

ARTICLE FOR GAZETTE
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I have followed with interest developments in regard to a bird flu epidemic and scientific efforts to produce a vaccine that would bring immunity. Immunity is a great thing. It removes fear and brings us safety. Now I am thinking about another kind of epidemic in our society that is already running rampant—violence. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could build up immunity to acting in violent ways! Violence has been defined as action resulting from intention to do harm. It is an unhealthy method of getting power and control.

“Oh, we can't get rid of violence,” I hear people say. “It is built into human nature.” Not so, according to research by Ari Cowan and others who have been working on defusing violence in prisons for the last few years. In a recent workshop led by Cowan, I learned that

- (1) Violence is not an isolated event, but is related to identifiable risk factors that can be born into a person but, more often, are the result of life situations and life choices.

- (2) Violence has a very strong cultural component that we have the power to change if we decide to.

- (3) You **cannot** use violence to prevent violence.

Risk factors for violence can show up in five areas—physical, emotional, mental, environment and spiritual. Physical risk factors include

- a. Life threatening situation, real or imagined.
- b. Brain disorder
- c. Chemical addiction
- d. Fetal alcohol syndrome
- e. Pregnancy and delivery complications
- f. Maltreatment
- g. Neglect, malnourishment, poverty
- h. Low resting heart rate

Emotional risk factors can come from

- a. Name calling
- b. Yelling
- c. Desertion or neglect
- d. Degradation and humiliation
- e. Attachment failure—lack of positive relationships
- f. Emotional maltreatment
- g. Negative self-talk
- h. Early initiation to violent behavior
- i. Anti-social behavior--nervousness, anxiety

Mental risk factors

- a. Lack of stimulation
- b. Inconsistency
- c. Misinformation
- d. Concentration problems
- e. Academic failure

- f. Dishonesty, denial
- g. Negative expectations
- h. Paranoid thought processes
- i. Deviant beliefs and attitudes

Environmental risk factors

- a. Violence in family and/or community
- b. Poor parenting
- c. Substance abuse
- d. Residential mobility

Spiritual risk factors

- a. Absence of spiritual identity
- b. Lack of sense of belonging
- c. Purposelessness
- d. Meaninglessness
- e. Spiritual oppression
- f. Frenzied religious action

The point that Cowan makes is that many of these risk factors can be changed and violent behavior can be prevented. Even if we have several risk factors, by becoming aware of them and seeking to change them, we can build up immunity to violence.

This is the same point that Jesus made by his life and death and resurrection. There is a better way of living where we forgive those

who harm us, love our enemies, give up trying to control everything for our own benefit. Jesus calls us not to be afraid of those who can kill the body, but of those who kill the soul. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 43 says, "I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?" God wants to do something new with us that will break old patterns of violence that have trapped us in the past. God's desire for us is a world of peace where we respect each other in spite of our differences and uphold the dignity of all created beings.