MUTUAL AID DISASTER RELIEF

Navigating Trauma

Emotionally digesting experiences as mutual aid workers including enduring the sight of state brutality, humanitarian crisis, natural and human-created disasters can induce complex and immediate acute distress as well as long term post-traumatic stress. Many people involved in this work may experience these psychological effects or experience feelings of guilt and shame once they have left intense and traumatic environments.

It is very difficult to do long periods of intense solidarity work without feeling emotionally exhausted. It can be emotionally damaging to witness the suffering of others. Injustice hits you in the face again with every new case - each new personal tragedy. Since grassroots solidarity requires a genuine emotional engagement with those we're supporting, it also exposes us to their suffering. We may always dismiss it as trivial in comparison, and while it's true that we may not be the ones experiencing the real violence or loss, we are susceptible to the cumulative effects of exposure to story after story.

We have seen time and time again in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, doing human rights work in Palestine, and refugee solidarity in Calais and in so many other contexts, it is very common for people responding to suffer from a complex mixture of guilt, shame and “low level accumulative” trauma. On top of this, it is also common for there to be a state of denial about people’s own symptoms, and if they do recognize any symptoms they do not think they should be "allowed" to have them. So many of these people are our lovers, our friends, and our heroes – people who inspire us - but we know we need to do a better job integrating healing justice in our movements.

For you who have responded, we know you may be feeling a mixture of guilt or shame for “not having done enough”. You might think or say something like: “How can I have fun and relax when people are suffering."

The guilt and shame of not having done enough is the bane of almost every activist's life and every campaign. This all comes into much sharper focus when the person suffering is somebody you have met, somebody you know and love. This might seem obvious, but it needs to be said over and over: **IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT.**

As catastrophes of climate chaos, war and exploitation will sadly continue on, as solidarity-based relief and aid workers, we need to practice mental health awareness and caring for ourselves and each other in order to be able to navigate through the trauma that working in these spaces can induce. We ask that even in times of crisis, you take time to make your physical and emotional well-being a priority. And please hold us accountable to maintaining a sustainable, empowering, and supportive organizational culture.

In movements for justice and liberation, we often talk about sustainability in all things except ourselves. We can clear-cut our own “emotional reserves”, or “burn the candle at both ends" and simply expect our bodies and minds to deal with it. But everyone has a breaking point and if you go beyond it then it can take months or even years to recover. Tragically, all too often, people may drop out of our movements altogether.

Some people have learned where their limits are and try to work within them. However, in what can be an intense atmosphere of a post-disaster zone, people may be tempted to go well beyond their own limits or push other people to go beyond what they feel able to do. If this does happen in the heat of the moment, it is essential that you later take the time and/or other steps to recover.

The fight, flight or freeze defense mechanism is a very powerful reaction that automatically kicks in during threatening situations. In the split second of a tense situation it controls what a person does. The part of the brain that controls this is called the amygdala; it has to react so quickly because such situations can be a matter of life and death, and also because it only has to decide from a short list of options: fight, run or freeze. Natural chemicals are released to enable this process. While this can be very useful in the short term, they can have harmful effects if fired too many times; and activists put themselves in these kinds of situations all the time. Being in this constantly stressed state can be unhealthy and leave you open to infection as your immune system is often shut down during this time. The mind and body are trying to deal with an apparently short-term crisis.

We all have unique emotional experiences and cope with trauma differently. Our brain's reactions to trauma play out in many different ways. Reactions are the attempt by the brain to regain control in the face of powerlessness.

Our lives depend on having a sense of some sort of influence on what is happening to us. If this power is taken away from us, we literally feel at the mercy of brutality and this produces stress.

Afterwards, our brain and body systems seek to regain control and make sense of the experience to prevent it from happening again. The brain may replay the experience in front of our inner eye to try and grasp it, while at the same time we want to avoid anything connected with it. We can become emotionally disturbed

because we do not feel safe and we feel bad about what happened.

