



“Understanding the Burden of Survivor’s Guilt” Briefer

A Summary of Key Takeaways from the May 6, 2021 Event

Introduction

The following briefer is a summary of key takeaways from “Understanding the Burden of Survivor’s Guilt,” a panel event hosted by the Uyghur Wellness Initiative on May 6, 2021. Co-sponsors of the event included the [Uyghur Human Rights Project](#), [Uyghur American Association](#), [Campaign for Uyghurs](#) and [Peace Catalyst International](#).

The information in this briefer is based on remarks from the event moderator, Mustafa Aksu, and the event panelists Dr. Nechama Liss-Levinson, Dr. Lauren Rubenstein and Dr. Adrian Zenz. More information about the contributors can be found at the end of the briefer.

A full recording of the event can be viewed in English [here](#).

What is Survivor’s Guilt?

Based on remarks from Dr. Nechama Liss-Levinson

Survivor’s guilt is something experienced by someone who survived a traumatic event when others did not. You might experience survivor’s guilt when you were part of a traumatic experience and survived when others did not, you saw something happen to others, or you heard about something that happened to others.

What Does Survivor’s Guilt Feel Like?

There are many different effects of survivor’s guilt. Not everyone experiences it the same way. The effects of survivor’s guilt are confusing, and you might not connect what you feel to survivor’s guilt. You might experience one effect, or you might experience many different effects. You might feel one way one day, and then feel the opposite on another day. That is normal. You are not crazy and you are not the only one. It may be painful and difficult, but you are not crazy, you are not alone, and you will get through it.

Things You May Feel or Experience

- Like there is too much (hyperarousal)
- Like there is too little
- Anxiety
- Panic
- Fear
- Helpless
- Unmotivated
- Numb
- Empty
- Disconnected
- Nauseous
- Stomach aches
- Not eating
- Eating too much
- Crying uncontrollably
- Trouble sleeping
- Nightmares
- Headaches
- Flashbacks to a traumatic event
- Obsessive thoughts about your loved ones in the homeland
- Like you did the wrong thing
- Like you didn't do enough
- Like things are your fault
- Like you don't deserve to have fun
- Like you can't feel proud of what you have accomplished
- Like life isn't worthwhile anymore

Talking About Survivor's Guilt within the Uyghur Community

Based on remarks from Dr. Adrian Zenz

People started paying attention to the idea of survivor's guilt after the Holocaust. Then the concept started to apply to any disasters where some survive when others do not. It is clear that many Uyghurs are experiencing survivor's guilt. Many still have loved ones in the Uyghur region. Sometimes they don't know if loved ones are alive, if they are in concentration camps, or if they have been released. Usually, there is no communication. If there is communication, it's often very painful.

Uyghurs often describe experiences of survivor's guilt to me, but this topic is not usually addressed. I decided to [tweet](#) about it because it's empowering to realize that what we feel is normal. Many people have felt it before. It has a name. People receive support for it, such as counseling. There was a great response from the Uyghur community to the tweet. People realize that it is not sustainable to constantly speak out about the genocide. You can't kill yourself in advocacy. You can't constantly think about it. The human soul is not designed for that. You destroy yourself. You need to take a break, but for many Uyghurs, taking a break leads to feelings of guilt. Some think, "Can my family member or friend and in a concentration camp take a break?" So people try to suppress coping mechanisms. Yet, one of the most important things for survival is to get help and take care of yourself. The genocide is not a short-term issue. We have no idea how long it will go on, so Uyghurs have to take care of themselves without feeling guilty. Nobody benefits if Uyghurs kill themselves emotionally, mentally and even physically because of guilt and advocacy.

It is so important to be able to name what you feel. If you can name it, you can say, "I am really affected. It's something called survivor's guilt. Anybody who goes through this situation can have it." There is a conceptual framework. You can recognize the symptoms, reflect on it and know that you need to get help and take care of yourself.

Responses from the Uyghur Community

Below are responses from the Uyghur community to Dr. Zenz's [tweet](#) about survivor's guilt.

"This thread has great suggestions for us Uyghurs about how to properly deal with survivor's guilt. Thank you."

"This post really describes the emotions that Uyghurs outside of East Turkistan can feel. We're feeling intense guilt due to the sufferings of relatives who stayed back home, while we live our normal lives."

