

Holistic Response to Trauma

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Trauma is anything that impacts us that is beyond our normal experience and coping mechanisms. The following are some ways to assist you in coping with traumatic experiences in a holistic way.

HONOR THE EXPERIENCE

Trauma affects each person differently. You are the best expert on knowing what you need. It is important to honor yourself and your process.

You are not to blame

No one deserves violence or trauma. It isn't your fault. You may rack your brain for every possible alternative to what happened, but no one deserves to be the victim of violence or other trauma. Others may blame you, but this is called blaming the victim. People often do this to distance themselves from a reality of the world they can't understand and therefore need to blame someone for it in order for their world to keep making sense to them. But, bad things happen and they are the fault of the perpetrator or nature, not the victim.

Follow your own timeline

Other people may want you to "hurry up and get back to normal" or to let it go or be happy again. But you need be in no hurry. You may process through anger, grief, fear, and many other feelings. Each one is important and deserves the time it takes for you to work through them. They are serving a purpose and you will let them go when you are ready. For example, you may feel closed off from people feeling that they don't understand. Yet, as you continue to integrate your own experience, you will become ready over time to be more open again. Don't force yourself to move forward; treat yourself gently as you move through the process of healing on your own timeline. That being said, we often want to hurry past all the difficult feelings, but to truly process them and integrate them into our beings, we must go through and experience each one. And, we can find help in doing so; we don't have to do it alone (see the Honor the Body section below for more).

Share your story

Share your story and your experience with those who are safe listeners. Look for others who will listen without judgment. It is important for your experiences to be heard and it is very healing to be able to share from our experience with someone who can honor it.

Our culture distances itself from difficult realities and it is important for those of us who have experienced them to continue to talk about them so that the culture can learn to respond in healthier and more loving ways. That being said, people who have experienced trauma often feel re-victimized by poor listeners and the culture as a whole, so choose wisely when and with whom to share that will lead you to healing rather than re-victimization. If you do have an experience that feels re-victimizing, know that you are able to get through it. Believing in yourself as capable, flexible and courageous can be very helpful in such times.

Find your own way to make sense of new realities

One of the hardest things about coming home after mission work can be to see others enjoying their lives, oblivious to the many problems of the world. This can feel especially isolating if you were the victim of trauma or violence. How do you relate to these people whose life experience seems so far from your own? While this experience can feel isolating, it is also an opportunity to become clearer about what is important to you and how you want to continue to incorporate those elements into your life.

Individual experience of societal lack

Any kind of violence and many kinds of trauma are expression of all of the ways our society is unhealthy and not whole. We are individual victims of larger problems. Though we may not find comfort in that and still wish what happened hadn't happened, it can be helpful to see the larger context of our experience. Until our communities and institutions acknowledge and own the violence in order to become whole, integrated, and healthy, people will continue to experience violence and trauma. If we are able to heal from our experience and use what we have learned to transform the world, we are helping the world become more whole.

HONOR THE BODY

Our body holds on to all we experience. In order to find healing from all levels of our trauma, we must engage the body.

Deal with overwhelm

When we experience trauma, our emotions can be overwhelming. Responding to the world itself and taking care of ourselves or others can be overwhelming. We can work to release one tiny piece at a time, as we are ready. There is no timeline for how long it should take. One technique for dealing with overwhelm is to **containerize**. Imagine creating a container, a box with a lid, for example. Imagine putting your emotions into the container and know that they are there for you to open and respond to a bit at a time, as you are ready. This allows you to have a small sense of relief from the cloud of emotions, to see that they are not *you* but rather *something you are experiencing*, and to feel a sense of control over what is happening to you and how you'd like to respond instead of feeling like they are controlling you.

Physical safety and support

It is important to create a situation for yourself that feels safe. Being around safe people, asking for them to go with you or be with you when you are afraid, and respecting your own heightened needs for safety are crucial.

Safe, nonsexual touch, if desired

Trauma, especially when it has been a violation of our physical bodies through injury, rape or the like, can lead to difficulties receiving safe touch from others. But, safe, healing, nonsexual touch can be very helpful in calming the body when desired.

