
SURVIVING TORTURE

What is Torture? What is the Purpose of Torture?

Torture is any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for the purpose of; getting information, punishing, intimidating or coercing, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind. AND, the pain and suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation or consent of a public official or other person acting on official capacity.

Torture is an instrument of power used to break down, to devastate people working for democratic change within their own countries. Torture is THE most effective tool against democracy and it is used as a powerful instrument to get and retain power and control.

While torture may be used to obtain information or signed confessions, this is not its primary purpose. Signing such confessions seldom leads to relief or release. Torture is directed towards instilling and reinforcing a sense of powerlessness and terror in victims and the societies in which they live. It is a process which generates a situation designed to destroy the physical and psychological capabilities of survivors to function as viable individuals.

Torture occurs to destroy community, hope and trust.

In a poem, torture is:

*anguish, squeezing in your chest as cold as ice
and heavy as a stone
paralyzing as sleep
and dark as the abyss
torture is;
despair and fear
it is not knowing how to trust
and having to learn again
how to live and how to love
how not to be afraid of living
or, waiting, or afraid of others*

Methods of Torture

Although torture is practiced in widely diverse sections of the world, the methods and techniques employed are remarkably similar. Some examples include: environmental manipulation (e.g. sleep deprivation, isolation); pharmacological manipulation (e.g. hallucinatory or muscle-paralyzing drugs); coercive methods (e.g. forced observation of torture of friends and family); somatic methods (e.g. beatings, rape, mutilation, starvation, electric shock, burning by cigarettes, repeated blows to the soles of the feet, suffocation— head forced into water filled with excrement or the air-tight “hood”); psychological methods (e.g. mock executions). Much of the trauma and stress of torture arises from the total experience of incarceration and ill-treatment, rather than from specific acts of violence.

Physical and Psychological Effects of Torture

The consequences of torture are multidimensional and interconnected; no part of the survivor's life is untouched. While the physical pain which was suffered may diminish over time, such physical impairments resulting from torture as amputations, deafness, blindness, poorly healed fractures, infectious diseases, and malignancies, are a permanent tangible reminder of the trauma suffered.

Psychological effects might include: memory disturbance and difficulty concentrating, sexual dysfunction, chronic anxiety, emotional irritability, social withdrawal and loss of trust in others, flashbacks, fear of sleep, nightmares, depression, feelings of betrayal, and phobias.

It is important to remember that survivors of torture are healthy people who have been systematically subjected to treatment intended to destroy their personalities, their sense of identity, their confidence, and their ability to function socially. Survivors may need assistance in understanding their experience, and help in rebuilding their identity.

How Can a Person Survive After Torture?

While considerable attention is focused on the negative effects of torture, and understandably so, it must be remembered that those who have survived show remarkable strength in facing these effects. To do so day after day represents a "triumph of the human will."

Those who seem to do best tend to have the following similar characteristics: seeing legal action taken to punish those who committed the abuse, a strong belief in their cause or strong religious beliefs, a strong support from their community, and access to treatment.

The healing process involves:

- Relearning to trust
- Regaining self and personal dignity
- Having the chance to talk about what happened
- Learning about the symptoms of trauma
- Grieving the losses- physical, psychological or community
- Accepting and adapting to disabilities

The information about torture and its effects was excerpted from the following sources:

- TASSC: Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition
- Canadian Center for Victims of Torture
- Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture

FACING TORTURE

by Hisham Sharabati

Steadfastness is the key word. The main factor in facing torture is steadfastness – the deep **faith** in the **just cause**, whatever the form of torture is.

Remember that the torturer is part of the machine of oppression. He participates in it for personal material gain, because he is obliged to be there (e.g., a soldier in military service), or because he is a member in military gang or death squad; however, you choose with your complete will to work for justice. You work for the light of the world and he works for the darkness. He is the one who is committing crimes and wants to hide it. You are the strong person who is chasing down injustice so that justice may prevail.

They can torture you, but they can't do it for long. They may try to convince you that they can torture you forever, but really they cannot. They will try to make you feel isolated from the world – you won't listen to the news, you won't read newspapers. You should believe and remember, however, that your friends, family and teammates and many others are doing their best effort to end your torture and to work for your immediate release. If the torture becomes worse, know that your supporters are making it more difficult for the torturers to keep you much longer. You are much stronger than the torturers; don't show them any weakness. One day you will win and they will be persecuted for what they are doing to you and what they have done to others.

If they ask you for information, don't give it to them. Don't think that by giving some information they will stop torturing you, to the contrary, that will make them think that the more they "pressure" you, the more info you will give; and this is an endless process.

They want you to give up your beliefs. Maybe they'll try to convince you that they are right and you are wrong. That is completely untrue, even if they seem to be right in minor things. ALWAYS believe that they are on the wrong side.

Even if the worst happens – if you die, that will prove your message that you are on the right side and they are wrong. You will be the martyr that every one remembers. And the torturers will have shame.