

Understanding the radicalisation process

It is important to understand what the radicalisation process looks like in order for families, friends and communities to help prevent acts of violent extremism.

The radicalisation process

There is no single pathway of radicalisation towards violent extremism, as the process is unique to each person. However, there are some common elements in the experiences of most people who have become radicalised in Australia, regardless of their beliefs or motivations.

These elements include significant behavioural changes in major areas of a person's life including ideology, social relations and criminal activity. If someone is radicalising towards violent extremism, changes can often occur in all three of these areas.

A person's behaviour must also become more intense and extreme over time, when compared with that person's previous or 'normal' behaviour. Their circumstances and environment should also be taken into account.

If there is a valid alternative explanation for the changes in behaviour, these changes should not be considered a sign of radicalisation.

If a person radicalises to the point of promoting, threatening or using violence for an extremist cause, the Australian Government and the wider community have a responsibility to act.

Ideology

In the process of radicalisation, ideology refers to a significant shift in the way a person views the world.

Ideologies are only concerning if they advocate the use of violence or other unlawful activity to promote particular beliefs.

As the radicalisation process builds, some people will promote an increasingly strict and literal understanding of a given belief. They may increasingly use ideological language that vilifies or discriminates others. In Australia, the small numbers of people who radicalise and promote violence often do not have a genuine understanding of the ideology they claim to represent.

Increasing religious devoutness or commitment to unconventional beliefs is not the same as radicalisation towards violent extremism.

The use of the internet to view, download and spread material promoting violent extremism is often part of the radicalisation process. Some people may occasionally view such material out of curiosity, but people who are radicalising tend to collect and share this material with others who hold the same beliefs.

Hateful ideology and anti-social ideas might be disturbing or offensive, but if someone has not committed to using violence or advocating the use of violence, it should not be considered radicalisation to violent extremism.

Social relations

Many people join extremist groups for social reasons. In Australia, people are most vulnerable to involvement in violent extremism through the influence of close personal relationships. This is especially true for young people.

As people start to become radical, they will often pull away from normal, mainstream activities and friendship groups. There may be conflict with family and friends over political or ideological views.

At the same time, some people will start to interact more often with smaller, tight-knit networks of people who share their specific beliefs. Some extreme groups may even require a person to go through an initiation or take an oath of allegiance to prove their commitment.

Radicalisation is most often led by personal face-to-face relationships, but there are some examples of recruitment into radical groups over the internet. A person may become part of an online community of people who share their views and radicalise in a virtual environment.

Criminal activity

During the radicalisation process, a person may start to 'act up' to draw attention to their beliefs or send a message to a specific group. These activities might not cause serious harm but might still be illegal. They might include actions like vandalism, minor property damage, trespassing or illegal protesting.

More radicalised individuals might try to influence a government or a section of the community by making threats. If someone begins to support the use of violence to promote a cause, radicalisation to violent extremism becomes a serious concern.

Once a person becomes committed to violent action, an actual violent attack may take place very quickly. If a person considers unlawful and criminal activity to be acceptable, they might also become increasingly suspicious and cautious. This might mean that they become nervous about the activities of governments, security and intelligence agencies or law enforcement.

Identifying radicalisation

Most individuals begin the radicalisation process in one of the three key areas—ideology, social relations or criminal activity. This normally means that a person's behaviour will noticeably change in one area first, and not across all three areas at the same time, but change in these areas can happen very quickly.

Most people do not go all the way to becoming a violent extremist. Something or someone might interrupt the radicalisation process, and the person does not get to the point of threatening or using violence, and may even reject their radical ideas. When this happens it is called disengagement. The active involvement of families, friends and the community in this process is very important.

More information

If you are concerned somebody you know may be radicalising, see the information sheet: *I am worried somebody I know is radicalising ... What can I do?*