Self-care and self-expression

It is important to nurture the body through **self-care**. Make sure to get plenty of sleep, eat healthy food, exercise, etc. Whatever feels nurturing to your body is important to do, be it warm baths, a cup of tea, or a gentle walk through nature.

The **self-expression** of drawing, writing, painting, etc. can be great ways to open to all of ourselves, not just minds, in expressing what we have experienced or feel.

Therapy that focuses on the body, or whole person, not just the thinking mind

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprogramming) is a therapy conducted by a trained psychologist that can help the brain reprogram traumatic memories into regular memories.

Traumatic memories hold all of the emotional charge of an event, creating the feeling of reliving and experience or the emotions of it. A regular memory is something we see more like a movie, but without the physical feeling of reliving it.

Energy work focuses on the energy of the body. All of our bodies take in experiences of the world, not just our brain. Because of that, we are not always able to process our experiences through talk alone. Energy work such as Reiki, Healing Touch, and others can help release blocked energy and emotions and to restore harmony and balance to the body, working beyond the intellect and interacting directly with all of who we are. Sound therapies or vibrational healing techniques also work to create shifts in our energy wavelengths and provide healing.

Art or sand therapy are other types of therapies offered by some professionals who are trained in accessing, processing and integrating our experiences with the aid of art or sand or other such techniques. These types of therapies help us make sense of what we've experienced through the language of symbols rather than through our limited thinking minds.

Techniques for calming the body and accessing positive feelings

Grounding is being able to feel connected to the planet and our center. When we ground ourselves, we gently corral our energy and emotions and imagine sending them down our spines, down a black energy cord into the ground. This helps us from feeling like we are floating or that our emotions are scattered or overwhelming. Grounding is one of the most important ways to be able to deal with fear. When we are connected and centered, we can engage with fear or anger, or any emotion from a place that is not overwhelmed, but instead from our inner essence that is much greater than any experience of any particular moment.

Once we are grounded, we can **release any negative energy and emotions** we feel down the energy cord into the ground where it can be renewed as all that returns to the earth is renewed. We can scan our bodies from above our heads down through each body part noticing where we have any tension, discomfort or negative feelings. As we notice each place of tension or discomfort, we can send it down the cord, until we feel lighter and calmer. This is a continual process to do in a moment of strong feelings or each day, as well as over time. We continually release whatever comes up without judgment, continually practicing and learning to experience and feel what we are feeling but to not let it take up so much room.

Once we have released negative energy, we can then **add in positive energy and emotions**. This may be right away after releasing negative energy and emotions, or it may take many months or years of releasing the negative energy or emotions to feel ready to add in the positive. There is no right time. But, when you are ready, you can think about what emotions you'd like to feel and expand your access to them. To do so, recall the feeling of the emotion you would like to add such as love, joy, peace, etc. Feel the quality of that emotion inside of you, perhaps in your heart area, and feel the expansion of that energy little by little until it feels bigger and bigger. Really sink into that energy and the way it feels. As you do so, you create new neural pathways in your brain that help to start to replace the well-worn neural pathways of the negative emotions or energy, giving you greater and greater access to the positive energy and emotions.

Another technique called **Focusing**, can help us if we don't know what we are feeling or if we are feeling a particular sensation that is unwanted. After grounding, you can ask your body gently where it would like some attention. Then, describe to yourself the sensations you experience. Perhaps you feel something heavy, or tight, or cold, or tingly, or sticky. With gentle curiosity, just be with those sensations, not looking to your mind or emotions; just be with, sit with those sensations. See if they have any information for you. Ask them if there is anything they would like you to know. As the sensations move around and change, just continue to be with them. It often happens that just by paying gentle attention to the sensations that they dissipate. This is the process of trapped emotions and experiences feeling that they are heard and can move on. If you don't feel a release, that is okay too. You can visit the sensation another time. Either way, thank your body for what it has shared with you.

HONOR THE SPIRIT

When we experience trauma it damages our sense of self and our understanding of the world and creates wounds in our souls, spirits or inner selves.

