

Healing Minds ~ Trauma and DoNoHarm

Trauma

There is no specific definition of what might be a traumatic event. When thinking about critical incidents, we often focus on the more extreme events that can occur, such as the recent tragic events at Grenfell Tower and London Bridge. However, on a smaller scale, exposure to traumatic events can also affect people deeply, for example, having an accident, being a victim of crime, losing a loved one or witnessing a traumatic event.

Following a traumatic event, people can struggle to know what help and support they need and what assistance they can offer to friends, family, colleagues or volunteers exposed to trauma.

In any emergency situation, the first priority is physical safety. It is only when safety issues have been addressed that we can begin to think about psychological support and this is where specialist advice is most helpful.

Psychological support

There is good evidence, widely agreed upon by emotional-shock/psychological trauma specialists, that is most often unhelpful and potentially harmful, to apply talking-therapies, in-depth psychological techniques or psychological medications during the first four/six weeks after an emotional shock, unless specifically recommended for individual cases on medical advice.*

For most of us, the desire to help following an emergency is very strong and very natural. Mental health professionals and trauma specialists, across many therapeutic disciplines recommend *emotional, practical and social support* in the hours, days, weeks and months following a traumatic experience; giving time and space to allow the mind-body system to work through, what is commonly referred to as “acute stress reactions”. These are natural and normal reactions to a very “abnormal” shocking situation.

*Exceptions to this would include expectant mothers, individuals who are especially vulnerable due to a pre-existing mental or physical health problem or where an individual is experiencing severe or worsening symptoms of emotional-shock, in which case a medical doctor should be consulted.

Emotional support

The role we can best play as helper, community leader, employer or friend in the first four/six weeks is to adopt the “Do No Harm” approach when offering emotional support. While holding back from applying formal or informal therapeutic interventions, we can comfort and console individuals by offering a supportive “vigil” to nurture and support the natural healing processes and wait to see if the individual fully heals without the need for the specialist, intervention that only a trained mental health professional or trauma-counsellor can provide. This is sometimes referred to as “watchful waiting.”

“Do No Harm”

1. Allow a settlement period - experts recommend between 4/6 weeks
2. Listen to community - listen to what is needed before instigating a response
3. Welcome emotions - allow emotional authenticity and people's honest reactions
4. Expert partnerships - create effective partnerships and communication between organisations across all sectors
5. Invitation not imposition - any activity we may deem beneficial should be undertaken with the invitation of the community or in partnership with a pre-existing community organisation
6. Humanise not pathologize - 90% of people impacted by trauma will make a full recovery without any specified psychological support. Individuals should be respected and valued and not labelled as "victims of trauma"
7. Respect religious and cultural diversity - take extra care to value and respect the cultural and religious diversity of a community. The best trauma response is one in which we unite around our shared humanity
8. Healing comes from within community - Trauma responses that fail to value and invest in the community will be ineffectual and short-lived. Attempts should be made to nurture the emotional healing that the community itself will generate

Practical assistance

In the days, weeks and months of the self-healing process, an individual's mind-body system may be particularly vulnerable. Offering practical assistance can be particularly helpful; offering to help with shopping, attend or give a lift to appointments or help with the school run can make an enormous difference to someone struggling to regain their equilibrium.

Employers can help by offering reduced or flexible working hours or occupational health support.

During this time, nurturing and help needs to be finely balanced, so as not to completely disempower individuals. A natural antidote to a shocking experience of being overwhelmed is for individuals to feel back in control of their thoughts, their behaviour and their life in general. With compassion and working at the individual's own pace, supporting them to feel a restored sense of being able to cope with their daily lives can assist a return to full health.

Social support

Following a traumatic event, individuals may want to withdraw from others. This may feel necessary in the first few days but prolonged isolation can make things worse. Connecting with others face to face can help with the healing process. Connecting doesn't have to mean talking about the trauma. In fact, for some individuals, that can just make things worse. Comfort can be gained from feeling engaged and accepted by others. Often individuals find it difficult to ask for support. In the early days and weeks following an emotional shock, visiting someone or offering an invitation to do normal things, such as going for a coffee, or a walk in the park - things that have nothing to do with the trauma - can help someone start to reconnect with normal life.

Finding community or someone to talk to: If individuals live alone or are far from family and friends, helping people to connect with their community or groups of interest can help reduce feelings of isolation. Supporting someone to join a club to meet people with similar interests and accompanying them to their first meeting can be very supportive.

Peer support: Being with others who are facing the same problems can help reduce a sense of isolation and hearing how others cope can help inspire individuals in their own recovery.

Recovering from trauma takes time, and everyone heals at their own pace but if months have passed and your symptoms aren't letting up, it is wise to seek the help of a mental health professional by contacting your GP.

Seek help for trauma if you are:

- Having trouble functioning at home or work
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety, or depression
- Unable to form close, satisfying relationships
- Experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding more and more things that remind you of the trauma
- Emotionally numb and disconnected from others
- Using alcohol or drugs to feel better