It is true that we don't have total control over our lives, but in understanding the way trauma works and practices for dealing with it, we can regain a sense of power, wholeness, and personal effectiveness. In addition, it is also possible to help others through loss or crisis while mitigating the risk of trauma and gain a new sense of what is possible through the process.

Understanding Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious (or bystander) trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being.

Vicarious trauma is ***cumulative***. It is what happens when witnessing cruelty and hearing story after story of devastation day after day, year after year. This process of change is ***ongoing***. Your experiences of vicarious trauma are continuously being influenced by your life experiences.

Vicarious trauma happens because you care, you empathize with people who are hurting. You have ***empathy*** – the ability to relate to and understand another person's experiences, reactions, and feelings.

When you care about people who have endured terrible things, you bring their grief, fear, anger, and despair into your awareness and experience and feel it along with them in some way.

Vicarious trauma occurs because you feel committed or responsible to help. This is a good thing! but can lead to very high (and sometimes unrealistic) expectations of yourself, others, and the results you want to see. Your commitment and sense of responsibility can eventually lead to feeling burdened, overwhelmed, and hopeless in the face of great need and suffering, as well as cause you to over-extend yourself beyond what is reasonable for your own well-being or the best long-term interests of those you are attempting to be in solidarity with.

How does your sense of commitment and responsibility to solidarity work help you? How might it hurt you?

Three Reactions to Trauma

There are generally three different reactions that commonly occur after direct or indirect experiences of brutality and suffering. These reactions are called "Post-Traumatic Stress". People might experience one, some, or all of them. These are:

1. **Re-experiencing the traumatic event**: nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive memories, the feeling of not being able to let go of the experience,

2. **Avoidance / Suppression / Emotional numbing**: losing the memory, self-medication (alcohol / drugs), self-isolation, social withdrawal, avoidance of everything that may recall the experience (known as avoidance behavior),

3. **Increased arousal**: Sleeplessness, irritation, rage, emotional outbursts, panic attacks, fear, hyper-vigilance, difficulties concentrating and performing normal tasks.

Possible Reactions after a Traumatic Experience

- Pictures and memories of what happened keep coming back
- Flashbacks (the impression of reliving the situation),
- Nightmares or other sleep difficulties
- Depression, not being able to enjoy life, feeling lonely and abandoned
- Feeling numb, switched off
- Becoming withdrawn, avoiding social interaction, self-isolation
- Changes in eating, sleeping or sexual habits
- Stomach pain, nausea, muscle tension, fatigue, or illnesses
- Fear, anxiety, restlessness, hyper-vigilance, panic attacks, phobias
- Guilt, shame, self-blame, regret
- Inability to function as normal, or inability to make plans or decisions
- Feeling that there is no point in living
- Doubting political activism and relationships with friends
- Irritability, rage, fear, emotional outbursts, uncontrollable crying, inner pain
- Reliving previous, other traumatic experiences
- Loss of meaning and hope.
- Difficulty managing your emotions, and difficulty feeling okay about yourself
- Problems setting boundaries and separating work from personal life.

- Problems in relationships.
- Accidents.
- Difficulty feeling connected to what's going on around/inside you.
- Changes in worldview or frame of reference such as change in spirituality, changes in beliefs about safety, control, trust, self-esteem, and intimacy.
- Hyperarousal
- Feeling unable to tolerate strong emotions
- Increased sensitivity to violence
- Cynicism or loss of idealism/despair
- Guilt regarding your own survival or pleasure
- Feeling disconnected with loved ones even when communicating with them
- Decreased interest in activities that used to bring enjoyment or relaxation
- Irritability, agitation, impatience, or moodiness
- Increased dependencies or addictions
- Impulsivity
- Bad group dynamics, arguments and guilt-tripping others over "not doing enough".

THESE ARE ALL COMMON REACTIONS TO EXTREME SITUATIONS!

What are some signs that you have experienced? Think back, about what may be the first signals that warn you that you're beginning to struggle with trauma?

