# Traumatic Stress - Causes

Human rights activists do difficult and challenging work, and see a good deal of human misery. We may even be fearful for our lives at times. It is therefore important to know how to react following a traumatic event, and how to recognise the symptoms of traumatic stress. (Post-traumatic stress is dealt with in the Expert Lesson.)

Any event which is very distressing and outside of the realm of normal human experience can result in traumatic stress. Traumatic stress usually produces a very intense response, including fear and/or helplessness, which may overwhelm the individual?s coping mechanisms. Such a response is a **normal reaction to an abnormal situation.**

# Effects

At the time of a traumatic event, the person experiencing the event might feel numb and unable to respond.

Immediately after a traumatic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, or dazed, or unable to process their own feelings.

Over several hours or days, the feelings of shock and denial gradually fade, and other thoughts and feelings take their place.

People react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with a traumatic event. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of your feelings. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings.

You may feel:

* **Frightened** ? that the same thing will happen again, or that you might lose control of your feelings and break down.
* **Helpless** ? that something really bad happened and you could do nothing about it.
* **Angry** ? about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.
* **Guilty** ? that you have survived when others have suffered or died.
* **Sad** ? particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
* **Ashamed or embarrassed** ? that you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you.
* **Relieved** ? that the danger is over and that the danger has gone.
* **Hopeful** ? that your life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.

Strong feelings affect your physical health. In the weeks after a trauma, you may find that you:

* Cannot sleep
* Feel very tired
* Dream a lot and have nightmares
* Have poor concentration
* Have memory problems
* Have difficulty thinking clearly
* Suffer from headaches
* Experience changes in appetite
* Experience changes in sex-drive or libido
* Have aches and pains
* Feel that your heart is beating faster.

It may take weeks for some of these feelings and symptoms to pass. Remember that these are normal reactions to extreme circumstances; they are not signs that you are weak or sick.

# How you can help

What can you do straight after a trauma to help someone heal? Psychological First Aid is an important first step to support a traumatised person. It is NOT about encouraging or even forcing people to ?debrief? following a traumatic event. There should be no pressure on the affected person to recount what happened to them. It helps to provide a safe and supportive environment for people to feel secure. If they wish to share their experiences they can, but there is absolutely no obligation to do so.

* Ask someone if they require assistance. Remove the person from danger and try to keep them safe. If very distressed do not leave alone.
* Ask about people?s needs. Do they need a blanket? Clothes? Medical treatment? Work with them to prioritise what they are most in need of and what is most important to them at this moment.
* Listen to people and help them to feel calm.

# Coping strategies

Everyone has natural ways of coping. Encourage people to use their own positive coping strategies, while avoiding negative strategies. This will help them feel stronger and regain a sense of control. You will need to adapt the following suggestions to take account of the person?s culture and what is possible in the particular crisis situation.

**Encourage Positive Coping Strategies:**

* Get enough rest.
* Eat as regularly as possible and drink water.
* Talk and spend time with family and friends.
* Discuss problems with someone you trust.
* Do activities that help you relax (walk, sing, pray, play with children).
* Do physical exercise.
* Find safe ways to help others in the crisis and get involved in community activities

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**Discourage Negative Coping Strategies:**

* Don?t take drugs, smoke or drink alcohol.
* Don?t sleep all day.
* Don?t work all the time without any rest or relaxation.
* Don?t isolate yourself from friends and loved ones.
* Don?t neglect basic personal hygiene.
* Don?t be violent.

It is crucial in the weeks and months after a traumatic event to keep an eye out for changes in personal attitude (depression, frustration, etc.), as these may be signs of longer-term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is dealt with in the Expert lesson.

Swipe right for this lesson's checklist

Go to the Beginner Lesson for advice on how to deal with chronic stress.

[Go to Beginner Lesson](umbrella://lesson/stress/0)

Go to the Expert Lesson for advice on how to deal with post-traumatic stress.

[Go to Expert Lesson](umbrella://lesson/stress/2)

### FURTHER READINGS

* [Good Practice Review Number 8: Operational security management in violent environments (Revised Ed.)](https://www.odihpn.org/download/gpr_8_revised2pdf)
* [ECHO Generic Security Guide for Humanitarian Organisations](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fec.europa.eu%2Fecho%2Ffiles%2Fevaluation%2Fwatsan2005%2Fannex_files%2FECHO%2FECHO12%20-%20echo_generic_security_guide_en.doc&ei=kLxAVc6LOILuUP2SgbAE&usg=AFQjCNEXEOcbLeV24f3WolHmDwLq7KJzlQ&sig2=hbnI7wfdrGIHS7mmikBRWA)
* [Protection International: New Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders (3rd Ed.)](http://protectioninternational.org/publication/new-protection-manual-for-human-rights-defenders-3rd-edition/)