Unsafe Systems & Systemic Trauma: How Rigid Institutions Perpetuate Harm and How to Break the Cycle

Introduction: Beyond "Evil Shooter" vs. "Innocent School" Simplifications

In the wake of a tragedy, it's tempting to reduce the story to villains and victims – an "evil, mentally-ill shooter" versus an "innocent community". But reality is more layered. Consider a recent mass shooting incident at a Catholic school: a 23-year-old former student opened fire during a morning prayer service, killing two children and wounding over a dozen. In the aftermath, city leaders urged "stop vilifying [any] group" and "love each other more." These calls for unity, while well-intentioned, gloss over the deeper question – how did a once-broken child evolve into a person filled with hatred toward everyone and capable of such violence?

Indeed, investigators revealed that the shooter had a history of depression and "expressed hate towards almost every group imaginable," from Black and Mexican people to Christians and Jews. The perpetrator also idolized prior mass killers. This extreme pathology did not emerge in a vacuum. It grew from years of trauma, social isolation, and a sense of not belonging – conditions that our institutions and culture may unwittingly cultivate. As one police chief noted, the perpetrator's intent was to cause "as much terror, as much trauma, as much carnage as possible" for personal notoriety. Such twisted motives often trace back to a lifetime of unresolved pain.

This white paper examines how rigid social systems – from schools and churches to families – can inadvertently perpetuate trauma and alienation, especially for those who don't fit their narrow norms. We present research "proof" that systemic hurt and limited beliefs about what's "acceptable" are deeply harming individuals and society. We then explore how this harm can manifest in cycles of violence or despair that feel "unfixable," persisting across generations. Finally, we propose a path forward: leveraging Safety, Presence, and Joy (SPJ) as fundamental principles to interrupt the cycle of trauma, even when large institutions are slow to change.

By understanding the systemic roots of tragedies like these, we can move beyond superficial fixes (important as gun control or mental health reporting may be) and address the core human issues of division, exclusion, and generational pain. The goal is not to vilify any faith, school, or community, but to confront hard truths: no system is truly "safe" unless every person within it feels seen, heard, and valued. Healing this divide is crucial if we hope to prevent the next tragedy – whether that tragedy is a public massacre or the private despair of a child contemplating suicide.

The Systemic Problem: When Rigid Institutions Create Unsafe Environments

Many of our most cherished institutions – schools, churches, family units, workplaces – operate with rigid norms and "molds" that define who belongs and who does not. These norms can provide stability for some, but they unintentionally (and sometimes intentionally) create unsafe environments for those who don't conform. In the Catholic school context, strict religious doctrines and traditional expectations set a clear mold: any child who diverges – whether due to gender identity, sexual orientation, mental health struggles, or even just a questioning attitude – may feel fundamentally "wrong" or unwelcome in that environment.

Silencing and Shaming of "Outliers"

LGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergent students, or others who don't fit the prescribed mold often receive implicit or explicit messages that something about them is "deviant". For example, peers and authorities might bully, ostracize, or attempt to "pray away" the parts of them that don't conform. Such an environment is profoundly unsafe on an emotional level – it replaces support with shame. Research by the Trevor Project confirms that LGBTQ youth are not inherently prone to suicide due to their identity, but rather are at higher risk "because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society." In other words, it's the hostile environment – not the child's identity – that inflicts the harm.

Mental Health Stigma and Lack of Support

In rigid systems, admitting to depression, trauma, or any mental health issue can be taboo. Children suffering inside often stay silent for fear of judgment. In one documented case, a perpetrator was described as a quiet loner who "skulked around" and even hid in a bathroom to avoid mandatory all-school Mass. These behaviors hint at a young person feeling deeply alienated from the school's ethos – perhaps because that ethos had no room for their pain or differences. When a system fails to proactively make every child feel safe and accepted, those who feel "different" retreat further inward, receiving no solace for their growing resentment or despair.