"None of my day passes without feeling guilt. The sense of shame is getting too much. Either I will be eaten by that, or I will get used to it one day."

"I'm feeling survivor guilt, too."

"I often feel this when I have too much of a good time, when I take a break from speaking out about the issue, or when I purposely suppress thoughts about the genocide for the sake of maintaining sanity."

"You nailed it. That's exactly what we've been going through for the past few years."

"This is an incredibly [under mentioned] concept. Thank you for shining some light on this."

"This guilt drives me crazy most of my days. I don't know how I will ever survive these times."

"I wake up with nightmares of what's happening to people back home."

"This is so true. We have this guilty feeling not only because our loved ones are suffering, but also because hundreds of thousands of children who have been taken away from parents and millions suffering in and outside the Chinese prisons and camps. We've been living in a very dark world since 2017. We have lost all trust and respect for the so-called world leaders and presidents of countries and influential people around the world for keeping silent."

"I never thought I can live in a free nation, and still suffer like in a cage. My mind and my soul are with our people in the homeland."

Personal Reflection: Mustafa Aksu

Based on remarks from Mustafa Aksu

Selfcare is really important. Maintaining wellness during such a devastating time of crisis can be very difficult. Personally, I have found support through meetings with a mental wellness professional.

In 2017, I was attending grad school at Indiana University Bloomington, in the United States. My family was still in the homeland, and I lost contact with them, and with my relatives and friends. I was told that I should not call them anymore.

In 2018, I received news that some of my relatives were sent to concentration camps. That same year, I lost my dear older brother, my uncle and my two cousins. I was very close to them growing up and felt really guilty that I couldn't attend their funerals. I also felt guilty every time I traveled to beautiful places. I felt guilty when I ate at a restaurant, because I would only think about how people in the concentration camps had almost nothing to eat.

I would pray, listen to music, and socialize with my friends as forms of selfcare, but I was having a hard time dealing with all of this loss. I always had terrible dreams, like I was being chased by the Chinese police. Just this morning, I woke up with this nightmare. It always happens to me.

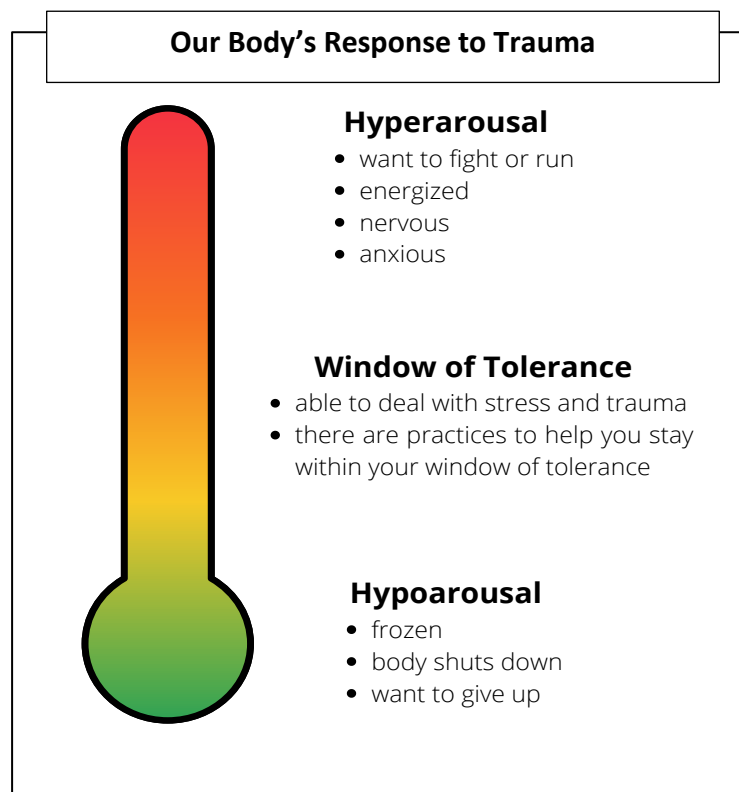
With the help of my colleague, I got connected with a wellness counselor through the Uyghur Wellness Initiative. I was not sure about it at first, but later I found it very helpful. I have made a lot of progress so far, and I'm always working toward goals.

