

## Background to Trauma:

Reactions are the attempt by the brain to regain control of our lives. Our lives depend on having a sense of some sort of influence on what is happening to us. If this power is taken away from us, we literally feel powerless, at the mercy of brutality, and this produces stress. Afterwards, our brain and body systems seek to regain control and make sense of the

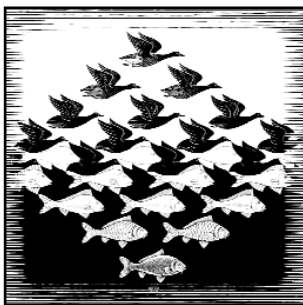
experience to prevent it from happening again. So the brain replays the experience in front of our inner eye to try and grasp it, while at the same time we want to avoid anything connected with it. We become emotionally disturbed because we never feel safe, we feel bad about what happened. Even blaming ourselves is based on that concept, because if it's our fault, we'd act differently next time, wouldn't we? It's true that we don't have total control over our lives, but our actions and thoughts are nevertheless based on a sense of power and personal effectiveness.

## Prevention:

Go into actions grounded. Close bonds with your group and mutual trust make you all stronger. Have a go-round about how you feel, before the action, so you are aware of everyone's needs and strengths.

## Inside our political movements:

It is vital to us that we are aware of how brutality affects us emotionally. Repression is in other's hands, but we have the power to deal with its effect on us. Repression will be less effective if our mutual support is strong. Far too often, post-traumatic stress is still thought of as personal weakness. Often the support is not sufficient. It is essential that our whole culture changes its attitude towards this. What we can do within our groups is to create the foundations of a culture where talking about fear and emotional consequences of repression and other trauma is not taboo, or seen as weak or "uncool".



## Support structures:

Groups providing trauma support are now appearing in many countries - e.g. in Germany, UK, Netherlands, Israel, USA. We hope that in the future there will be an international network of trauma support structures similar to the Streetmedic network. Our work currently consists mainly in stress prevention, education and information as well as providing emotional first aid, recovery spaces and help-lines at larger events plus some long-term support.



# ACTIVIST TRAUMA AND RECOVERY

## How to manage your psychological reactions to brutality from police & others

One of the amazing things about activists is that we often deliberately expose ourselves to brutality when we believe it necessary. What is sometimes equally surprising is how little we know about the psychological effects of this violence. We need to prepare ourselves and learn how to support each other through the physical and emotional consequences of trauma.

### Three reactions to trauma

...that can occur after direct or indirect experiences of brutality are called "Post-Traumatic Stress" or PTSD. You might experience all, some or one of them:

#### 1. Re-experiencing the traumatic event:

nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive memories, the feeling of not being able to let go of the experience

#### 2. Avoidance / Suppression / emotional numbing:

losing the memory, self-medication (alcohol / drugs), self-isolation, social withdrawal, avoidance of everything that may recall the experience (known as avoidance behaviour)

#### 3. Increased arousal:

Sleeplessness, irritation, rage, emotional outbursts, panic attacks, fear, hyper-vigilance, difficulties concentrating and performing normal tasks

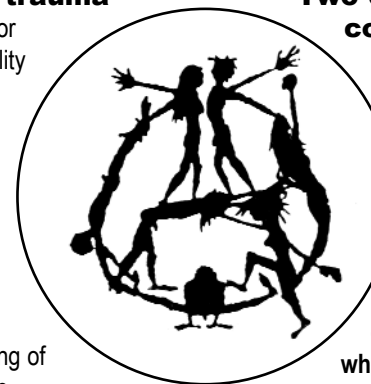
These are common reactions to extreme experiences. A lot of people have been through and get over it. People react differently and in different intensities to a traumatic experience. They also have different needs in terms of support. You can become traumatised by your personal experience, by witnessing, but also outside the action by knowing the victim or by just hearing about it.

### Two essential components of recovery:

1. Stay in a calm place for some time, where you feel safe and you have people around you who you can trust and who can care for you

2. Work through the experience. Find words for what happened. Tell a friend in detail. Write down what happened.

Express it in whatever way suits you.



For about 70% of people, these symptoms slowly disappear after about 4-6 weeks. But if they continue, this condition is called "PTSD" (post-traumatic stress "Disorder" - we disagree with using the word "Disorder" for something we see as a normal reaction). If your reactions don't settle after this time then seek 'professional' help (which might be helpful anyway if the reaction in the first weeks is strong).

It may be that "PTSD" only occurs months or even years after the experience (delayed "PTSD"). Basically, it is a processing dysfunction - our system does not process the experience. The experience is blocked, so it keeps on hurting. There are different kinds of therapy or healing. The aim is to integrate the traumatic experience into your life. It will not disappear, but the pain will diminish.

## TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER

### Activist Trauma Support

Email: [activist\\_trauma@riseup.net](mailto:activist_trauma@riseup.net) Tel: 07962 406940

[www.activist-trauma.net](http://www.activist-trauma.net)

A very good book: 'Trauma and recovery' by Judith Hermann

ASSIST offers a free phone helpline: [www.traumatic-stress.co.uk](http://www.traumatic-stress.co.uk)

Tel: 01788 560 800

## **Possible reactions after a traumatic experience:**

- Pictures and memories of what happened keep coming back
- Flashbacks (the impression of reliving the situation), nightmares while asleep
- Depression, not being able to enjoy life, feeling lonely and abandoned
- Feeling numb, switched off
- Becoming withdrawn, avoiding social interaction, self-isolation
- Changes in eating, sleeping or sexual habits
- Stomach pain, nausea, muscle tension, fatigue
- Fear, anxiety, hyper-vigilance, panic attacks, phobias
- Restlessness
- Guilt, shame, self-blame, regret
- Inability to function as normal, make plans or decisions
- Irritability, rage, emotional outbursts, uncontrollable crying, inner pain
- Suicidal thoughts, feeling that there is no point in living
- Doubting political activism and relationships with friends
- Reliving previous, other traumatic experiences
- Hopelessness, belief that this phase will never end

## **What you can do for yourself:**

- Remind yourself: your reactions are normal and there is help available; this is a difficult phase but you will get better.
- Immediately after the experience: get to a place where you feel safe and take care of yourself. This may mean allowing other people to take care of you.
- Don't isolate yourself. Turn to your friends and tell them what you need.
- See a professional if that is what you need.

- Get rid of the adrenaline that is still stored in your body: go for walks, cycle or run, do exercises.
- Take your own time to heal, be patient with yourself and don't condemn yourself for your feelings and reactions. Inner wounds take time and patience to heal, just like physical ones.
- You might feel bad if you think that others are dealing with an experience better than you are. Remind yourself that people are different and react in different ways. There is no "right" way to react. (If you have had a previous experience of trauma, including childhood abuse, you may have more intense reactions.) Also, more sensitive people often experience stronger reactions. It's not a sign of weakness to feel pain after being attacked.
- You may feel guilty about what happened and blame yourself. Remind yourself: It was not your fault!! The aggressors carry the guilt.
- Family and friends often don't know how to help. Tell them what you need and don't need.
- If you think: "I don't have the right to feel this bad - what happened to me is nothing compared to X," remind yourself that you have experienced something terrible and that you have the right to feel as you do. If you feel bad, that's because the experience was bad for you. There is no point in comparing and contrasting brutality. If you accept your condition, you will get better faster.
- Avoidance and denial have damaging effects in the long run and will restrict your life. Self-medication with alcohol and drugs may seem to help for the moment but has negative effects in the long run.
- Bach Flower Remedies and acupuncture can help you deal with the emotions. Valerian is good for sleeplessness. Massages and hot baths are always a good idea.
- Find out more about post-traumatic stress. The more you know, the easier it is to see your reactions as normal reactions to "abnormal" events.

## **How to support your friend:**

- Don't wait for them to ask for help. Be there for them
- Telling the story in the order in which it happened, chronologically, helps the brain process the experience. Carefully encourage your friend to talk about what happened, what they saw, heard, felt and thought. But don't push if they don't want to.
- Lack of support can worsen the reaction. This is called "secondary traumatisation" and is to be taken very seriously. It involves "shattered assumptions" - aggressors are known to be brutal, but if you feel that your friends don't support you afterwards, you feel as though the whole world is breaking down.
- The days immediately after the experience are crucial. This is when all the emotions are easily accessible. It's good to talk then. Later on, people often close up.
- Often traumatised people withdraw from social activities and isolate themselves. You may not see your friend around anymore. Go and find them.
- Sometimes you might feel you're up against a brick wall or rejected. See it as a symptom, don't take it personally and hang on in there.
- You might feel insecure about how to help. Find out more about post-traumatic stress so you understand it better. Ask what they need, don't impose your solutions.
- Behave normally. Pity or self-indulgent "overcare" do not help. The most important thing is that your friend feels safe and warm in your presence.
- Bear in mind that many people seem all right after traumatic experiences and that reactions may come later.
- Listen. Avoid talking too soon, too long and too much. We often long to give good advice rather than be a good listener. Put yourself in their shoes. Try and understand how they feel, not how you might have felt.

- Traumatized people often find it hard to ask for help. Be proactive but not pushy
- Traumatized people often struggle with the smallest tasks. Cooking, shopping, handling the chores for them can be invaluable help, as long as you don't patronise them or undermine their independence.
- Irritability, ungratefulness and being distant are common reactions. Don't take it personally, keep the support going.
- Saying "You really should have got over this by now, get on with life", is obviously completely unhelpful and will just distance your friend.
- Important: helping and caring can be very hard for you, too. Take care of yourself, do things that make you happy. Talk to someone else about how you feel. Getting support for yourself will help you support others.
- Good therapists can help. Help to find one. The therapist should have some experience of trauma work, otherwise it can be pointless or counter-productive. It also helps if they are politically sympathetic or at least neutral. You'd see a doctor if you had a broken leg. Trauma is a very real emotional wound.

## **What you can do as a group:**

- If you've all been involved in a traumatic experience, take time to talk together about what happened. Groups often go round, taking turns to give everybody the space to talk about what happened, where they were, what they saw and heard, what they felt and what thought, if they want to. Participation is voluntary and it is more useful if people have the same level of trauma; if not bystanders could become even more traumatized.
- You can also work collectively with a therapist.
- Remember: a supporter needs support, too. Supporting a supporter is essential.