

how to prevent emotional trauma at demos and direct action

from <http://healingtrauma.pscap.org/active-trauma.html>

summary:

some genetix actions have been traumatic and disempowering for a few of those arrested, as demonstrated in the diary of an activist. public genetix rallies are most likely to produce these situations. much of this can be avoided through careful preparation and good support.

typically, at open / public genetix rallies people surge on to the gm crop, apparently "spontaneously", but in reality many have inwardly planned it. some inexperienced and unprepared people get swept in by the tidal wave. some of these unprepared people get arrested and charged and have to endure various degrees of trauma afterwards. this can include anger, stress, anxiety, fear, paralysis, isolation, confusion, humiliation, defeat, indecision, feeling like a victim, powerlessness. it often seems to be the most vulnerable people (e.g. with a disability, with a child, inexperienced) that get arrested and experience trauma. often this person's difficulties will get transferred to the rest of the group of defendants and this may result in serious conflicts emerging within the group, dragging everyone down.

edited extracts from a diary:

this diary was generously offered by somebody inexperienced who spontaneously joined in crop pulling at an open public genetix action.
(longer extracts are also available)

"i'm wandering up the path with my placard watching it all. someone says "i do encourage you to pull some up - look - they come up really easily!" well, maybe if i just push [some] over like this, without even looking down at them - nobody will even see. ... there. subtle ! ... cops everywhere now - my [friends] have got nervous and headed back up the field. think i'll go back to the gate - cops heading up from the gate. that's ok, they don't want me, i haven't been trashing. they're heading my way though, maybe i'll go up the field. shit where does this path lead to - no i'll go back down to the gate. cops heading straight for me. no escape - hand on the shoulder. arrested ! no way ! how did that happen? wish i'd read one of those bits of paper people had [legal briefing].

"police station. in a cell on my own. ... determined not to cry. taken to interview room. try and stay centred. officer is very kind and gentle... so tell him i pushed over [some] plants. could've had a solicitor but i just wanted to get out of here quickly as possible. ... car outside waiting for me. feeling sheepish now - what a prat for getting into such a stupid situation.

"day after the action: ... panic setting in. bit tearful. ...

"a month later at the police station: ... i'm first to arrive. always too early. should i wait for [the others] or just go in? don't want to be in trouble for being late. go in alone. they charge me with criminal damage. can't believe it - start shaking and crying. tell them i was supposed to have a solicitor - they chase it up for me and lock me in a cell 'till she arrives. crying hard. ... solicitor arrives. tells me what happens next, forms, fingerprints, bail. go home dazed and depressed.

"first hearing (six weeks after action): ... i'm anxious about (a) my mum seeing me on the news - she's just had surgery, she really doesn't need the worry - and she does worry; (b) what i'm going to get fined - potentially much more. worried about the money granny left me last year - the only legacy i'm likely to get. they might take the lot. meet barrister. ... wants to know everyone's pleas. they all want ... to go "not guilty" - he wants to know my plea - court ushers saying we've got to go into court now, they're all filing out - i don't know, i don't know ! i thought i wasn't going to have to decide this today - oh no! tears coming, i hate this. "w" realised, says something to barrister - but we're all trooping in to court now - me all wet and dripping tears."

experiences like this understandably lead people to assume:

(a) all direct action is terrifying and they are never going to do anything so silly again - which means our movement is unsustainable; (b) it makes more sense to do actions covertly so you don't get the legal consequences - there are some good arguments for acting covertly but this one is a misconception.

why is it that some individuals experience extreme trauma following arrests while others come through it empowered?

how can four women take the risk of destroying £13 million worth of warplane, go through 6 months of remand in prison and come out strong? how come they survived that and were empowered by the experience (even before they were acquitted). how come two of them went on to do further high risk actions and go to prison again and again. they claim there is nothing unusual or heroic in their characters.

how trauma can be avoided:

the case for careful preparation before an action and support afterwards

most experienced activists confirm repeatedly that the most important step to avoiding trauma is to be well prepared, especially emotionally and psychologically - and spiritually if so inclined. this simply means to reflect on what is ahead, imagine how it will feel, think about what you can do about it. emotions like fear are usually about the unknown and will dissolve if you think about the things that could happen and plan what

to do. there's lots of practical solutions to the negative stuff, most are common sense and easy to find before the action, but not so when you are locked in a cell. for example, if you think you might get bored or frustrated in the cell take a book to read, if you are afraid of being isolated stay together with a buddy.

the best kind of preparation for open public rallies is an open public preparation session, including a legal briefing, encouraging everyone to attend. this will reduce the likelihood of "action casualties" occurring.

of course preparation means that some people will decide not to go ahead, or to do something less risky like support someone else. better that they avoid the trauma and hopefully decide to go ahead when they feel more prepared. however "brave" we are, there will always be a limit to what we can cope with, something worse they can do to us. the trick is to get familiar with our personal limits and go up to those limits but avoid going over them. some of us live in a secure setting that means we can stick our necks out further. nobody is invincible and we don't need to be. perhaps the greater effort needed to prepare for actions will mean that initially the actions are less frequent with fewer people - but perhaps they will be so improved that eventually the net result is better.

if the preparation as above doesn't happen then the very least we can do is provide good post-action support. be on the look out for anyone experiencing trauma (they may try to hide their feelings) and be sensitive about offering support to everyone (including the ones who might be irritated by the person who is traumatised).

often organisers don't want to provide public preparation because this might alert the police or the company. a solution to this would be for all organisers to make it standard practice to provide a verbal and written legal briefing prior to rallies or actions at gm crop sites, whatever the intentions of the organisers - we don't necessarily know the intentions of others.

the experience of going through the court / punishment process when well prepared and supported mean that you are likely to experience some of the emotions already mentioned - anger, stress, anxiety, fear - but less intensely. and you are also likely to experience clarity, feeling alive, inspired, a sense of achievement, centred, in control, vulnerable yet powerful - and sometimes very intensely. some people say prepared actions seem to have more depth and meaning which goes beyond their own experience - touching others more deeply too. these positive experiences make it possible to walk through the negative ones: "feeling the fear but doing it anyway". they also inspire other people to take action. so it's understandable that people who have had a few of these experiences carry on, become more effective and many also become organisers.

many thanks to the person who offered the diary. if you think you know who that is please respectfully keep it to yourself.

rowan tilly