Your struggles with trauma can have a serious impact on those close to you as well. Withdrawal, overusing alcohol, lack of sleep, diminished sexuality, over-protectiveness, loss of compassion or hope all influence the way you interact with those you love.

Consider asking people you are close to "What have you noticed about the way I behave and appear to feel when I'm under pressure?" or a similar question.

People react differently and in different intensities to a traumatic experience. They also have different needs in terms of support. You can become traumatized by your personal experience, by witnessing, but also outside the action by knowing the survivor or just through hearing about it.

For about 70% of people, these symptoms slowly disappear after about 4-6 weeks. But if they continue, this condition is called “PTSD" (post-traumatic stress "Disorder" - we disagree with using the word “Disorder” for something we see as a normal reaction).

If your reactions don't settle after this time, you may wish to seek "professional" help (which might be helpful anyway if the reaction in the first weeks is strong). It may be that Post-traumatic stress occurs months or even years after the experience because we don't initially process the experience. The experience is blocked, so it keeps on hurting.

Why Do Some People Recover From Trauma While Others Don't?

The following factors appear to make it more likely that a person will develop Post-Traumatic Stress:

- the more severe the trauma
- the longer it lasted
- the closer the person was to it
- the more dangerous it seemed
- if the trauma was inflicted deliberately by other people (eg., police and prison officer brutality)
- the more times the person has been traumatized
- if the person gets negative reactions from friends and relatives - which is why it's so important to support each other more effectively
- the longer it took to get into safe/supported circumstances afterwards - the first minutes and hours can make a massive difference.

Essential Components of Recovery

1. **Stay in a calm place for some time**, where you feel safe and you have people around you who you can trust and who can care for you

2. **Work through the experience**. Find words for what happened. Tell a friend in detail. Write down what happened. Express it in whatever way suits you.

3. **Practice good coping strategies**. Good coping strategies help you take care of yourself – especially ***escape***, ***rest***, and ***play***.

Examples include: books, films, video games, talking to friends about things other than work, taking time off, lying on the grass, sipping tea, taking a nap, getting a massage, being physically active, sharing jokes, being creative.

What are activities you enjoy doing that help you cope with trauma?

We do not just want to cope, however. We want to heal and transform. Transforming trauma means identifying ways to nurture a sense of meaning and hope.

Examples include: reminding yourself the importance of your work, staying connected with friends and family, paying attention to the "little things", partaking in traditions or rituals, reading, writing, prayer or meditation, challenging your cynical beliefs, learning, journaling, being creative or artistic.

What are activities you enjoy doing that could help you transform trauma on a deeper level?

Three important themes in an effective action plan for dealing with trauma are ***awareness***, ***balance***, and ***connection***. Understanding your responses and what might be contributing to them can lead you to a sense of what you need, and how to change what's happening or manage your own responses so that things don't get worse. Being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it, deliberately keeping your mind and body in the same place may help prevent or manage trauma.

Reflect on how you are feeling (physically, emotionally, spiritually). Are you aware of anything out of the ordinary? If so, what might that be related to?

Next: balance. Balancing your personal needs with the needs of the work you are doing. Balancing really demanding work with less challenging work. Make sure each work day includes breaks for meals/physical activity/rest. Spend some time with people you don't have to take care of, or better yet, who take care of you. Understand that exhausted activists and volunteers can do more harm than good by making mistakes.

Fill in the blanks: "I sometimes find it difficult to balance _____ with _____."

Maintaining nurturing relationships and meaningful contact with others is one of the best things we can do to address vicarious trauma. Connection also means being connected with what nurtures and anchors you. Whether that is nature, religion, or another source of meaning, awe, joy, wonder, purpose, and hope. It is very important as well.

What are some communities that help you feel nurtured, supported, and connected?

How you think about your work plays a big role in keeping you balanced, healthy, and able to prevent or manage trauma.

