

BASIC TRAUMA SUPPORT

Trauma is everywhere and can have devastating effects on how people live their lives. Sometimes professional help is needed for people to recover from trauma, but often people can recover with basic trauma support. Anyone with basic training in trauma support can be helpful. This quick-guide is intended to provide basic information for individuals who may offer support to individuals following exposure to trauma, but is not a replacement for appropriate training, guidance and supervision.

What is trauma?

Trauma is our psychological reaction to an event we experience as horrifying or terrifying, or where we face the threat or experience of death or sexual violence. Not everyone responds to trauma in the same way. Trauma is very different from everyday stress and is an injury to the brain and nervous system.

What happens after trauma?

When exposed to threatening and overwhelming circumstances, the mind-body survival system kicks in and floods the body with stress hormones such as adrenaline. This is a normal reaction. Immediately following such an exposure and for 1 to 2 days afterwards, individuals may experience shock, numbness, disbelief or other normal, but distressing feelings. After a few days, symptoms of trauma may appear and remain for a few weeks while the individual recovers in a normal way. After 3 or 4 weeks the symptoms of trauma start to disappear and the individual recovers from these negative effects. This is a normal recovery cycle and the individual does not always need counselling.

What are symptoms of trauma?

Individuals may experience a combination of the following symptoms:

- Upsetting and involuntary images or thoughts about what happened
- Upsetting dreams and nightmares
- Flashbacks

- Distressing feelings whenever something reminds the individual about the event, e.g. people, places, activities
- Feeling that their future is somehow shortened by what happened
- Unable to feel emotions in the same way as before the event

Often individuals want to avoid these symptoms by:

- Not talking about what happened
- Avoiding anything that reminds them of what happened, such as places, people, activities

Some people also:

- Struggle to fall or stay asleep at night
- Become irritable and angry
- Find it difficult to concentrate
- Feel on guard all the time

It is also common for people to:

- Struggle to remember some aspect of what happened to them
- Develop negative beliefs about themselves or people and the world
- Blame themselves or others for what happened
- Lose an interest in activities they enjoyed before the event
- Feel constant feelings of fear, guilt, anger, shame or horror
- Feel distanced or disconnection from the people around them

These symptoms are normal and will disappear after a normal recovery period of about a month without any counselling. There are two exceptions to this rule where counselling should be offered immediately:

1. If the symptoms keep getting worse or are distressing enough to interfere with a person's ability to lead a normal life at work or home
2. If there are complicating or risk factors present

What are risk factors and why do they matter?

Risk factors consist of circumstances that make an individual more vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma and may interfere with their normal recovery. The

more risk factors present, the more important that counselling is offered. General risk factors may include circumstances such as poverty, unemployment, unsafe communities, illness, or any stressful circumstances. More support is needed for people exposed to risk factors.

Some risk factors are likely to interfere and in these situations counselling should be offered immediately, in particular:

- Individuals who have a history of depression, anxiety or other mental health difficulties
- Individuals who have previously been exposed to traumatic events
- Individuals who are isolated and have very few social support systems
- Individuals who use or are likely to use alcohol or other substances to cope with stress
- Individuals who lost a loved one during the event

Trauma Support

Trauma support is not counselling and is not a substitute for professional counselling. Anyone exposed to trauma can benefit from support, but not everyone needs professional counselling. Support can be offered by anyone who has been trained in the principles of trauma support.

The World Health Organisation recommends that you do the following:

- Be honest and trustworthy
- Respect people's right to make their own decisions
- Be aware and set aside your own biases and prejudices
- Make it clear to people that even if they refuse help now, they can always access it in the future
- Respect privacy and keep the person's story confidential
- Behave appropriately by considering the person's age, culture and gender

The World Health Organisation warns supporters NOT to do the following:

- Don't exploit your relationship as a helper

- Don't ask the person for a favour or money for helping them
- Don't make false promises or give false information
- Don't exaggerate your skills
- Don't force help on people and don't be pushy
- Don't pressure people to tell you their story
- Don't share the person's story with others
- Don't judge the person for their actions and feelings

The Trauma Support process

Immediate after the traumatic event and the following 2 days:

- Ensure the person is safe and returns to a safe environment – this remains the priority until it is successful
- Give practical advice and guidance to increase safety, deal with basic needs and connect the person to support systems
- Respond empathically to upsetting emotions

After 2 days and for the next 2 – 3 weeks

- Individuals who have many risk factors are referred for professional counselling
- Normalise the response to trauma – this is a normal response to an abnormal event
- Encourage people to return to a safe daily routine as soon as they feel they are capable to do so

Some extra guidelines – things to do:

- Find a quiet place to talk and minimise distractions and interruptions
- Let the person know that you are listening
- Be patient and calm
- Provide factual information, if you have it
- Be honest about what you know and don't know
- Keep things simple
- Acknowledge the person's feelings
- Acknowledge the person's strengths
- Allow for silence

Some extra guidelines – things to avoid:

- Don't interrupt or rush someone's story
- Don't touch the person if you are not sure it is appropriate to do so
- Don't judge what the person have or have not done
- Don't make up things you don't know
- Don't tell them someone else's story
- Don't talk about your own troubles
- Don't think and act as if you must solve their problems
- Don't give advice

A word about spiritual care

People are in need of spiritual or pastoral care will approach their religious leader for this. Avoid offering spiritual or pastoral care unless this is your specific area of work and the person specifically asks for spiritual care.

Self-care and preventing secondary trauma

Secondary trauma is the trauma that helpers can develop as a result of exposure to other people's trauma. It is very important that people who work with trauma have someone else to talk to – like a mentor – about their own feelings.

A special word about children

Children are very vulnerable to the negative effects of trauma because their minds and bodies are still developing. Children younger than 12 years don't have the thinking skills to understand what happened or the language skills to talk about what happened. They may need professional counselling.

Children do not respond to trauma the same way as adults. They often develop symptoms that look like physical illness, such as aches in the body, e.g. headaches or stomach aches. They may act out feelings of anger, irritability or frustration without understanding why they feel that way. They may also act out the events that happened by playing it or drawing it.

How to help children

Just like with adults, safety is very important. Almost no-one can recover from trauma if they are not safe. Make sure

children are physically safe at home, at school and in their neighbourhood.

Children should not be exposed to a lot of stress after trauma, as this interferes with recovery. They need a calm and safe environment. Environments with a lot of noise and chaos can make things worse. They need patience and caring. Children need to feel strongly connected to loving adults in order to recover from trauma. Parents need to make an extra effort to provide love and comfort and be patient when children struggle to recover. Other adults such as teachers can also play a very important role by offering understanding, patience and appropriate caring.

Children sometimes need a little help with expressing their emotions such as anger or frustration as well as calming down when they get angry. It is not helpful to tell a child not to be angry. It is helpful to acknowledge how they feel and sit with them in a caring way, as long as it takes, for them to feel back in control again.

Childhood trauma include many kinds of abnormal stressful events that damage a child's development and can include:

- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Physical or emotion neglect
- Growing up with violence in or around the home, including domestic violence
- Growing up with substance abuse or mental illness in the house
- Growing up with crime in the house

These kinds of trauma negatively affect a child's development over time and interfere with their ability to learn in school or learn social skills. As a result, they are more likely to fail a grade or act out their trauma at home or in the classroom. Children are often described as "hyperactive" when they are in fact traumatised, as the symptoms of hyperactivity and trauma look very similar.

In communities where trauma is commonplace, more trauma support services should be made available. Professional help is not always available and almost anyone can support traumatised individuals in their recovery.

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