst there were almost no services, no help for people whatsoever," says Healey.

We head outside in search of photo locations. There are cranes on the skyline and signs of investment on the ground - new streetlights and railings here, a small community centre there. But the sectarian street murals remain vivid and plentiful, the fear and anger they symbolise not yet far beneath the surface calm despite political progress.

The sensitivities of the conflict impinge on everything the centre does, from ensuring that its staff are drawn from each side of "the divide" to managing its appointments system so that enemies, real or perceived, don't end up in the waiting room at the same time. Political awareness is as essential to the therapeutic process as listening skills and boxes of toys. It is, in its way, as emblematic of the struggle for peace as the negotiations about Stormont and as good a reason for measured optimism.

"I feel very, very privileged to have heard some of the stories people have told me," Arlene Healey says. "Some have already ended up being stories of healing and recovery. I'm hopeful that many more will in the future."

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