From Unsafe to Traumatizing

Crucially, when safety is missing at the systemic level, vulnerable individuals are not just unsupported – they are actively harmed. Being forced to suppress one's identity or needs to survive in a rigid system is itself a form of trauma. Over time, this can cause profound psychological damage. Multiple studies have shown that youth who face rejection or hostility in their primary environments have dramatically worse outcomes. For example, lesbian, gay, or bisexual young adults who reported high levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide and 6 times more likely to have high levels of depression compared to peers from accepting families. Similarly, a large international study found that being bullied for one's identity or beliefs (e.g. "religion-based bullying") correlates with the highest odds of adolescent suicide attempts – higher than being bullied for any other reason. In short, when children are made to feel unsafe or "less than" by the very communities that should protect them, the harm is both deep and lasting.

Isolation Breeds Desperation

Lacking safety and belonging, traumatized individuals can spiral into isolation. A common profile emerges in hindsight of many school shooters: they felt rejected, invisible, or tormented by peers. In fact, nearly half of K-12 school shooters had a history of feeling socially rejected or bullied by others. One 16-year-old (who later perpetrated a school shooting) wrote, "I feel rejected…not so much alone, but rejected… the negative [treatment] is like a cut, it doesn't go away." Another shooter stated in court, "I felt like I wasn't wanted by anyone, especially my mom." These are the words of deeply hurt children molded by environments that failed to give them basic emotional safety. If a rigid institution continually sends a message – "You do not belong here; who you are is not acceptable" – the result is often a person who loses hope of ever being seen or loved. That loss of hope is the seed of despair, and sometimes of rage.

Case in Point

Former classmates of one perpetrator recall that the individual "had a crazy distaste for school" despite their own mother being on the parish staff. The person often sat alone at lunch and skipped religious rites like Confirmation class, withdrawing from the school's community. We cannot know every inner thought of this individual, but the outward signs are of someone who felt profoundly unwelcome and unsafe in their supposed community. A classmate even noted the paradox: hating the very church that employed their mother. Such internal conflict – loving family yet possibly feeling hurt by the family's faith – is a textbook recipe for moral injury and trauma. In this case, that trauma appears to have curdled into an abhorrence of all groups and life itself. By the morning of the attack, the individual's sense of connection to humanity was so eroded that, as an acting U.S. Attorney grimly observed, "the shooter appeared to hate all of us."

Bottom Line: Rigid, non-inclusive systems multiply trauma in those who are already vulnerable. They create ticking time bombs of pain. Not every traumatized child will become violent – most implode (struggle internally, sometimes to the point of self-harm) rather than explode. Indeed, for each infamous shooter, there are countless other children and adults quietly suffering, turning their pain inward. But whether the outcome is violence against others or oneself, the common denominator is an environment that failed to provide safety, acceptance, and support when it mattered most.

Why It Feels "Unfixable": Deep-Rooted Cultural Divides and Generational Trauma

If the problem is so clear, why is it so hard to solve? The short answer: these harmful dynamics are woven into the fabric of our culture, our institutions, even our families. They are reinforced over generations, creating a cycle that feels intractable. Several factors make systemic trauma and hatred seem "unfixable":

Entrenched Beliefs and Institutions

Many powerful institutions (a 2,000-year-old Church, a centuries-old school system, long-standing cultural traditions) have deeply ingrained values and structures. By design, they resist change – sometimes viewing calls for inclusion or reform as attacks on their core truths. For example, if a religion teaches that certain identities or behaviors are "sinful" or "unnatural," it will be institutionally reluctant to affirm those individuals. This creates a tragic Catch-22: the very systems that need to change for some members to be safe are the ones most insulated against change. To a child inside such an unyielding system, the message internalized is "You will never be fully safe or accepted here." That realization is devastating to one's psyche – especially during adolescence when belonging is so vital for development.

