The silver lining

Going through traumatic experiences can often have positive outcomes in the end. For example, conscious enjoyment of life and the beauty around us, facing your fears and overcoming them is very empowering. Having a broader understanding and humility can make you a more empathic and understanding person.

One of the most important things you can do is to give the message:
‘You are not to blame - and you are not alone. This is normal and it will pass.’

It is also important to have realistic expectations while the person is recovering and not to expect too much or too little from the person.

Learn about the disorder and encourage the person to stick with treatment even if it is painful.

Go with them when, for example, they try to go on demos and actions again. Keep an eye on them, and check how they feel, before, during and after. During treatment, the therapist may try to help your loved one get in touch with feelings about the trauma. This can be very difficult and there may be a temporary increase in symptoms and distress. Emotional support from family and friends can be especially helpful during this period.

Also, when the symptoms of PTSD are over, it is important to help the person to reintegrate into an active life.

For further info and help contact:
Email: activist_trauma@riseup.net Skype: activisttrauma
Tel: 07962 406940 or 0207 871 6940
Write to: Activist trauma, OARC, East Oxford community Centre, Princess St. Oxford OX4 1DD
www.activist-trauma.net
Also from the states see: http://healingtrauma.pscap.org
PTSD help line call (10am - 4pm) ASSIST 01788 560800
www.traumatic-stress.co.uk
A very good book is ‘Trauma and recovery’ by Judith Herman.
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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.)

Don’t expect a traumatized person to recover quickly. Some will, but some won’t be able to do that. If someone is taking a long time to recover from a crisis, offer your support repeatedly, so that they do not feel alone.

A traumatized person may have symptoms which are very hard for those around them to deal with, for example anger or withdrawal.

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.

Provide emotional support and be a good listener.

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 seemingly reasonable 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.

The person may need to talk about the traumatic events over and over, and one of the best things family members and friends can do is to be patient and sympathetic listeners so the person feels less alone. It may be the case that the person doesn’t want to talk about it, in which case don’t force them because they might shut down on you.

It is highly unlikely that all of the symptoms will apply at the same time. Remember that these symptoms are natural reactions to very disturbing situations, and some of these symptoms are attempts of your body and your brain to protect you. If these symptoms apply to you, make sure the people surrounding you get to see this list, so they are able to understand your reactions better.

Possble signs and symptoms of a traumatic stress reaction

Emotional signs include: sadness, helplessness, feeling numb, anxiety, fear, apprehension, uncertainty, grief, denial, guilt, depression, feeling overwhelmed, loss of emotional control, irritability, agitation, intense anger with self or others, shame.

Cognitive (thinking) effects include: confusion or mental fuzziness; poor attention and concentration; poor problem-solving; poor decision-making; memory problems; loss of orientation; disturbing thoughts; flashbacks and intrusive images; avoidance of thinking; nightmares, panic attacks, hyper-vigilance, guilt, and blaming others or yourself.

Behavioural signs include: withdrawal; tearfulness and emotional outbursts; an inability to feel settled; suspiciousness; hyper-alertness/intensified startle-response; a loss or increase in appetite; increased alcohol consumption; increased use of medication; change in sexual functioning; altered sleep patterns; strained relationships; increased accidents; avoidance of places, people or situations; loss of interest in life; reluctance to discuss the event or wanting to talk about it all the time; apparent personality change or anti-social behaviour.

For Post Traumatic Stress ‘Disorder’

Most people recover from trauma within a few weeks. However, some 20-30% of people exposed to trauma develop a range of symptoms which psychologists call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is officially considered an illness (www.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=248146) and should be available on the NHS. This diagnosis applies when stress symptoms do not disappear after a month or so. Effective treatments for PTSD are available, and awareness of the condition and personal preparation can reduce the risk of developing symptoms after an incident.

People’s reactions to traumatic events vary enormously; some may become withdrawn, others may be fearful or angry. The time it takes to recover from trauma also varies from hours or days, weeks, months and sometimes years - though most people recover within a month. Post-traumatic stress can take many forms. Some may find themselves more scared of the police or of crowded situations; others may become angry, while others feel paralysed and vulnerable. You may feel changed as a person. Opening spaces to exchange experiences and communicate our emotions are important first steps to deal with experiences of violence.

