

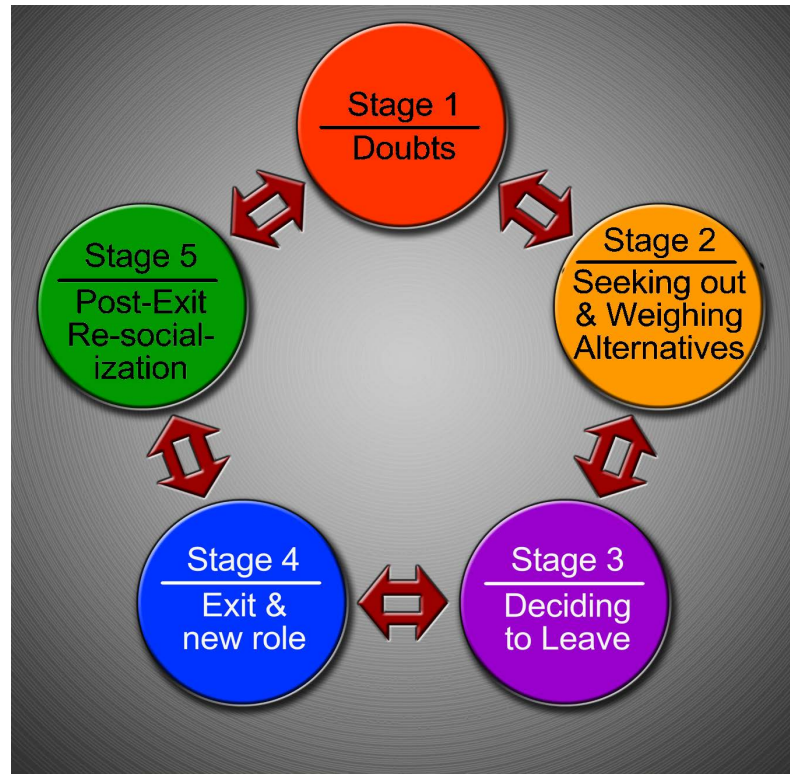
Disengagement Case Study: Sarah's Story

INTRODUCTION

As an adolescent, Sarah* became involved in a series of violent extremist right-wing (XRW) groups. She eventually committed to one group and was convicted for terrorist offenses. Sarah's first exposure to the XRW scene came via a group of skinheads in high school. Sarah says that these initial groups were little more than "watered down punk rockers" mostly focused around the "style, the way of life, the music scene."

"In the beginning... it was anarchy symbols and a '[expletive]' the world' approach to life. And when I started to become active in the far-right groups, their anarchy symbols became swastikas. Their beliefs, and what I was learning there, started to mold me. It was understood that being publicly involved with the group meant ... there's no walking away ... when [my] involvement first started, I didn't seriously consider what happens if I decide to walk away, because I made a decision to be completely involved. That meant staying. It meant commitment."

Common Stages of the Terrorist Disengagement Process



Adapted from Ebaugh's 1988 model of voluntary role exit

* Not her real name

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BECOMING INVOLVED

Involvement with the more experienced right-wing group, however, would eventually require more than just a shaved head and drawings. She would socialize with a small few hardcore younger members who would, from time to time, encounter members of the older group at a concert or party. Sarah would be "hanging out" with the older group's members, "getting drunk, being obnoxious ... pounding the streets trying to recruit people." It was apparent to her that engagement with this older group represented a different kind of involvement than that of the previous group:

"When I met them through the younger skinheads, then I started to see this is really serious shit. That ... and this is one thing I don't think I really consciously realized then, that there was that line that was going to be crossed."

One evening, two of the younger skinhead members went to a concert with members of the older group. Here they encountered an opposing group of skinheads, and a fight broke out. Rather than standing his ground to fight, one of the younger members hid. This, Sarah says, was taboo: "You don't run, you know, when there's a fight. You stick around, you, you know, fight it out with your comrades and your friends no matter what happens."

Sarah described how members of the older group goaded another young member into a fight whereupon he had his nose "horribly broken." His failure, Sarah explained, led to his expulsion. Sarah enforced that expulsion. Her willingness would establish her as a fully-fledged member of the older group:

"I think ... without really realizing it ... that was my point of making my commitment. Because I said 'I'll be the one to get rid of him.' And a big part ofb... at least back then if you wanted to disgrace a skinhead or, kind of excommunicate them, they would be beat up. They would have their boots taken, their flight jacket taken, their suspenders taken. So that's what I literally did to that kid."