"We've Always Done It This Way" – Cultural Inertia

Systemic harm is often dismissed or normalized because "that's how it's always been." Generations might pass down prejudices and limited beliefs ("people like that are immoral/weak/unworthy") without ever questioning them. Sociologists describe how trauma can be transmitted across generations in families and communities, both through learned behaviors and even biologically. If parents carry unresolved trauma or hatred, they may (often unintentionally) pass it on to their children in the form of abuse, neglect, or bias. As one expert put it, we commonly see "children who are victims of abuse, whose parents were also victims of abuse, who had parents that were victims of abuse, and so on," with people shrugging it off as the status quo. That complacency "is what keeps the cycle going." In the societal context, this means a city or nation can cycle through "divided culture for one reason or another" – race, religion, politics, identity – replaying the same conflicts and hurts indefinitely.

Hate Feeds on Itself

When an individual snaps, public discourse often splits along ideological lines – Was it mental illness or access to guns? Was the shooter driven by anti-religious bias, or was it tied to their personal identity in their alienation? Very quickly, people start vilifying entire groups (e.g. transgender people, religious people, the mentally ill, etc.) instead of understanding the intersectional, systemic roots of the tragedy. Blaming a broad group for the acts of one individual only perpetuates the divisiveness that underlies these incidents. Yet even well-meaning pleas ("don't villainize others, choose love") can feel impotent. Telling a polarized society simply to "love each other more" can ring hollow when hate and mistrust have been brewing for decades. Leaders themselves often seem bewildered, offering platitudes because deeper solutions are hard. Thus the public falls back into its comfort zone of entrenched blame – a media cycle that lasts until the next tragedy, and changes little.

The Myth of the Isolated "Mentally Ill Monster"

Another way the system avoids self-reflection is by painting each mass shooter as a lone, deranged aberration – a "monster" not produced by society but acting against it. Mental health is undoubtedly a factor in many of these cases (studies show about 2/3 of mass shooters had a documented mental health issue, and over half of school shooters showed signs of depression, suicidal ideation, or other psychological problems). But to attribute everything to "mental illness" is an oversimplification that research strongly rebuts. Most people with mental health conditions do not commit violence, and many mass shooters do not meet clinical definitions of insanity – rather, they are often angry, "ordinary" individuals whose grievances festered in echo chambers of trauma and hate. Psychologists warn that "simply blaming mental illness for mass shootings unfairly stigmatizes those with diagnoses and ignores other, potentially more salient factors behind incidents of mass violence."

Those more salient factors include the very social systems we're discussing: childhood abuse or neglect, bullying, feelings of not mattering to anyone, availability of weapons, and cultural scripts of using violence to "get even." A comprehensive study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice found that nearly all mass shooters share four things: a history of early childhood trauma, a recent personal crisis or grievance, a "script" or examples from previous shooters to follow, and easy access to firearms. Notice how three of those four are rooted in life experiences and environment, not innate madness. It's trauma, crisis, and social contagion driving these acts – with the gun as the means. In short, these tragedies are symptoms of a broken system.

Given these complexities, it's understandable that many people feel despair. One cannot simply flip a switch to undo generations of bigotry or to make long-standing institutions instantly embrace change. The frustration is palpable – "Is there a solution, other than gun control?" the question goes, "…because gun control might stop a shooting, but it won't stop the hate that caused it." We owe it to our children to at least try to break these cycles. No, we cannot dismantle centuries of tradition overnight. But we can disrupt the cycle of trauma and hate, right here and now, by changing how we relate to each other within those systems. As the International Society for Trauma and Dissociation noted, "the more we can work on it and stop it at its root and prevent it, the better it is for all who are suffering and also for society."

The next section outlines a framework for doing exactly that – starting on the personal and community level, where change is still possible even when top-down reform is slow.

Breaking the Cycle with Safety, Presence, and Joy: A New Paradigm for Change

Faced with deep-seated cultural rifts, one might fantasize about escape – "Do we move to the mountains and turn it all off?" as even one shooter mused in a video, resigned that "we're all just going to rot with this trauma for generations." Giving up may feel easier than fixing what's broken. But there is an alternative to despair: it involves redefining safety and healing at the human level, within and between us, even if institutions remain imperfect. This is where the Safety–Presence–Joy (SPJ) framework comes in – a model that offers practical tools to foster healing in any environment. The SPJ approach rests on a simple truth: "No system is truly safe unless every person in it feels seen, heard, and loved. Safety is not optional. Presence is not optional. Joy is not optional. Without them, trauma multiplies."