Physical effects include: fatigue, weakness, nausea, dizziness, chest pain, elevated blood pressure, difficulty breathing, sweating, teeth-grinding, rapid heartbeat, muscle tremors, visual difficulties, menstrual changes, feeling faint, stomach upsets, muscular tension leading to head, neck or backache.

Note: It is highly unlikely that all of the symptoms will apply at the same time. Remember that these symptoms are natural reactions to very disturbing situations, and some of these symptoms are attempts of your body and your brain to protect you. If these symptoms apply to you, make sure the people surrounding you get to see this list, so they are able to understand your reactions better.
What Is Post Traumatic Stress ‘Disorder’?

PTSD is diagnosed when there has been exposure to an extreme stressor, resulting in a set of symptoms that persist for more than a month, and can continue for much longer. These symptoms are, for example, being attacked by the police, raped, mugged, a serious accident, child abuse, the sudden unexpected death of a loved one, or witnessing a traumatic event.

Recently, therapists have also begun to talk about “complex PTSD” where the person has been exposed to a series of repeated stressors rather than a single one - for example previous (childhood) trauma plus being attacked by the police.

A person with PTSD has three main types of symptoms:

1. Re-experiencing of the traumatic event
   - indicated by: flashbacks, nightmares, exaggerated emotional or physical reactions to things (called ‘triggers’) that remind the person of the event.

2. Avoidance and emotional numbing
   - indicated by: Avoiding anything that reminds the person of the trauma, activities, places, thoughts, feelings, or conversations related to the trauma.
   - A loss of interest, “lack of interest, “in life”.
   - Some may feel that activism seems pointless.
   - Feeling numb and detached from others, being withdrawn and avoiding social interactions.

3. Increased arousal
   - indicated by: Difficulty sleeping or conversely sleeping longer. Irritability or outbursts of anger, often over “minor” things. Unable to be still, wanting to be on the move. Not being able to feel safe/supported circumstances afterwards - the first minutes and hours can make a massive difference.

Why do some people recover from a trauma while others don’t?

The following factors appear to make it more likely that a person will develop PTSD:

- the more severe the trauma
- the longer it lasts
- the closer the person was to it
- the more dangerous it seemed
- if the trauma was inflicted deliberately by other people (e.g., police and prison officials)
- the more times the person has been traumatized
- if the person gets negative reactions from friends and family - which is why it’s so important to support each other more effectively
- the longer it took to get into safety circumstances afterwards - the first minutes and hours can make a massive difference.

Some specific problems associated with PTSD

Panick attacks

Individuals who have experienced a trauma may have panic attacks when exposed to something that reminds them of the trauma eg, seeing police officers - they may also develop unjustified feelings of guilt and self-blame and feel that somehow it was their fault, even when this is clearly not true. For example, an activist may blame themselves for being attacked by the police or not being able to prevent someone else being beaten.

Suicidal thoughts and feelings

Sometimes depression can lead to the threat or idea of suicide. (As many as 50% of rape victims report suicidal thoughts.) If you or someone you care about is suffering suicidal thoughts following a traumatic event, it is very important to consult a professional immediately and get help.

Substance abuse

People with PTSD may, understandably, turn to alcohol, drugs - legal or illegal to try to deaden their pain. However, inappropriate substance use greatly aggravates the symptoms and makes successful treatment difficult. Alcohol and drugs will make a bad situation much worse.

Feelings of alienation and isolation

People with PTSD need support, but they often feel very alone and isolated by their experience and find it difficult to reach out to others for help. They find it hard to believe that other people will be able to understand what they have gone through. They may also feel so daunted by psychological symptoms such as feeling restless or detached or feeling that they are going crazy, dying, or having a heart attack.

Severe avoidance behaviour

Sometimes avoidance begins to extend far beyond reminders of the original trauma to all sorts of situations in everyday life. This can become so severe that the person becomes virtually housebound.

Depression

Many people become depressed and no longer take interest or pleasure in things they used to enjoy.

Delayed PTSD:

Although the symptoms of PTSD usually begin immediately after (or within a few weeks of) the trauma, they often appear several years even years later. This may be more likely to happen on the anniversary of the traumatic event even years later. It is usually, especially if the person has not experienced PTSD previously, an important reminder. A survivor may express disproportionate anger or frustration at the symptoms. This can turn out to be displaced anger about the trauma.

Impairment in daily functioning

Some people with PTSD have severe problems functioning in the same day-to-day life. A person may lose their ability to do ordinary tasks that were formerly easy and enjoyable.

