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# Verbal catharsis: healing war wounds into mere scars

'THE SIMPLE FACT THAT WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT IT MEANS THAT NO LESSONS HAVE BEEN LEARNED'

*'History revives your pain, but we are not talking about sick people here'*

**Alia Ibrahim**  
Daily Star staff

Lebanon's war is one chapter in the country's modern history that needs to be researched, analyzed and discussed for the Lebanese to avoid another round of strife, according to Elie Karam, professor and head of department of psychiatry and clinical psychology at St. George University.

Speaking during an interview with The Daily Star, Karam said that having more information about the war would allow for the healing of a lot of wounds that are still open.

Karam, who has been researching the psychological impact of the war in his position as the director of Institute for Development Research and Applied Care (IDRAC), said that discussing the war could help many of those who were traumatized by its events, either psychologically or physically.

"Those victims of the war, like those who lost someone dear to them, would feel much less isolated and could become more productive, if they realize they are not alone," he said.

By talking more frequently about the war, Karam said, people become less scared of

the subject, and are less likely to be intimidated by it.

"We know that the information is helpful, so how come we avoid this big chapter in our history? How come people say they don't want to talk about it?" he asked.

"It is illogical that 11 years since the war ended we still don't have a consensus on why it has taken place, with each of us having a different theory," he said.

Karam added that even the term "civil" used to describe Lebanese war could be contested for accuracy.

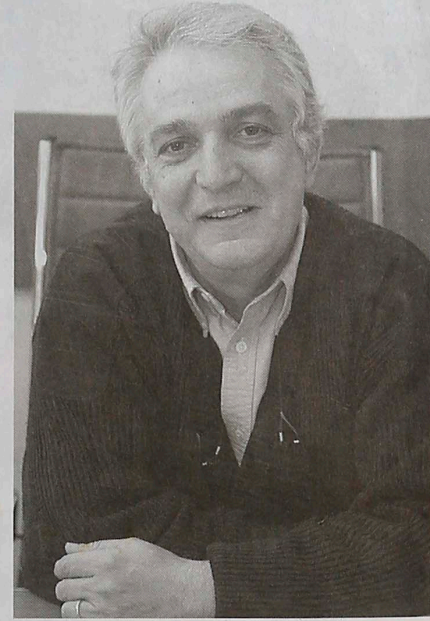
"Maybe we discover it wasn't a civil war, maybe we discover it was several wars that happened in a vacuum of authority," he said.

If such a conclusion is reached, Karam said, it will help a lot of Lebanese get over the guilt they have been suffering from for years.

"The simple fact that we are not talking about it means that no lessons have been learned," he said.

"Most people would feel it is not wise to talk about something scary because it will revive your pain, which is true. History revives your pain, but we are not talking about sick people here," he said, adding that there is no danger in recalling sad memories.

"Some people may be concerned that the debate could be used by some, but the thing is, silence is being used too," he said. "Are we getting better by



Karam: "We need to find a common denominator"

not talking about the war? Are we getting more democratic by not talking to each other and listening to our differences? Is it by complacency that we build a nation? How are we going to

teach our children to fight for this country and not for the clan ... to avoid another war if we don't start talking," he asked. Karam stressed that it was important for Lebanese to talk

## STATISTICAL PORTRAIT OF TRAUMA

A study conducted in 1996, following Israel's Grapes of Wrath operation and a part of which focused on assessing the psychological, medical and social needs of war orphans who lost one or two parents during the bombing of the UN shelter in Qana, showed that those children continued to have high rates of depression, PTSD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and Conduct Disorder, one year after the trauma, whereas those who were exposed to the same experience but didn't lose a parent had gone down to normal rates of these mental health disorders. Even two years later, in 1998, the rates in the orphan sample were still high for depression, PTSD, SAD.

### Individual treatment

Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in PI, PII, PIII and PIV

Disorder	Phase I (June 1997) One year after trauma N=58	Phase II (July 1998) One year after treatment N=66	Phase III (June 1999) Two years after treatment N=67	Phase IV (July 2000) Three years after treatment N=69
Post-traumatic stress disorder	20.7%	8.1%	6.3%	1.4%
Depression/dysthymia	24%	17.7%	3.2%	4%
Separation anxiety disorder	39.7%	17.8%	1.6%	*
ADHD & conduct disorder	10.3%	7.8%	17.4%	10%
Any disorder	62.5%	30.2%	29.8%	23.2%

\* Not systematically evaluated

about "our differences."

"Muslims, Shiites, Sunnis ... come to my office. They are not the same, they don't feel they are the same, and the fact that they feel they are not the same is not what we need to fight," he said.

"What we need is to find a common denominator between us," he added.

He lent his approval to the idea of building a war museum with pictures and slogans from the different sides.

"Maybe if a Maronite from Bsharri and a Shiite from Tyre see those pictures and read those slogans, they would all realize that they want similar things," he said.

The Institute for Development Research and Applied Care, a non-profit and non-governmental organization led by a team of Lebanese psychiatrists, psychologists and epidemiologists, has conducted a program of mental health research in Lebanon over the past 20 years.

The studies conducted by the group investigated two populations, adults and children, and used methods internationally recognized as being scientifically sound.

The institute conducted several studies on adults over three different phases, 1989 (Phase I), 1991 (Phase

II) and 1994 (Phase III) in four different Lebanese communities exposed to different levels of war trauma. Some of the findings:

● High rates of depression, reaching around 30 percent, were found in Phase I and Phase II. These rates started to drop in Phase III.

● The research that conducted on the war in Lebanon showed that the effects of the war on mental health vary with the degree of witnessing of a war event – death or mutilation of close person, destruction of home – the frequency of the events, and type of the event.

## DISTURBING FINDINGS

● People who lose a very close person are at high risk of developing psychological problems, as they are exposed to a two-fold trauma: violent death and war.

● These individuals may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (a psychological state where the individual is so overwhelmed by the trauma that he or she feels obsessed with the event and its possible recurrence), depression, and anxiety disorder.

● The studies in Lebanon did not show an increase in rates of substance use, but further studies are being conducted in this area.