In essence, we counter systemic trauma by systematically infusing its antidotes. Here's how each element addresses the problems discussed:

Safety

As trauma expert Dr. Bessel van der Kolk writes, "the ability to feel safe with others is probably the most important aspect of mental health." Psychological safety means I can be myself without fear of judgment or harm. To create safety, families, schools, and workplaces must name the truth that certain past practices have been unsafe and actively commit to change. For example, a school might implement a zero-tolerance policy for bullying and train staff in inclusive, trauma-informed teaching. A faith community might openly acknowledge past hurt (e.g. "We know LGBTQ members have felt unwelcome; we apologize and pledge to do better") to validate those wounds. Leadership must send a clear message: Everyone belongs. Accountability is key here – leaders and community members alike need to recognize their role in either amplifying or reducing harm. When people in power admit fault and model compassion, it helps survivors feel safer. Crucially, safety also involves listening without denial when someone says they feel unsafe. Rather than dismissing such concerns ("Oh, you're overreacting"), an SPJ approach encourages us to ask: "What would make you feel more secure and valued? How can we provide that?"

Presence

Presence means true, empathetic engagement with others – being fully "here" in the moment with someone, free of distraction or prejudice. Presence combats the isolation and rejection that fuel despair. It is a skill that anyone can learn: it involves active listening, empathy, and bearing witness to another's pain without immediately trying to judge, "fix," or distance oneself from it. For a traumatized individual, simply having someone stay present with them can be life-changing. Research on resilience shows that one single supportive relationship can dramatically improve outcomes for youth in crisis. For instance, a recent study found that transgender/nonbinary youth who had even one accepting adult in their life had 33%–39% lower odds of attempting suicide in the past year. One trusted teacher, one mentor, one parent-ally can literally tip the balance between life and death. This underscores a powerful point: we don't have to entirely overhaul "the system" to save lives – we can start by showing up for individuals in pain. Presence also means being attuned to early warning signs of crisis (while avoiding profiling). If someone is withdrawing or signaling hopelessness, a present community will notice and gently intervene long before that person resorts to violence. In the Brookings study on school shootings, experts advised fostering "psychological mattering" – making each student feel important to others – as a preventive measure. When people feel they matter, they are far less likely to lash out or self-destruct. Presence is how we communicate to someone that they matter.

Joy

It may seem odd to speak of joy in such dire context, but joy is the ultimate act of resistance against trauma. Joy here doesn't mean surface happiness or forced positivity; it means cultivating moments of genuine human connection, hope, and laughter, even amidst struggles. Traumatic experiences rob people (especially children) of the innocence and lightness that make life worth living. By intentionally re-introducing positive experiences, we help rewire traumatized brains to see that goodness is still possible. At an organizational level, Joy could look like a company ensuring employees have time for team-building fun and personal growth, not just grind and stress. In a family, it could be upholding traditions of play, affection, and praise to counterbalance any conflicts. For a survivor of a rigid, punitive environment, discovering joy again – perhaps through art, nature, or supportive peers – can be profoundly healing. Joy does not negate suffering; it counters it by reminding us that life retains beauty and meaning beyond trauma. Moreover, shared joy builds bridges: it's hard to remain strangers or adversaries when you've laughed or created something together. Communities that celebrate together (inclusively) forge stronger bonds, making it harder for hate to take root. This isn't fluff – it's grounded in neuroscience. Positive emotions broaden our thinking and help "undo" the physiological stress of negative experiences, increasing our resilience in the face of challenges.

