Psychology of hate:

Why people join hate groups

By Sharon Jayson
Kaiser Health Network

Cries of "Nazis, go home!" and "Shame! Shame!" filled the air as Angela King and Tony McAleer stood with other counter-protesters at the "free speech" rally in Boston in August.

They didn't join the shouting. Their sign spoke for them: "There is life after hate."

They know because McAleer and King were once young extremists themselves, before they co-founded the nonprofit Life After Hate to help former white supremacists restart their lives. To hear them talk about their pasts hints at what may be in the minds of those inside the far-right fringe groups whose actions have ignited raw, angry passions across the country. What are people thinking when they spew hate? Are they all true believers? What's more, how does someone get that way?

Hate groups in the U.S. number 917 and have been on the rise for two years, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Those who study human behavior attribute hate speech more to deep personality issues than to a diagnosable mental illness. But they're also intrigued by how the white supremacy movement is rebranding itself for the 21st century. The well-known racist symbols of white robes and hoods or shaved heads and torches have given way to a clean-cut subtlety for the millennial generation. With heightened tensions on all sides, there's a renewed interest in explaining how minds turn toward hate.

"I felt power where I felt powerless. I felt a sense of belonging where I felt invisible," McAleer, 49, said of the pull of white nationalism that led him to spend 15 years as a skinhead recruiter and an organizer for the White Aryan Resistance.

"I was beaten at an all-boys Catholic school on a regular basis at 10 or 11," said McAleer, a middle-class kid from Canada, which left him with "an unhealthy sense of identity."

King, 42, who grew up in rural South Florida, said she turned to white nationalism as a child, first learning racial slurs from her parents. Growing up, she questioned her sexual identity and didn't fit in. At 12, she said, a school bully ripped her shirt open, exposing her training bra and humiliating her in front of her classmates.

"At that point, I decided if I became the bully, no one could do that to me," King said. She became a neo-Nazi skinhead at 15, and at 23 went to prison for three years for a hate crime. King had a tattoo of a swastika on her right hand; she has since covered it up with the likeness of a cat.

Young people with a troubled past are especially vulnerable, said psychologist Ervin Staub, of Holyoke, Mass., a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst who studies social processes that lead to violence.

"Why would people join groups like that? It usually involves them finding no other socially acceptable and meaningful ways to fulfill important needs — the need for identity; the need for a feeling of effectiveness; the need for a feeling of connection," Staub said.

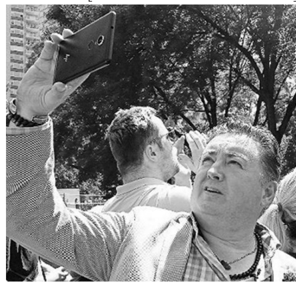
"Often, these are people who don't feel like they've succeeded or had a chance to succeed across normal channels of success in society. They may come from families that are problematic or families where they're exposed to this kind of extreme views of white superiority and nationalism. If you don't feel you have much influence and power in the world, you get a sense of power from being part of a community and especially a rather militant community."

Groups advocating white superiority have always preyed on "young, impressionable people who are loners or had a traumatic thing in their background," said sociologist Robert Futrell of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

"What's different now is the range of ways the white power movement is reaching them. The internet is a boon to those who are stigmatized and relatively powerless."

Angela King participates in a counter-protest during what was billed as a "free speech" rally in Boston in August. King, a former neo-Nazi who went to prison at 23 for three years for a hate crime, co-founded the nonprofit Life After Hate.

[MELISSA BAILEY/KHN PHOTOS]


Tony McAleer spent 15 years as a recruiter for the White Aryan Resistance before co-founding the nonprofit Life After Hate.

By the numbers

917: The number of hate groups in the U.S., according to the Southern Poverty Law Center

45 percent: Almost half of former members of violent white supremacist groups reported being the victim of childhood physical abuse, according to a 2015 report by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

20 percent: One-fifth of former violent white supremacists reported being the victim of childhood sexual abuse, according to the same 2015 START report

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