Uncontrolled crying

Sometimes people cry a lot for a long period of time. The pure thought of the event, or any “triggers” produces a deep grief that expresses itself through intense crying sometimes screaming, sometimes voiceless.

The treatment of PTSD

Good informed support is the most useful treatment for most people but in some serious cases appropriate psychotherapy, support groups and even sometimes medication may be necessary.

Alternative Treatments:

Traditional Chinese medicine:

acupuncture or acupressure (basically acupuncture without needles) can be used as prevention, i.e. to maintain good health and readiness for action/demos; and as treatment, after the event, to help heal any wounds, acupressure rather just for physical health problems. It can help the ‘shen’ or spirit, just as much as the body and has shown to be effective in PTSD symptoms. Try to go to a practitioner who specializes in/has experience with psychological/spirit disorders and makes sure they always use disposable needles. (Read on-line guides to choosing a practitioner.)

Other therapies known to help psychological trauma include: Shiatsu, Reiki, holistic massage, Bach Flower remedies and yoga.

Exercise:

Physically energetic activities are helpful so go cycling, swimming, walking etc, if you can.

Find a place of retreat:

It is important to be in a place where you feel safe, and where you can have friends around you who can look after you. PTSD is like being ill, all the time, your time, let others take care of you.

Acceptance:

PTSD can happen to anybody. It does not mean you are weak, or that the right feel how you feel, and to accept that is an important step in recovery.

Psychotherapy:

There has been increasing awareness of dealing with PTSD, and preferably one who is psychologically supportive. Rape helplines can often give good advice and have contacts for therapists who are clued-up on PTSD.

Three types of psychotherapy are especially effective in treating PTSD:

- Anxiety management (involving relaxation training, breathing retraining, positive thinking and self-talk, assertiveness training.)
- Cognitive therapy (helping to change irrational or unrealistic beliefs associated with the trauma.)
- Exposure therapy (helping you confront situations, people or events that have evoked the trauma, e.g. asking a cop for directions. Your fear will gradually begin to dissipate in safe circumstances afterwards - the first minutes and hours can make a massive difference.

Why do many people NOT receive appropriate treatment for PTSD?

People with PTSD often do not seek help. There is a natural tendency to avoid dealing with the unpleasant feelings associated with the trauma. The very symptoms of PTSD - withdrawal, feelings of guilt or mistrust may make it difficult for some people to get treatment. People may not know that there is such a thing as PTSD, and may not be aware that it is a diagnosed illness and may not know that treatment is available.

Can we prevent PTSD?

Some activists use meditation, martial arts, other eastern disciplines (like tai chi, chi gung) to help prepare for, and recover from trauma. Some activists may believe there may be trauma. They can help ground you, give you focus, confidence, and help you defend yourself, physically, emotionally.

Being aware of potential violence will reduce the shock-factor. Good support will help lessen the symptoms even onset of PTSD. Taking vigorous exercise immediately after may help to release stored up adrenalin.

Emotional awareness in preparatory group meetings is important, to enable people to recognise reality. Knowledge of post-traumatic stress is important, because if traumatic events occur, you will be better supported by people who already know about PTSD, and you will be better able to help others.

If an action/demo is coming where there may be traumatic events, plan your support and a debriefing session afterwards. Plan to do nice stuff afterwards, and take time off. Encourage your group to do personal support.

On the day, bear in mind the “golden hour” which medics speak of, is the vital time for limiting the emotional impact of a trauma. In the minutes, hours and day/s after a trauma, assist a trauma survivor to:

- get somewhere safe and calm
- be cared for medically and/or by friends/family, and know any children will be cared for
- eat and drink good food
- stay calm - one of the body’s responses to stress, is to get very cold be listened to
- not be left alone
- know what has happened to friends/family, and know any children will be cared for
- know that support will be available for the duration
- be safe to experience whatever emotions may arise
- not take on new responsibilities and have old obligations taken away for the time being.

An activist’s immediate response to trauma may well be: “I’m fine, leave me alone, I have to go and...” rescue my friends/throw myself into it. I have to go in a couple of hours/ single-handedly look after my children/ do prison supporter/ attend the big protest party. These are the best choices that the make the difference between taking a month or ten years to recover from the trauma. Discuss the right response to trauma in advance, with our friends/family, and community and attempt to commit in advance to the appropriate response, regardless of how “fine” we feel at the time.