- Why do you do this work?
- How does the work you do fit into the larger picture/mission of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief or climate justice more broadly?
- How do you measure success in your work?
- What can you control in your work?
- What are the costs and rewards of this work and how are you personally changing?
- In the midst of demanding situations, do you notice any examples of determination, ingenuity, compassion, courage, resilience, heroism, etc.?

What We Can Do For You

We want to integrate healing justice in all aspects of our work and build an organizational culture of care and compassion for each other. We encourage all participants to take time to talk together about and reflect on disaster relief experiences. People in groups can go round, taking turns to give everybody the space to talk about what happened, where they were, what they saw and heard, what they felt and what they thought. Participation is voluntary and it is more useful if people have the same

level of trauma. If you are no longer in a location with other participants, we welcome you to use our Facebook group page to discuss, connect, and reflect. When peer support isn't enough, there is a 24/7, 365-day-a-year, free, and multi-lingual Disaster Distress Helpline that provides crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

What You Can Do For Yourself

Get to safety - Immediately after the experience: get to a place where you feel safe and take care of yourself. This may mean allowing other people to take care of you. Don't isolate yourself. Turn to your friends and tell them what you need. Family and friends often don't know how to help. Tell them what you need and don't need.

Act - Get rid of the adrenaline that is still stored in your body: go for walks, cycle or run, do exercises.

Remind yourself - You may feel guilty about what happened and blame yourself. Remind yourself: it was not your fault!! Your reactions are normal and there is help available; this is a difficult phase but you will get better. Find out more about trauma. The more you know, the easier it is to see your reactions as normal reactions to "abnormal" events.

Beware unhealthy coping mechanisms - Avoidance and denial have damaging effects in the long run and will restrict your life. Self-medication with alcohol and drugs may seem to help for the moment but has negative effects in the long run.

Explore Alternatives - Bach Flower Remedies and acupuncture can help you deal with the emotions. Valerian is good for sleeplessness. Massages and hot baths are always a good idea. Also, don't be afraid to see a professional if that is what you need. Good therapists or other professionals can help. The professional should have some experience of trauma work, otherwise it can be pointless or counter-productive. It also helps if they are politically sympathetic or at least neutral. You'd see a doctor if you had a broken leg. Trauma is a very real emotional wound.

Acknowledge - What you have done, are doing, or intend to do. Even if what you achieve in the short term does not seem to be enough, it should be viewed as part of a much longer struggle. Unfortunately, for the foreseeable future, there will be disasters and disaster capitalists who try to take advantage of disasters to further entrench their power and privilege. You burning out will not change that, neither will it help the people you are trying to assist. We all need to look at ways to avoid burnout and blaming ourselves.

“**Buddy up**” - Go out there with someone you trust, or find someone there that you can work, rest & play with. While buddying does not work for everybody, many find deep solace in knowing someone is looking out for them. Or, better yet, come with a whole squad. We encourage the affinity group model of organizing, and one of the benefits of this is the microcosm of care that hopefully will come with it.

Don't judge yourself against others - Listen to your inner-selves and be aware of your physical health. There are very few people out there who can work incredibly hard for many years under very stressful situations and seem to suffer very little ill effect from doing so. You might feel bad if you think that others are dealing with an experience better than you are. Remind yourself that people are different and react in different ways. There is no “right” way to react. (If you have had a previous experience of trauma, including childhood abuse, you may have more intense reactions.) Also, more sensitive people often experience stronger reactions. It’s not a sign of weakness to feel pain after being attacked. If you think: "I don't have the right to feel this bad - what happened to me is nothing compared to X," remind yourself that you have experienced something terrible and that you have the right to feel as you do. If you feel bad, that’s because the experience was bad for you. There is no point in comparing and contrasting brutality. If you accept your condition, you will get better faster.

