

TRAUMA GUIDELINES

WHEN A LOVED ONE HAS SUFFERED TRAUMA

(A handout for family and friends of those who have suffered a traumatic event)

Exposure to traumatic events leaves most people with a variety of distressing reactions. Many of them fall into a category that professionals call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which may be familiar to you. Youth can be especially vulnerable, as they often lack an experience base that might help them to identify what's happening to them after experiencing a traumatic event. For this reason, it's especially important that their needs are quickly and accurately identified. Here are some suggestions that might make this difficult time a little easier for you if someone you know has been traumatized.

The biochemistry: It's important to understand that traumatic memories are different than other kinds of memories. When someone's life is in danger or when one sees or experiences something terrifying, the brain gives signals to release great amounts of adrenaline as well as other mobilizing chemicals. The emotional sensation that accompanies that adrenaline release is fear. The cognitive reaction to that release is heightened sensory awareness (clearer vision, higher level of alertness). The physical reaction is greatly heightened physical energy and stamina. During the initial time, most people have a warped sense of time, often have confused thoughts, and later may not remember many major aspects of the incident.

After the danger has passed, people usually go rapidly into shock for some time. During this time it is important to keep them safe, as they may do something like step out into moving traffic without realizing it. People often forget to eat or take in adequate hydration.

It is important to bring in someone who is trained in the psychology of trauma as quickly as possible, so that people can be debriefed. Responding to trauma calls for a specific process, which is quite different for survivors than it is for first responders (911 helpers). If the traumatized person was in uniform, Critical Incident Stress Management is very helpful. If the traumatized person is a civilian and was a survivor or bystander, it is critical for those providing intervention to have a clearly different approach specifically designed to meet the unique needs of survivors and bystanders. EMDR is particularly effective.

These are important distinctions. Trauma is not the same as grief, and each calls for different kinds of treatment. Within trauma, what's appropriate for first responders is not the same as what's appropriate for civilian bystanders or survivors. We need to be really clear about these distinctions in order that we not provide a response that may not help – or worse yet, may cause further harm.

Even after people have received intervention, it will likely take some time for the aftermath to calm. There are likely to be some issues that may not make sense to you. Traumatized people have experienced something that makes them feel they've lost control of their lives. They may have lost their sense of trust in the world, their belief in their ability to keep themselves safe, even their ability to manage their thoughts and dreams.

Flashbacks are involuntary and vivid visions of the event or a sudden physical sensation that makes them feel they are re-experiencing the trauma. Reactions to flashbacks may include an increased heart rate, immobilizing fear or other reactions similar to what they had at the time of the traumatic event. Nightmares are also common. Both threaten their sense of control, so they may want/need to control many other areas of life that were unimportant to them before.

Give them every opportunity to make their own decisions wherever possible and appropriate. Often people assume a chronic state of hyper vigilance and are unable to relax, have interrupted sleep, and appear to overreact to normal daily stimuli (such as jumping when a door slams shut). They may have a feeling of impending or immediate danger, even when the environment is safe. All of these are signs that the person is still suffering from a traumatic reaction and would likely benefit from additional professional help. Without intervention, people are at risk of using drugs or alcohol to try to manage the pain, confusion, overwhelm and anxiety. Sleep deprivation often results and the long-term detrimental effects are numerous.

Advice often feels to them as further loss of control. Instead of trying to tell them what you think they need to do to get better, rethink and rephrase your advice into an expression of your concern.

As you do this, it's important to own your concern. Instead of saying "Eat something good for you. You've got to take care of yourself and eat well," try, "I'm concerned about whether you're eating well. I know you like my barbecued chicken, so I just brought you some in case that appealed to you. I knew I'd feel better if I could think of something to do for you." Rewording statements in this way (in fact, rethinking your approach in this way) removes

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any assertion that the traumatized person 'needs' to change while allowing you to openly present your concern and offer support without any pressure. When someone has been victimized or traumatized, nearly every person who cares about them (friends and loved ones, family members, teachers) has a piece of advice. This is an especially poor time for them for them to feel that everyone is telling them what to do. In addition, some of the advice they get from different people will likely contradict advice others have given, which can lead to greater frustration or upset during a very delicate time. What people need in times like this are love, support, and a sense of self control. Telling them what to do or how to think – even with the best of intentions – rarely comes across as loving or supportive.

Here are examples of some helpful things to try or to say. Adjust the language depending on the age of the survivor:

- How can I help?
- Is there anything I could do to take off some of the load? Laundry? Cooking? Anything at school?
- Could I take the kids for dinner so you have some time alone?
- If you're having trouble sleeping, would you like someone to stay with you at night?
- Would it help if I went with you to... (court appearances, follow-up meetings with police, doctors, whatever)
- What is it you wish others understood about how this is for you?
- What is the hardest part at this point?
- Is there someone who really understands how this is for you?
- Would you like to see if we can find someone else who have been through something similar to this?
- Is there a way for us to predict some of the difficult parts yet to come and set up some temporary supports to help get you through those times? (Very important!)

If and when the traumatized person is willing to engage in conversation based on questions like those above, he or she is demonstrating an invitation for understanding and compassion. Do not mistake this for an invitation to give them advice! Many people will have several kinds of triggers. A trigger is something that brings on a flashback, which causes survivors to feel that they are re-experiencing either the event itself or the physiology of their reaction to the original event. A trigger can be a place (like the scene of the accident) or an unrelated but similar event (news coverage of a similar event happening to someone else, even many miles away or in another country) or even smelling something similar to an odor that was at or near the event, even if that odor was unrelated to the actual tragedy. For example, it makes sense that the smell of smoke would be a trigger for someone who had been trapped in a house or building on fire, but it might be more surprising that a trigger odor might be the smell of leather or plastic or something else that was in the house or near the person, unrelated to the smoke.

Triggers often aren't predictable, nor do they always appear to make sense. Trigger experiences are like being re-traumatized. Give survivors support and understanding when they occur. Find out whether there is a professional who can give you help with how best to do so.

Do not criticize their reactions. They may feel anger at emergency responders for not having gotten there sooner. You may think that their anger "should be" at the perpetrator. You don't have to agree with their reaction, but you can accept it as being true and real for them. You don't have to lie and pretend to agree. You can say, "I can imagine that if I were in your shoes I might feel the same way," or "Is there more you'd like to say about that?" or, "Is there a constructive thing I can help you do with all the energy or power of your anger?" As one example, the woman who started MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) found a very constructive way to channel her anger.

Two things are essential for recovery from trauma to be very complete and successful: first, the survivor has to do the work, and second, the therapist(s) involved must have specific knowledge and skill in the area of trauma. Traditional counseling techniques are neither helpful nor appropriate. Recovery from trauma always takes longer than we wish, and the mere passage of time is not helpful. Even if people are able to bury it for a while, it will surface at some point later in life, and will then be more complex to handle. Timely professional help makes the greatest difference in recovery.

Summary: Let them teach you about how this is for them and what they need from you. Ask what would be helpful. Don't make assumptions. Hang in there with them for the long haul. But don't reverse roles even for a moment expecting the traumatized person can listen to your frustrations. Find others with whom you can share your thoughts and feelings but don't address these to the survivor. They will feel safer talking to you about their needs if they can feel that you can be fully supportive for them. If they begin to feel that you have needs around the trauma, they'll be apt to stop talking. They can't afford to feel like they have to support anyone else.

Accept that this has changed your life, too. While you encourage others to take care of themselves, it is critical that you do so as well. If we don't first take care of ourselves, we won't be able to take care of one another.