By deploying Safety, Presence, and Joy in tandem, we create a microclimate of healing even if the macro system is still catching up. The SPJ framework does not pretend to "fix" a 2,000-year-old church or magically erase all prejudice in the world. Instead, it empowers people at every level to interrupt the cycle of trauma right where they stand. A teacher can decide that no child in their class will feel invisible on their watch. A manager can ensure their team culture prizes psychological safety and respect. A parent can break the family's cycle of abuse by choosing gentle parenting and therapy. These localized changes add up. They create ripple effects across communities. Over time, as more individuals heal and refuse to perpetuate hate, institutions will also adapt – because institutions are ultimately made of people.

Consider an analogy: we may not be able to drain a swamp all at once, but we can plant seeds of flowers that purify sections of it. Those safe, nurturing sections then expand outward. Each person who embodies safety, presence, and joy becomes a buffer against generational hate. They ensure that the trauma they inherited will not be passed on to others on their watch. This is how we slowly turn broken cycles into healing circles.

Confronting Complacency: The Individual Responsibility Component

While institutional change is critical, we must also confront a fundamental reality: every person must ultimately take accountability for their own emotional responses and wellbeing. As much as we want to be seen, heard, and validated by others, this external validation will never be consistently available. Perfect institutions do not exist, and waiting for systems to provide complete emotional safety before developing internal resilience is both unrealistic and self-defeating.

This hard truth does not diminish the real harm that exclusionary systems cause, nor does it excuse institutional failures. Rather, it acknowledges that sustainable healing requires developing the internal capacity to navigate inevitable disappointments, rejections, and imperfect environments without being destroyed by them. The goal is not to eliminate all discomfort or ensure constant external validation, but to build emotional competence that allows individuals to process difficult emotions and find meaning regardless of circumstances.

The emphasis on creating "safe spaces" where individuals never experience discomfort represents a fundamental misunderstanding of psychological development and resilience. Research shows that toxic positivity—"dysfunctional emotional management without the full acknowledgment of negative emotions, particularly anger and sadness"—creates additional psychological harm by teaching individuals to suppress rather than process difficult emotions.

When institutions or individuals promote the idea that "negative thoughts about anything should be avoided" and maintain "unrealistic expectation of having perfectly happy lives all the time," this approach "can often lead to further unhappiness in the long run." People "can feel shame or guilt by being unable to attain the perfection desired."

True emotional regulation differs fundamentally from emotional suppression or toxic positivity. Emotional regulation "is the ability to manage and respond to our emotions in a healthy way. It means being able to acknowledge our emotions, process them effectively, and respond appropriately to situations." Research demonstrates that "people who avoid their own negative emotions just feel worse later on," while "true happiness doesn't come from suppressing negative emotions and touting feel-good statements, but rather leaning into what we're authentically feeling in the moment and accepting all of our emotions, both positive and negative."

The Reality of Imperfect Systems

No institution—religious, educational, familial, or workplace—will ever perfectly meet every individual's needs for belonging and validation. Even well-intentioned communities led by compassionate people will have limitations, blind spots, and moments of failure. Expecting otherwise sets individuals up for perpetual disappointment and keeps them trapped in external dependency rather than internal growth.

This reality does not excuse harmful institutional practices or eliminate the need for reform. However, it means individuals cannot make their emotional wellbeing entirely contingent on whether others see, hear, and affirm them. The most resilient individuals are those who can maintain their sense of worth and emotional stability even when external support is lacking or imperfect.

Breaking Cycles Through Personal Agency

The cyclical nature of trauma means that ultimately, individuals must develop capacity to regulate their emotional responses regardless of environmental factors. This is not about "bootstrapping" or ignoring systemic harm—it is about recognizing that each person has the power to choose how they respond to that harm, and that choice determines whether cycles continue or break.

Those who successfully interrupt intergenerational trauma patterns often share a common trait: they refuse to make their healing dependent on receiving apologies, acknowledgment, or changed behavior from those who hurt them. Instead, they develop internal resources for processing pain, finding meaning, and creating the safety and joy that may have been absent in their formative environments.