If you are interested in connecting with a wellness counselor, please fill out this [Community Input Form](#), or email us at uyghurwellness@protonmail.com.

Enduring the Burden of Survivor's Guilt

Based on remarks from Dr. Lauren Rubenstein

The idea of selfcare can be difficult. We tend to feel like if we're taking time and energy to take care of ourselves, it is selfish. The Dalai Lama said, "You don't feel selfish when you brush your teeth every day. So why feel selfish when we try to take care of our minds and our hearts?" This is called **emotional hygiene**. Just like we bathe and brush our teeth every day, we have to attend to our emotional well-being every day. It is not selfish. We don't know when the genocide is going to end. We don't know how it is going to end. We have to make sure that we're functioning at our best.



That is easier said than done. It's like when a child gets upset, and our instinct is to say, "Just relax." Well, how do you do that? We have to teach people how to relax, how to take care of themselves. Our nervous system is like a thermometer. At the top is **hyperarousal**, the sympathetic nervous system, which is the fight or flight response. We want to take action. We're energized, maybe too energized. Maybe we're nervous, maybe we're physically shaking. At the bottom is **hypoarousal**, where we just want to give up. We also refer to this as the freeze response.

What so many Uyghurs are likely experiencing is a very painful state of having the fight response, where your

nervous system is on high alert, but also having a freeze response, where you're not sure if it's okay to express anger, to express yourself, to protest, to speak out. This combination of fight and freeze happening at once is like driving a car and stepping on the gas pedal and the brake pedal at the same time. It's a very uncomfortable feeling in the body.

What we try to do is to find our own **window of tolerance**, that spot in the middle. There are hundreds of different practices to help us do this. All of our nervous systems are different and what's going to work for one is not necessarily going to be the solution for another.

Five Practices for Daily Wellbeing

There are five practices that are scientifically proven to impact wellbeing.

- 1) Exercise**
- 2) Prayer (or Meditation)**
- 3) Gratitude Practice.** Think about things you are grateful for. For example, "I'm looking outside and the sun is shining today."
- 4) Random Acts of Kindness.** When we do kind things for others, our bodies release hormones to actually make us feel better.
- 5) Journaling about a Happy Moment.** Write about something positive that happened. Our nervous systems are wired to notice the negative moments and overlook the positive. We can help ourselves by trying to stay in positive moments for as long as we can. Scientists call this practice "**savoring**."

These are just some practices that might be helpful. There are many others to explore. Try them and find the practices that are best for you.

Example 1 of a Daily Loving Kindness Practice

Find a comfortable position. Some people find it calming to put one hand on the heart. Take a deep breath, and exhale. You can repeat these statements to yourself silently or out loud.

For myself...

May I find peace.
May I find compassion.
May I find courage.
May I retain hope.
May I be free from suffering.

For my loved ones...

May my loved ones find peace.
May my loved ones experience compassion.
May my loved ones have courage.
May my loved ones retain hope.
May my loved ones be free from suffering.

For the Uyghur community...

May we all find peace.
May we all have compassion.
May we all have courage.
May we all retain hope.
May we all be free from suffering.

Example 2 of a Daily Loving Kindness Practice

Begin by saying "Just for today..." followed by an intention for yourself. For example:

Just for today, I will be free from anger.
Just for today, I will be free from worry.
Just for today, I will be kind to every living thing.

About the Contributors

Mustafa Aksu is the Program Coordinator for Research and Advocacy at the Uyghur Human Rights Project. His research interests focus on language policy and surplus labor transfer in East Turkistan, Turkic languages, and the Uyghur diaspora in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Dr. Nechama Liss-Levinson is a psychologist whose practice focuses on milestones within the family. Dr. Liss-Levinson has worked closely with Uyghur clients.

Dr. Lauren Rubenstein is a psychologist who specializes in addressing trauma and difficult feelings with children, adults and families. She is the author of the children's book, *Visiting Feelings*.

Dr. Adrian Zenz is a Senior Fellow of China Studies at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. He is known for his research on Uyghurs and the atrocities in Xinjiang including forced labor, family separation, birth prevention, internment, and the police state.