This "crossover" point represented a major change for Sarah. This shepherded a new "level of commitment ... and from, yeah, there on, it, it was understood there's no walking away. The group became my surrogate family. That, to me, seemed the place where I was accepted, I was wanted. It seemed like they cared about me. I played my part well. I was already violent, I was already starting fights and getting into fights. So becoming one of them—it was very easy."



Photo by Chris Smith, in Travis & Hardy, 2012

STAGE

1

DOUBTS

Sarah began having doubts about her involvement. She struggled with recurring conflict about the reality of her involvement, asking herself: "You are a [expletive], why are you doing this?"

"As I was getting deeper and deeper involved with the group, I started a relationship with a Hispanic man. I was in love with him, but I knew I had to keep it secret. If the group ever found out, they would have said, 'You're a whore and a traitor.' Eventually one of the guys in the group—my ex—gave me an ultimatum. Either I stop seeing the man I love or he tells the rest of the group. So I stopped. All this time, I felt like a hypocrite, but I knew if I started to fully acknowledge that to myself, everything would be unraveled."

External events compounded Sarah's doubts. Struggling to cope with her increasing disillusionment, she recalls reaching a tipping point:

"Seeing the bodies being pulled out of the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, I saw the corpses of children. I think that made it finally seep through to my conscious mind. I would ask myself, *WHAT am I doing? Do I want to be a bomber too?*' To push those thoughts away, I would always do more drugs, drink more, become more involved to kind of, you know. But there came that point when I just really knew. When I tried to quit, around the time of the bombing, I realized I actually just couldn't get out."

She responded by trying to conceal any hint of her desire to disengage:

"And then I knew. I thought, *now* I have to be *super*-racist skinhead because I had fallen off the wagon. I literally made a point to go out and recruit more people and to be more hardcore and start more fights. And, you know, because I felt I have to re-prove myself because they knew that I faltered."

In concealing her inner disillusionment, Sarah actually appeared to become more outwardly committed.

STAGE

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SEEKING OUT & WEIGHING ALTERNATIVES

Although Sarah was able to eventually admit to herself that she was disillusioned with her involvement, her unfilled emotional needs, lack of confidence, and the absence of attractive alternatives presented obstacles that prevented her from walking away.

"A *lot* of the time I was walking the line and on my way out. One time I was under house arrest, and I thought it might give me an opportunity to leave. I remember thinking, 'Well I'm just not going to call them anymore and if they show up here, then I won't answer the door. But the group made it a point to let me know that they knew—with bullet holes through the door of my home. Sometimes the group's threats were more subtle, like: 'Have you seen your grandparents lately? They knew where to find my family.'"

Such threats reinforced Sarah's belief that she lacked exit routes:

"If I ... had the [financial] resources I probably would have been able to leave. But in the end I thought, 'I can't do it. I'm on house arrest, where can I go? I have no money, I can't move. I can't protect my family.' And ... I *still* very much wanted the attention that attracted me to the group in the first place. I still felt like I needed to be doing something and be a part of something ... It was just absolutely impossible to leave at that point."

Unable or unwilling to leave the movement, Sarah told the group: "I'm not going anywhere." The open clarification, she says, sufficiently allowed tensions to get "cleared up very quickly," and Sarah was back in. One evening Sarah was hanging out with other members of her group. Drinking heavily, reading copies of *The Turner Diaries*, they considered potential targets. Serving as a driver and lookout, Sarah aided in an armed robbery of a store. Fearing arrest and prosecution for the crime, Sarah and her boyfriend went on the run.

"I had to go on the run after the robbery. I remember thinking, Am I going to keep doing this forever? At some point, I'm going to have to start popping out babies."

"A few times, I gathered up all of my belongings and went to the bus station to leave town ... but I just stopped at the last minute. I had this constant fear of being alone ... I had such horribly low self-esteem before and during my involvement. So I thought, At least I have someone in my life. Maybe I got lucky. But if I leave--if I quit--I'm going to be alone. So I stayed."



DECIDING TO LEAVE

The seeds of disillusionment grew fast in Sarah's mind. The Oklahoma City bombing proved a catalyst for this but did not quite cause Sarah to admit her own involvement was somehow reprehensible. Instead, it was Sarah's arrest and a subsequent plea agreement that provided the turning point. Sarah reported that this arrest was the first time in her life that she actually accepted responsibility for her actions and admitted that what she had done was wrong.

She indicated that her time in prison forced her to confront the doubts she struggled to conceal as part of the movement:

"One thing I often see is the people in the movement, you're so preoccupied with, keeping up the beliefs and all that that you almost need ... prison gives you a space ... gives you a time to ... sort of think about those things ... and entertain [those thoughts]."

Sarah's time in prison exposed her to interactions with people from a diversity of races, which she reports as positive.

"In prison I was worried that I'd be fighting every five minutes, but no. The other inmates knew what I was, and they still treated me like any other person. I was friends with white women. But—and here's the irony—my closest friends in prison were black. One of my black friends in prison asked me: If you met me on the street before this, would you have kicked my ass? You can't bullshit your way through an answer to a question like that. The more questions she asked me, the more I learned about myself. So I stopped trying to fit the role of a racist skinhead. I stopped thinking things like: I must hate. I must hate. "

"So in prison, I had honest, open, and frank discussions with black women. There was no tension between us when we discussed these emotionally-charged, sensitive issues. They didn't make me feel judged. I started becoming the person that I should've been, had I not gone down that path. The more time I spent with my friends in prison, the more I learned."



STAGE
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EXIT & NEW ROLE

Her decision to pursue an associate's degree while in prison also broadened her perspective and challenged her commitment to violent extremism. Sarah mentioned that in her courses she "started learning about all these different aspects of life that [she] hadn't considered." She "started realizing the world truly is so much bigger than [she] and [her] beliefs and ideas and, you know, [her] feelings." According to Sarah, this realization imbued her with a "terrific sense of freedom."

"While in lock up, I took some courses. The more I learned, the more I realized that the world is so much bigger than me, my beliefs, ideas, and feelings. I now know that I had a power within me—the capability to feel compassion and empathy. After years of professing hate—it was liberating."

Sarah was assigned to help a General Education Development (GED) teacher in the prison system with grading. When Sarah realized that certain women in the class were not participating because they were illiterate, she began to teach them how to read. She reported that the experience of teaching these women (of all different races) how to read had a profound effect on her:

"It was more for me than them. That, to know that I had that power within me, that I was capable of being compassionate and empathetic and actually caring about people that I professed to hate for so many years—those kind of experiences changed me tremendously."

Incarceration—an involuntary disengagement—facilitated Sarah's permanent break from violent extremism. In fact, Sarah chose to testify against her former movement while in prison. Since her release from prison, Sarah has not returned to extreme right-wing activity of any kind. According to Sarah, the decision to cooperate with law enforcement officials provided her with a "sense of relief." Following her release, Sarah focused her attention primarily on her education, earning an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree.

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POST-EXIT RE-SOCIALIZATION

Upon her release from prison, Sarah worried tremendously about what life would be like outside of the relatively secure and predictable prison environment. Moreover, she worried whether her beliefs had truly changed or whether she might eventually change back:

"When I got out of prison, I was petrified that my brain was hardwired ... That every time I saw someone black I would automatically think a racial slur. I was seriously worried that I couldn't stop that and that I couldn't change it. But I didn't want to be like that. It was like breaking a bad habit. If I learned to be a racist, I had to learn how not to be racist. So every time I had a racist thought, I literally stopped and talked to myself like—'Why did you *think* that? What, you know, what about *that* person made you think this?'"

Leaving prison and the group, according to Sarah, was "very emotional because that wall of anger" on which she depended on for so long "had crumbled":

"You know, I went to prison this racist, horrible, violent person, and my whole life changed. It was like being reborn but not in like the religious sense. When I came out of prison, I experienced things differently. The colors looked brighter ... I know what led to *my* disengagement. Several of my friends are formers, just like me. But each of them disengaged for different reasons. It's different for everyone. I now have a responsibility to go out and try to undo damage—to try to put a stop to violence and racism in its infantile stages. If I can help prevent someone from getting involved, then all the better."

Conclusions

- It is common for members of violent extremist groups to experience doubts and disillusionment.
- A common obstacle to disengagement is feeling that there are no exit options--this explains why people often remain in violent extremist groups despite being deeply disillusioned.
- Sometimes, members attempt to conceal that disillusionment by becoming outwardly more "extreme."
- An important factor in preventing re-engagement in violent extremism is a new sense of purpose and identity.

Additional Reading

Briefing note: *Self-Concealment in Violent Extremist Groups*



from "Walking Away" by the Fox and the Hound