

Brittney Griner 'will be a different person' after traumatic Russian imprisonment, says psychologist

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Brittney Griner. Credit: [Lorie Shaul](#)/Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA](#)

What will life be like for Brittney Griner?

The American basketball star was released after 10 months of imprisonment in Russia, President Joe Biden announced on Thursday. But by no means have her issues been resolved, warns Laurie Kramer, a professor of applied psychology at Northeastern.

"She's been through an extremely traumatic set of events and so has her family," Kramer says. "She was in a situation where no one really understood to what extent her life was in danger or for how long she would be held.

"When people experience that kind of [trauma](#), it changes them forever."

Kramer equates Griner's frightening circumstances to those of a hostage or a prisoner of war.

"It's terribly scary, and it's more terrifying when you don't have any models of how a good outcome could occur in this situation," says Kramer, stressing that she has never met Griner while commenting in general about people who have undergone similar trauma. "There were no assurances of what was going to happen to her. And of course we have no idea of the full extent of what did happen to her."

Griner, 32, is likely to continue reliving the trauma of not knowing what would become of her amid U.S. tensions with Russia over the Ukraine war. She was sentenced to nine years in prison after allegedly being caught with vape cartridges containing hashish oil at a Russian airport on Feb. 17. The 6-foot-9-inch Griner was a star player for a Russian basketball club at the time.

As relieved as she will be to return home, Griner may experience symptoms related to trauma.

"People who have been traumatized often go through periods where they

may feel very depressed, anxious and angry," Kramer says. "They may experience nightmares, ruminate about what happened to them or have difficulty just maintaining a sense of who they are now.

"But Brittney also has a lot going for her as an individual who has succeeded in so many areas of life," Kramer adds. "She has a strong support system, a loving family and a lot of people around the world who have been rooting for her. And all those things count quite a bit."

Griner may also benefit from her background as an elite athlete who has led her teams to an NCAA championship, a WNBA championship and two Olympic gold medals. She has trained herself to overcome obstacles and respond to problems with resolve and discipline.

"All of those characteristics—determination, perseverance, her sense of not giving up easily—are critical elements of resilience," Kramer says. "Then there's her physical stamina: Most people probably could not have withstood the types of treatment that she was likely subjected to."

At the same time, Kramer notes that no [athletic training](#) could prepare her for the loneliness, fear and uncertainty she was experiencing far away from home.

"That sense of isolation and the feeling that the world is unpredictable and unfair, that the treatment you're receiving is unjustified, it violates our sense of how the world should work," Kramer says. "It makes you feel incredibly powerless to know that you cannot use reason to help you through the situation."

Kramer says the understanding that other Americans remain imprisoned in foreign countries while she has been freed may also create discomfort for Griner.

"She may be feeling a little bit of guilt realizing that she has been able to escape the situation, whereas others have not," Kramer says. "That sense of being falsely imprisoned, of losing your autonomy and freedom—all of those sorts of things are shared with prisoner of war experiences."

Her family—including her wife Cherelle Griner, who campaigned publicly for her release—have also been traumatized, notes Kramer. At the same time that they were terrified about Griner's safety, they also felt compelled to take strong action to advocate for her release. Together with Griner, Kramer says they must recognize that these experiences—the bad and the good—will contribute to a new life that will be quite different from the life they led before her imprisonment.

"People who have been through traumatic situations like Brittney will likely never again be who they were before," Kramer says. "Too much has happened, too much has changed for both the individual and the family. They will need to address the fact that there has been this traumatic event that was persistent and long-lasting, where they each felt fear and powerlessness for a very long time. They will want to process that in order to move forward together, probably in a new way."

"I think that Brittney will be a different person and the family will look very different from how they looked previously," Kramer says.

The hard work of confronting these experiences could very well lead to a good outcome, offers Kramer. Despite the many challenges they faced, Kramer says Griner and her [family](#) appeared to stay connected and committed to one another, thereby providing a strong foundation for the future.

"When people who have gone through incredible stress are able to process what happened to them and get the kinds of support and resources that they need to address that trauma, they're often able to

form relationships that are even stronger than what they had previously," Kramer says. "Maybe they feel that they're being more open, more real, that their level of communication is even clearer and stronger, and that they're more connected and supportive to one another given what they have overcome."

Provided by Northeastern University

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