

Trauma Overview - Symptoms and Healing

by Andrew Rose from <http://www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/traumaoverview.html>

These are things people need to know about trauma to heal quicker or prepare mentally or at least be aware that the process is known and trauma can be healed. In other words it's good for people to know BEFORE actions and it's good to know AFTER actions. And it's good for people that are traumatized and it's good for people that are supporting.

Causes of Trauma:

- The brain works different than normal under severe threat and anxiety -- it essentially 'scans' or 'photographs' EVERYTHING going on at the time. Sensory perceptions are stored in a different way in memory than under normal circumstance. Later, these perceptions become 'triggers' which cause the person to feel like they are back in the moment of trauma. Knowing what these triggers are is crucial to countering symptoms.

Symptoms: How do you know when you've healed? The symptoms are no longer present.

- Severe: catatonic (speechless), black-out (memory loss), robotic action (mind control)
- Less severe: flashbacks (remembering when you don't expect to), sleeplessness, irritability, quick to anger, listless, anger, limiting life choices (never dating again, never walking down alleys, never going to another demo), hopelessness, purposelessness, defeatist, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares, bad dreams

Triage (does not include physical wounds - attend to physical wounds immediately):

1. The person is communicative and can explain in proper sequence to order of events
2. The person is impaired, crying, starts crying or shuts down when talking about events
3. The person is disassociative (does not know the day, identity, current events)
4. The person is noncommunicative or catatonic, cannot speak, glassy eyed

Reasons for different reactions: (extent of damage by shock)

1. Depends on amount of support and quick placement into 'safe space'
 - Creating safe spaces for people when they leave jail is VITAL -- receive people leaving jail. This is a part of any action, so do not leave it out.
 - Note 'interviews' by media or 'interested parties' or 'supporters' can RE-Traumatize. Be very careful. Think about what it's like for a rape victim to go to the hospital and be interviewed by a cop - it sucks. Be gentle, warm the person, feed the person, absolutely remove reminders of 'triggers' if the person can't handle it. If the person is triggered by long hair and you've got long hair, hide it, cut it, or get away. Keep the space open between the person and the door of the room you are in -- do not thoughtlessly block a person's 'way out'.
2. Depends on induced by person, government, state OR by forces of nature (fire, flood, earthquake)
 - It is difficult to 'get back' at nature so the healing process is different based on cause of the trauma
3. Depends on severity of event
 - Heard screams of torture, saw torture, and tortured are different levels of severity
4. Depends on previous experience with trauma
 - For example, if someone has been through 'tear gas' attack before that led to injury, a new round of 'tear gas' can trigger or add to the severity of the trauma felt.

Stages:

1. Shock, induced by life threatening or perception of life threat or witnessing life threat
2. Compensation (anger or denial) - can last decades or moments, it will be shorter if people know what's going on.
 - Means the person is waiting for someone to do something or something to happen to someone before 'resolution' -- this may mean someone is jailed or killed, or a house is rebuilt, or 'justice is done'
 - Often people stay in this stage (men especially may not cry openly) and sometimes you may hear "I can't start crying because if I start I'll never stop" which people believe, but it turns out that they do eventually stop crying.
 - It is important to know that healing does not begin with anyone else than the person needing to be healed.
3. Mourning (sadness) -- acknowledging loss
 - Looks like crying, sounds like crying, is crying -- essentially, we honestly acknowledge what we've lost. This can be done like "I lost me sense of safety in the universe", "my sense of justice", "my sense that the universe is fair", "my trust in humankind", "my trust in decency", "my faith in God", "my dignity", "my body safety", "my purity", "my trust in activists", "my trust of myself" -- all of it, the more the better -- if you are crying your eyes out you're healing.
4. Reconnection - healing. Studies show rape survivors and demilitarized soldiers that go on to recount their experience, help others cope, testify, etc. eventually loose symptoms. Reflection on events is 'boring' rather than emotional.
 - Having hobbies, meeting with people for mutual support, working, "getting on with it" sort of stuff (brainstorm -- things to do besides being traumatized) - only at this stage is it truly safe for a person to confront perpetrators, or do media truth telling, or participate in other people's healing.

Trauma debriefing:

SAFETY FIRST - if you are not clear about your care and concern for the person, or you are in it for anything besides healing, don't bother - you will possibly do more harm than good. Be centered, be healed yourself, do not do this work if you are traumatized unless you are well into reconnection and won't damage yourself.

