



The  
CENTER for  
VICTIMS of  
TORTURE

## Effects of Psychological Torture

Torture is the deliberate and systematic dismantling of a person's identity and humanity. Torture's purpose is to destroy a sense of community, eliminate leaders and create a climate of fear.

Beatings and psychological torture are the most common forms seen at the Center for Victims of Torture™ (CVT). CVT clinicians have seen more sophisticated forms of torture over the years, especially psychological torture, that do not leave physical scars. This makes it more difficult for survivors to seek redress or make asylum claims.

In 2010, new clients to CVT reported the following forms of torture (many of these forms have reportedly been used by the U.S.):

**Physical Assaults**, including beatings, prolonged enforced standing, hanging, suffocation, burnings, electric shock, sexual assault and rape, and exposure to extreme heat or cold;

**Psychological Torture**, including verbal abuses, threats against family, friends and loved ones, false accusations, forced choices, mock executions, and being forced to witness torture, mutilation and murder of others;

**Deprivation of Humane Conditions**, including deprivation of food and water, being held in isolation, restricted movement, blindfolding, sleep deprivation and withholding of medical care; and

**Sensory Over-Stimulation**, including exposure to constant noise, screams and voices, powerful lights and forced ingestion of drugs.

### Effects of Torture

- Long-term physical effects of torture include scars, headaches, musculoskeletal pains, foot pains, hearing loss, dental pain, visual problems, abdominal pains, cardiovascular/respiratory problems, sexual difficulties, and neurological damage.
- Long-term psychological effects include difficulty concentrating, nightmares, insomnia, memory loss, fatigue, anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.

### Psychological torture is damaging

- In CVT's experience, psychological torture can be more damaging and cause more severe and long-lasting damage than the pain of physical torture.
- A recent study found that degrading treatment and psychological manipulation cause as much emotional suffering and long-term mental health harm as physical torture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Torture vs Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment. Basoglu et al. Archives of General Psychiatry, Volume 64, March 2007. PDF available at: <http://archpsyc.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/64/3/277>

### **Threats of Death or Injury**

- Survivors say mock executions left them feeling they were already dead.
- Survivors relive these near-death experiences in their nightmares or flashbacks.
- CVT clients have told us that they pleaded with their torturers to kill them, preferring real death over the constant threat and intolerable pain it caused.

### **Sexual Humiliation**

- Sexual humiliation leads to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression; victims often have flashbacks or nightmares about their experiences; male and female victims feel shame, grief and fear.
- Forced nakedness creates a power differential, stripping the victims of their identity, inducing immediate shame and creating an environment where the threat of sexual and physical assault is always present.
- At CVT, our Muslim women clients say sexual humiliation is so shaming, they cannot admit it to their communities or families without fearing rejection.
- Male victims feel degraded in their manhood, especially if the perpetrator was female.

### **Sensory Deprivation, including Solitary Confinement**

- All forms of sensory deprivation can have profound and long-lasting psychological consequences.
- Effects of solitary confinement include depression, anxiety, difficulty with concentration and memory, hypersensitivity to external stimuli, hallucinations, perception distortions, paranoia and problems with impulse control.
- The Berlin Center treated ex-political prisoners from East Germany who experienced solitary confinement with sensory deprivation for long periods (from several months to several years). Torture methods included sleep deprivation, long lasting interrogation night and day and disorientation techniques. The prisoners reported that they no longer trusted their own perceptions. They went through psychotic states with delusions and hallucinations and experienced a total loss of cognitive function. (*Physicians for Human Rights*)

### **Sleep Deprivation**

- Causes a host of negative psychological effects, the most prominent is cognitive impairment.
- Sleep-deprived individuals take longer to respond to stimuli and sleep loss causes attention deficits, decreases short-term memory, speech impairments, perseveration and inflexible thinking. These symptoms may appear after one night of total sleep deprivation or after only a few nights of sleep restriction (5 hours of sleep per night).
- Sleep restrictions can result in hypertension and other cardiovascular disease. (*Physicians for Human Rights*)

To learn more about the effects of psychological torture, read *Break Them Down: Systematic use of Psychological Torture by U.S. Forces* by Physicians for Human Rights available at: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR\\_Reports/break-them-down.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/break-them-down.pdf)