Spiritual care

We may have many questions to answer for ourselves:

What is my place in the world?

How do I trust again?

Where can I find hope?

Was God in this?

Do I believe in God?

What do I believe?

Why do I feel so angry with God or others?

How do I live with my vulnerability in a way that doesn't completely make me want to stay indoors all the time?

How do I grieve the world I knew before my assault, including my innocence?

When I'm ready, how can I transform this experience into something that will help others and help me find greater joy in my own life?

We can work to answer these questions and others by ourselves, through journaling or prayer, or by talking with others. You might seek to work with a spiritual director who can help accompany you on that spiritual journey. Seek a spiritual director who is open and expansive in thinking and will be a safe person to accompany you on your journey.

Growth gained

Even though traumatic experiences are not of our choosing, they, like all things in life, can be great teachers, if we allow them to be. Some of the many possible ways we may grow are:

Depth of compassion for others

Greater awareness of our own feelings and what is important to us

Clearer sense of boundaries

Ability to help others with similar experiences

Greater ability to be honest and transparent

Ego cracked open to see more clearly who we really are, our inner essence

More comfort with ambiguity, multiple realities existing at once

Deeper awareness of our shared humanity

Deeper gratitude

Ability to be accountable to our own feelings and experiences (rather than blaming others)

Ability to accept other people's experiences as real and valid

More flexibility to life's constant changes

Deeper understanding of the world's realities

Courage and bravery

Healing rituals

It is a human endeavor to search for meaning, peace, reconciliation as a way of transforming violence. There are many creative ways to mark for yourself or with others the experience that you have lived through and are living through. You might create a ritual to honor:

What you have lost

What you have gained

To mark your healing and wisdom gained

Path to forgiveness

HONOR OTHERS – BE A WITNESS TO THE DIFFICULT PATH OF HEALING

If you are in the role of supporting others who have experienced trauma, the following, in addition to all of the above, are some suggestions:

Listen to the needs of person

Above all else, let the victim determine their needs and follow their lead. They are their own expert in what they need. Trust that. And, trust that what they need will change over time; it is not your job to hurry them along or believe they should be in a different place than they are in their process.

Say it was wrong

Telling the victim that what happened to them was wrong and that it wasn't their fault is very healing. Many victims are blamed by others or blame themselves for what happened. Violence or injustice is not deserved by anyone.

Don't leave others alone to deal with what happened

Traumatic experiences can be very isolating for victims. Let them know you are there with them, as long as they need, that they are not alone, and that you support them. Check in with them regularly to see how they are doing. Ask what you can do and what would feel most supportive to them.

Examine your own feelings with others, not the victim

Do you want to distance yourself from what happened, deny that it happened or that the world could not be that way? Or, do you want to diminish in any way or question the victim's experience? Process these questions with other people until you are able to relate to a victim in a way that puts them and their experience first. Even saying that you are hurting because they are hurting could be interpreted as making it about you, not them, and should be avoided. But, do tell them that you love them and care about them.

Don't be silent

Silence adds to a victim's sense of shame about what happened. Be willing to talk about what happened, unless the person states they don't want to. Don't pressure the other person to speak, but make it known that you are a safe person to talk to when they want to talk

Create community responses to mark the experiences

When large public shootings or other such things happen, communities mark the experience to allow for public grieving and to own that it affects the whole community. Individuals who experience violence or trauma do not typically get such support. Create ways to honor the experience of individuals: rituals, ceremonies, etc.

Resist adding in your own thoughts about your own life

Don't share your own stories. Just listen. Sharing your own experiences makes it about you, not the victim.

Just listen

Listen when they want to talk, for as long and as often as needed.

See the wounds

Realize that many people act the way they do because they are carrying something around with them that they can't integrate. Try to see them as wounded instead of lacking. Our society blames people with problems instead of helping them heal. Be a healing presence.

See the person beyond their wounds too

Honor all that the victims have been through, survived and learned. They have something to teach us. Learn from them. Celebrate their courage and strength.