HEALERS BEWARE - you will be taking "energy" from the person - you need to pass that through your body - do not hold onto the others person's story or emotions - do not retell stories - let them pass from your memory. When you shit, meditate on the "bad energy" leaving your body and going into mother earth, who is generous enough and compassionate enough to take it. If you start to have bad dreams or other symptoms

GET HELP YOURSELF. I started dreaming about houses burning after listening to Kosova eviction stories - that's the time to stop and heal.

Do this work away from action, in a place where no further trauma possibility exists if at all possible. Possibly match genders, age, language - if you are using an interpreter MAKE SURE the interpreter knows everything in this note - do not use an interpreter with an ulterior motive (some Yugoslavian mothers were demanding that their raped daughters "tell the doctor how you were raped" etc. be very careful with interpreters)

Essentially the debrief does two things - it gives the person an opportunity to discover their triggers and it gives the helper a chance to teach some coping skills.

Use the phrase "back then", "at that time", "when it happened" over and over. You are establishing a clear division between past and now.

Ask the person to describe the event, starting with what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, touched - all senses - notice minute details, especially sounds and smells - these are the triggers people are not aware of (the smell of coffee, the smell of cigarettes, the sound of turkish music, etc.) THEN ask about what sort of thoughts were going through their mind. THEN ask what sorts of feelings the person had. Thoughts and feelings can be deep triggers, as can smell and sound and color.

If the person goes back into heavy breathing, crying, etc. back off, give them time, offer touch if they allow it (ask first), breathe.

You can say "one way to get some control if you need it is to wiggle your toes, count things around the room, say the names of colors of things in the room, look at the ceiling because it's hard to cry when you look up". These are immediately effective ways for people to get out of their trauma memories. As the person tells their story make mental or written notes about what sounds like triggers even if they don't seem to think that those perceptions were important.

Only when they are done talking about the event to their satisfaction do you want to proceed.

Look over the list and ask how the person feels when they see..., hear..., think about..., feel ... (the particular trigger).

One thing we can remind ourselves is that today's (trigger, for example cigarette smell) is not the same as the one you smelled back at that time

Another coping skill is to have the person "visualize a videotape recorder (VCR) with a tape of the event -- imagine it is across a river or a very large room -- imagine a remote control in your hand -- stop the tape, rewind, play the tape -- stop the tape and press eject -- visualize putting the tape on a shelf -- pick a name for the tape -- when you think of the event, think of the name of the tape and think about it on the shelf in a box"

In a group, people can share their coping tricks and share their symptoms and their successes at overcoming symptoms. Groups can work well but need strong ground rules, and lots of safety to be useful. Final note - trauma is complex and made complex by "captivity" - longer captivity does other deeper things, captivity that requires injuring another or be killed (men forced to rape or bite off penises of their fellow captives, children forced to kill animals) break the spirit and create robotic zombies. Prisoners best mentally survive by maintaining "connection" even if it's just tapping a few times a day on bars to let others know the connection exists. The JAIL SOLIDARITY DEMAND to not be separated is very important for this reason.

Relevance to demonstrating: (Prague, Seattle, etc?)

In comparison to rape, perpetrating mass murder, or other terrible things, street demonstration is relatively less traumatic -- however trauma is very much an individual thing and people can be severely effected by imprisonment, gassing, beatings by police, betrayal, or even unexpected behavior by comrades or the state. We can mourn little things as well as big things and it's healthy and we should. Spending time in the "sad space" intentionally allows us to delve deeper into the things we need to heal - and we can gradually recover memories that may have been blacked out in order to cope at an earlier stage in life. Many people, many activists were imprisoned or held captive or felt that way through childhood and schooling. There is much to mourn and it's healthy.

That's it - I'm reluctant to write this, but it's important, and I don't feel like "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing". I'm committed to correcting this note if want to add something or correct something. When we as a culture can understand trauma we can see more clearly how much MILITARY TRAINING (BASIC TRAINING) is based on traumatizing individuals in order to gain mind control - AND WE CAN COUNTER IT. Teach trauma healing!

based on writings in: Judith Herman - "TRAUMA AND RECOVERY", and Warren Dale - "SELF HELP GROUPS FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY".