

IDENTIFICATION OF Extremist Influence

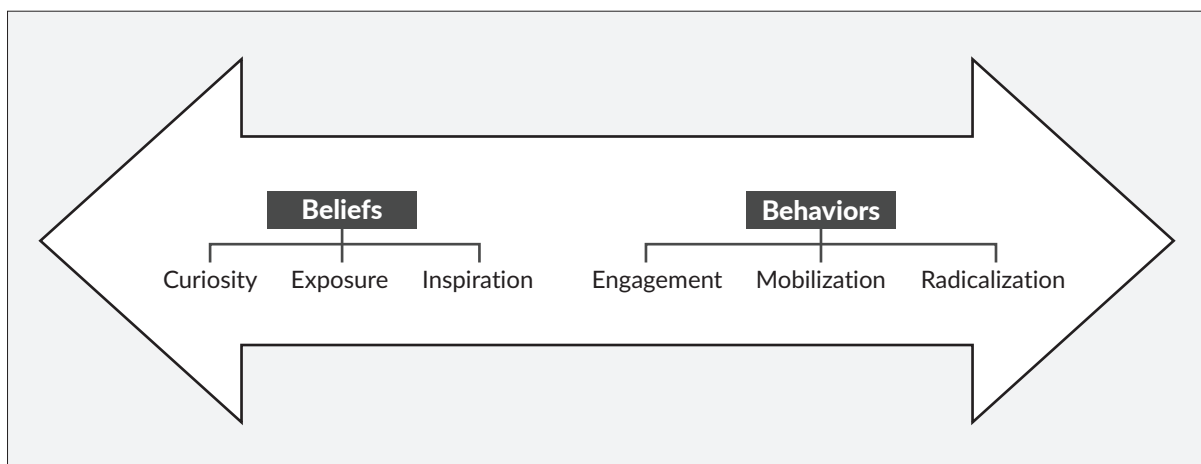
Professionals working on the front-line encounter individuals every day who have been influenced by extreme beliefs or rhetoric. The definition of extremism varies widely across the globe. Not all extreme beliefs qualify as extremism. The threshold for extremism is often cited as when beliefs are used to justify violence.

The FBI defines extremism as *encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals*.¹ A 2025 review of scientific literature provided this definition of extremism: *adoption or promotion of rigid ideological beliefs that reject diversity and tolerate little or no dissent, often resulting in or justifying behavior that contravenes widely accepted social, moral or legal norms*.²

Recent research conducted at the University of Nebraska identified behaviors encountered by law enforcement, school officials, or behavioral health professionals that may be indicative of extremist influence. Key findings from this research are presented below.

- One does not have to “join” a group with violent ideology to learn its tactics—individuals may cut and paste reasons to justify violence from a variety of sources.
- Engagement with extremist content occurs along a continuum ranging from curiosity, exposure to, or inspiration from extremist beliefs, all the way to behaviors indicating someone has engaged with, been mobilized or radicalized by extremist content ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Spectrum of Extremist Engagement



Note. Adapted from *A threatening approach: Differential predictors of mobilization to violence* [Paper presentation] by R. F. Grydehøj & M. J. Scalora, 2025, March 13-15, American Psychology and Law Society, San Juan, Puerto Rico. Copyright 2025 by R. F. Grydehøj & M. J. Scalora. Adapted from *Mobilization to violence in community settings* by M. J. Scalora & R. F. Grydehøj, 2024, University of Nebraska Public Policy Center (unpublished report). Copyright 2024 by M. J. Scalora & R. F. Grydehøj.

¹ <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/fr/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html>

² Ismail, A.M., Jamir Singh, P.S. & Mujani, W.K. A systematic review: unveiling the complexity of definitions in extremism and religious extremism. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 12, 1297 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-05685-z>

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- People with mental illness may experience a “morphing” of extremist language with their own delusional beliefs. Pay attention to the content of the delusion rather than writing it off as just a product of mental illness.
- Extremist tactics or ideology influencing the justification of violence shows up as:
 - Belief that government is corrupt or illegitimate
 - Anti-government behaviors
 - Believing rights are violated or injustices suffered
 - Justification containing religious or racist references or content
- Indicators that someone may be influenced by extremist content or ideology include the following:
 - References to prior acts of mass violence
 - Current references to any extremist groups, ideology, or their activities
 - Current references to hate or an identifiable ideology
 - Past disclosure of extreme beliefs, plans for justified violence, or past steps taken toward carrying out violence that are justified
 - Expressed desire to die for an extreme belief
- People may reinforce their personal grievance with justified violence language.
- People can be inspired to carry out violence from a variety of sources. This can come from online sources, media, peers, or reading material.