Get some R & R - rest AND recreation - let go, have a laugh, dance, do some martial arts, get into the countryside, make love, or engage in BDSM, eat well – do whatever you need to feel good and remind yourself that life is worth living. And if/when those little/loud voices creep into your thoughts allowing guilt in, acknowledge it,

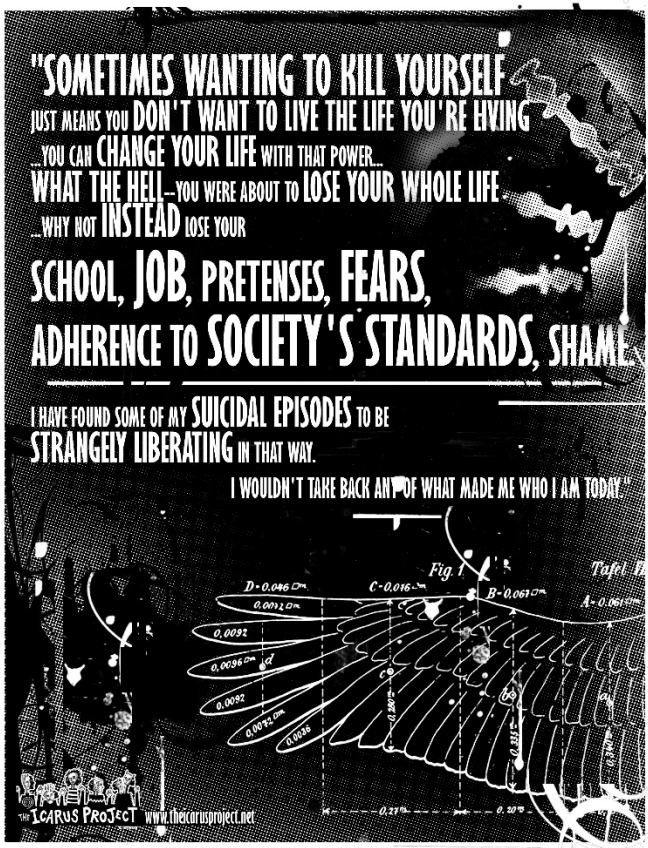
smile at it and tell it to mind its own business. You are in this for the long haul and need to look after yourself, and you will be back in the fray soon enough if you look after yourself.

Reduce other stresses in your life - if possible. Don't take anything else on until you have recovered from the last escapade. For example, if you find meetings difficult, and you don't NEED to be there, then don't go.

Sleep! - What could be more anticapitalist, carbon friendly and nonconsumerist? And it's FREE! Get as much of the lovely stuff as your body demands.

Be patient - Take your own time to heal, be patient with yourself and don't condemn yourself for your feelings and reactions. Inner wounds take time and patience to heal, just like physical ones.

Ask - “Am I in this for the long haul?” If your answer is yes, then you need to be honest and think whether or not the way your current actions are likely to help or hinder that. Think long-term. This is a marathon, not a sprint.



How To Support Your Friend

The support of friends and families is enormously important, and cannot be overstated. (Lack of support and understanding, on the other hand, contributes to the persistence of trauma.) Lack of support can worsen the reaction. This is called "secondary traumatization" and is to be taken very seriously. It involves "shattered assumptions" – law enforcement and perpetrators are known to be brutal, but if friends don't support you afterwards, you may feel as though the whole world is

breaking down. This is where you come in! And here are some tips to help you be there for your friend.

Be honest - Let your friend know, gently and wherever appropriate, in private, that you have noticed some worrying changes in their behavior. If it is affecting their ability to work effectively or get on with other people, tell them. It might be useful to be specific. Make it clear it's their current behavior that you are commenting on, not “the normal them”, and that it is because you care so much about them that you are bringing this up. Take them out and have a good time, if possible avoid talking shop. Consider showing them this zine.

Be proactive - Traumatized people often find it hard to ask for help. Be proactive but not pushy. Don't wait for them to ask for help. Be there for them. The days immediately after the experience are crucial. This is when all the emotions are easily accessible. It’s good to talk then. Later on, people often close up. Often traumatized people withdraw from social activities and isolate themselves. You may not see your friend around anymore. Go and find them.