This approach empowers people to break intergenerational cycles through conscious choice rather than perpetual victimization. By practicing authentic emotional regulation, individuals "build resilience and become better equipped to handle life's ups and downs" while expanding their "window of tolerance." More importantly, they model for the next generation that external circumstances do not have to dictate internal experience—a powerful antidote to systemic trauma.

Conclusion: Toward a Future Where Every Child Feels Seen, Heard, and Loved

The cyclical trauma in our divided culture – whether manifesting as public acts of violence or private anguish spanning generations – will not vanish overnight. But it will diminish with sustained, collective effort to replace rigidity with empathy, exclusion with inclusion, and despair with hope. In this white paper, we have presented evidence that systems failing to provide emotional safety have dire consequences: children grow up wounded, and some wounds tragically become the scars on society we call mass shootings, suicide epidemics, and rampant hate. We've also highlighted that these patterns, however ingrained, are not beyond intervention. Humans created these systems and norms; humans can change them.

As a call to action, let us commit to the following guiding principles:

Belonging is a Right, Not a Privilege: Every child and adult deserves to feel they belong in their community. If any policy, practice, or belief undermines that sense of belonging for a whole class of people (e.g. LGBTQ+ members, those with mental illness, those of a different faith or race), it must be critically examined. We must be brave enough to say "This is causing harm, and we need to do better," even in venerable institutions. Remember, acknowledging past wrongs isn't about tearing down institutions – it's about strengthening them by making them just and humane for all.

Healing over Blaming: Rather than vilifying groups or simplifying causes ("It was just a crazy person" or "just a gun problem"), we will take a holistic, compassionate view. When trauma occurs, we ask "What happened to this person?" and "How have we, as a society, contributed to this?" as much as we ask "What did they do wrong?" This doesn't negate personal responsibility; it adds collective responsibility into the equation. By focusing on healing the broken parts of our systems, we reduce the likelihood of new perpetrators emerging. It's telling that when school shooters were asked about their motives, many spoke of being treated as insignificant, bullied, or unloved. Those are preventable precursors. Let's prevent them.

Invest in Safety, Presence, Joy at every level: Governments and organizations should treat emotional safety as foundational infrastructure, just like physical safety. That means funding mental health counselors in schools, training leaders in trauma-informed practices, promoting mentorship programs (to ensure every youth has an ally), and even designing spaces and schedules that promote human connection rather than isolation. It means measuring success not just by test scores or productivity, but by well-being indicators – do the people here feel safe and valued? Data consistently shows that when people have support and feel they matter, outcomes improve – from lower suicide rates to reduced violence. These "soft" concepts have hard impacts.

Break the Silence, Share the Joy: Finally, we must speak openly about trauma and hate rather than sweeping them under the rug. As painful as it is, bringing the dark truths into the light is how we disarm them. When one person bravely shares their story of struggle and healing, it gives others permission to do the same. This builds empathy – the antidote to "othering." And while we do this hard work, we should also unapologetically share joy and gratitude. Celebrate the small victories: a school that successfully mediates conflicts and stops a bullying incident is a cause for community celebration. A family that reconciles after years of estrangement is a story to be honored. Joy is not trivial; it is what keeps us going in the fight to create a safer world.

In closing, we cannot afford to remain bewildered by systemic violence and division. We have to face the uncomfortable causes within our culture and ourselves. The good news is, every day offers opportunities – however small – to change the story. By ensuring Safety, Presence, and Joy in our circles, we do make a difference. We prove by example that hate and trauma are not, in fact, inevitable inheritances; they are problems we can solve together.

If we succeed, future generations will look back and see that the cycle was broken – not by one grand policy or one charismatic leader, but by thousands of humane choices made in homes, schools, and offices across the country. They will see a world where such tragedies are far rarer, and where, when tragedies do strike, the response is not division and despair but unity and compassionate action. That is the world we owe to the memories of those lost and to the hope of those yet to come.

Let's build it – one act of safety, one moment of presence, one shared joy at a time.

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