

Responding to Trauma in Protests and Mass Mobilizations

Supporting Yourself and Others to Cope with Traumatic Incidents

Everyone participating in an action is confronting the abusive power of the state. Our response to the abuse that we experience will depend on our self-care and support in the midst of that experience, on our personal histories, as well as the actually traumatic incidents that occurred. Circumstances that are likely to produce high levels of post-traumatic stress are personal exposure to physical, mental, and sexual assault, witnessing the assault of others, and prolonged or intense fear. Factors that place us at greater risk for post-traumatic stress are having a history of abuse, not getting support that we need from our allies, and being separated from others, either during or following the action. Because abuse is pervasive in this culture, learning to heal from and integrate our traumatic experiences in action can empower us to live our lives more fully every day.

As we have already highlighted, a traumatic situation can affect different people in different ways.

There are a wide range of symptoms associated with trauma sufferers, which is one of the main reasons why it is often misdiagnosed. For the sufferer, the sooner these symptoms are identified and treatment sought, the quicker they are likely to improve, both personally and professionally.

So what are the trauma warning signs that you need to look out for?

Nightmares

Flashbacks and hallucinations

Disturbed sleep

Social and Emotional Withdrawal

A Sense of having a foreshortened future

Inability to concentrate

Hyper vigilance

Individuals who experience trauma injury very often go on to develop

Phobias/ Panic attacks

Depression

Increased Alcohol, Smoking and Drug Use

Absenteeism

Feelings of suicide and being unable to cope

A sense of isolation

If someone is showing signs of trauma – whether it be one hour or one month after a traumatic incident – **take it seriously**. Post-traumatic stress can be severely worsened by ignoring it or making fun of it – “come on get over it!”

In the **immediate aftermath of a traumatic incident**,

1) Ask the affected person they'd like to go to a quieter space to talk about it. Don't yank them away if they wish to remain connected to what is happening. But talking soon after the incident is one of the best ways we have of minimizing ongoing trauma. There is no need to dissect everything that happened at this stage but just listen.

2) Help them to reconnect with their affinity group, and to locate those they are concerned about.

Healing from a trauma is partly about finding safe ways to reconnect a range of things that have been severed by the trauma (trust, faith, etc), and this is not done by ignoring or minimizing it.

3) Be mindful of little things that you can do to assist the person to **restore a sense of dignity and humanity** ... finding a space where they can have a wash, feeling the grass underneath their feet ~ ask them what will help (as this will differ between people and circumstances).

4) It goes without saying how important **deep listening** is. It is particularly important to reassure the person that what they are feeling is normal ... that traumatic reactions are normal reactions to the types of events that no-one should have to be exposed to, that it isn't a sign of going mad, nor of being unable to 'stand up for the cause.' Again, be very wary of "don't be a cry-baby" type of reactions that come out of the same sense of patriarchy found in police cultures and in much of society.

And in the **days after the traumatic incidents?** ... some things to remember include

- v Eating nourishing food
- v Being physically active, as traumatic incidents can wash one's body with chemicals that need releasing through exercise
- v Helping the person to establish a normal routine for themselves, to do at least some of the sorts of things that they would do had they have not been traumatized
- v Continuing to provide a listening ear
- v Helping the person to find their own balance of reconnecting with various facets of the mobilization, spending time in a small supportive group (s), and being alone if they express this wish
- v The person may not be their normal self ... be patient, and don't try to snap the person back into their normal self

For particularly severe traumatic incidents, it can be helpful to organize a formal group debrief for those affected, at some point between 24 and 72 hours after the incident. A formal debrief is run by someone with experience who can help those involved in a particular incident to support each other.