Listen - The person may need to talk about the traumatic events over and over again, and one of the best things friends can do is to be patient and sympathetic listeners so the person feels less alone. Avoid talking too soon, too long and too much. We often long to give good advice rather than be a good listener. Put yourself in their shoes. Try and understand how they feel, not how you might have felt. Telling the story in the order in which it happened, chronologically, helps the brain process the experience. Carefully encourage your friend to talk about what happened, what they saw, heard, felt and thought. But it may be the case that your friend doesn't want to talk about it, in which case don't force them.

Have realistic expectations - It is also important to have realistic expectations while the person is recovering and not to expect too much or too little from them. Don't expect a traumatized person to recover quickly. Some will, but some won't be able to. If someone is taking a long time to recover from a crisis, offer your support repeatedly, so that they don't feel alone.

Don't take things personally - A traumatized person may have symptoms which are very hard for those around them to deal with, for example anger, withdrawal, irritability, ungratefulness and being distant are all common reactions. Bear in mind that the traumatized person is not deliberately acting this way: it is the trauma which makes them behave like this. Don't take it personally, but recognize it as a symptom and as a sign that they need your support.

Don't minimize the trauma - People are tempted, time and time again, to encourage the person to stop reliving and simply forget about the trauma and get on with life. Unfortunately, this advice is usually not helpful in this situation and is likely to make things worse, as it may make the person feel even more isolated and hopeless.

Remind your friend - One of the most important things you can do is to give the message: *"You are not to blame - and you are not alone."*

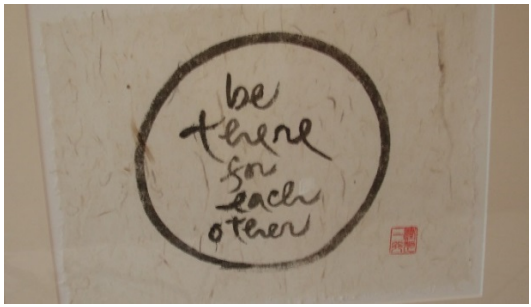
Behave normally - Pity or self-indulgent "overcare" do not help. The most important thing is that your friend feels safe and warm in your presence.

Educate yourself - You might feel insecure about how to

help. Find out more about trauma so you understand it better. Bear in mind that many people seem all right after traumatic experiences and that reactions may come later. Ask what they need, don't impose your solutions.

Accompaniment - Traumatized people often struggle with the smallest tasks. Cooking, shopping, and handling the chores for them can be invaluable help, as long as you don't patronize them or undermine their independence. Or maybe go with your friend when, for example, they try to go on demonstrations, actions or to other potentially triggering situations again. Keep an eye on them, and check how they feel, before, during and after. Also, when the symptoms of post-traumatic stress are over, it is important to help your friend to reintegrate into an active life.

Seek support - Remember: a supporter needs support, too. Supporting a supporter is essential. Helping and caring can be very hard for you, too. Take care of yourself, do things that make you happy. Talk to someone else about how you feel. Getting support for yourself will help you support others.



Going through traumatic experiences can often have positive outcomes in the end. A lot of people have been through these experiences and many have reported breakdowns turning into breakthroughs and opportunities for self-growth.

For example conscious enjoyment of life and the beauty around us, being grateful for every day. Facing your fears and overcoming them is very empowering. Having a broader understanding and humility can make you a more empathic and understanding person. And having been through a traumatic experience can give you valuable insight on how to help another person through traumatic experiences as well. There is much of this world that needs to be composted, and you have wisdom, heart-breaking, hard earned, wisdom, that is needed in these times of death, birth, and renewal. Never give up. The world needs us more than it ever has before. Sometimes we are broken, but it's the cracks that let the light come through. These cracks just mean something is being born inside, something green, something new.

Sometimes, it's only through disasters that we unearth a power within that can't be measured or defined.

Sometimes darkness is our candle.

Sometimes our wounds illuminate our path.

And sometimes healing happens, in roundabout ways, all around and deep inside us.

To heal, we must resist. To resist, we must heal.