Responding to Critical Incident Stress in Protests and Mass Mobilizations

This infosheet begins with a list of suggestions prepared by someone (Rodney Vlais, windscape@planet-save.com) with clinical psychology qualifications and experience in working with psychologically traumatic incidents ... but it is no definitive authority on what you should and shouldn't do. It ends with an abridged list of suggestions written by Starhawk.

Critical incident stress can be caused by events at protests and mass mobilizations such as:

- use of terror tactics (sometimes indiscriminately) by police, including physical, mental and sexual assault
- the experience of prolonged and intense fear
- being separated from injured colleagues
- sexual harassment by other protestors

Critical incidents such as these can shatter an illusion of invulnerability, and expose on a very personal level the injustice and violence of loving, compassionate people being treated as terrorists. Even among particularly experienced front-line activists, these incidents can build up through time causing escalating uneasiness and burnout.

This doesn't mean that we should frighten people away from mass mobilizations, however, as most of the time we cope well with the difficult circumstances that confront us. It is often in the midst of fighting for what our heart burns for that we discover our resources of resilience and courage.

Yet we can lessen the risk of post-traumatic stress among ourselves and others. By taking responsibility to be mindful of the effects of critical incidents, we are evolving the revolution now into a world of decentralized networks of care, compassion and solidarity.

Trauma is not an inevitable reaction to critical incidents ... certain incidents like those listed above increase the likelihood of trauma, and almost always guarantees at least some level of distress ~ but it's best not assume that everyone will be significantly traumatized. Be very mindful of the possibility of trauma, yes, but don't assume it.

If someone is showing signs of trauma - whether it be one hour or one month after a traumatic incident - take it seriously. Post-traumatic stress can be severely worsened by ignoring it, treating it as if it doesn't matter, or joking about it ~ critical incident stress can make one feel very isolated and alone, and glib reactions (of the "you¡¦ll get over it" type) to this experience can intensity the trauma. Healing from trauma is partly about finding safe ways to reconnect a range of things that have been severed by the trauma (trust, faith, etc), and this is not done by ignoring or minimizing it.

In the immediate aftermath of a critical incident, if someone is appearing affected ask them if they'd like to go to a quieter space ... but don't yank them away if they wish to remain connected to what is happening. When supporting women ask if they'd like to be helped by another woman rather than a male ... particularly important in situations of violence or assault. Help them to reconnect with others in their affinity group, and to locate those they are concerned about.

There is no need to dissect everything or ask a heap of questions concerning what happened ... rather, be attuned to the energy of the person you're supporting, and ask them what would help them to feel less distressed ~ you don't need to baby the person, but support them to take their own measures to regain a sense of control.

Be mindful of whether the person is in some level of shock, or even in a milder form of daze. In this situation they may not realize how close they are to police batons, nor be aware of other dangers that are around them. This doesn't mean that you have to make decisions for them ... just be watchful so

that you are supporting them to feel more in control in a safe way, that doesn't worsen the situation for them.

Also note that sometimes the full extent of one's injuries is not apparent in the aftermath of a critical incident ... look out for signs of internal damage that may be overshadowed by the person's adrenalin or shock.

Be mindful of little things that you can do to assist the person to restore a sense of dignity and humanity ¡K finding a space where they can have a wash, feeling the grass underneath their feet ~ ask them what will help (as this will differ between people and circumstances).

It goes without saying how important deep listening is. There's no problem in gently reassuring that we generally do recover from trauma through time ... that the reactions do often subside. It is particularly important to reassure the person that what they are feeling is normal, that traumatic reactions are normal reactions to the types of events that no-one should have to be exposed to, that it isn't a sign of going mad, nor of being unable to "stand up for the cause". Be very wary of 'don't be a cry-baby' type of reactions that come out of the same sense of patriarchy found in police cultures and in much of society.

Be cautious when offering your own experience in similar situations. By all means, talk about your experiences in general terms to reassure the person that with support they will feel less distressed through time ... this may also help them to feel less alone. But don't assume that your specific reactions to your experience can speak for what the person besides you is experiencing now, nor that what worked for you will necessarily work for them.

Traumatic incidents can be life-changing events. Exposure to out-of-the-ordinary experiences can change how we think about ourselves and the world, and disconnect us from what we previously took as normal and as sources of connection, comfort and solace in our lives. These changes can affect family relationships, friendships and our perceptions of
many things ... we cannot always get over trauma in a month, or even a year. Offer support for the long-term, and journey with the person s/he tries to make sense of the changes.

Supporting Survivors

Notes from Starhawk, abridged by Rodney Vlais - full version is at
http://www.starhawk.org/activism/activism-writings/genoatrauma.html

Some of the symptoms of trauma follow. All of these are part of our normal human response to trauma - it's their duration and intensity that can turn them into the life-threatening condition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Some symptoms:

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns. Some people may be unable to eat or sleep. Others may not be able to stop.
- Not being able to put aside the terrible images and memories.
- Not being able to feel.
- Depression, inability to take joy in life.
- Rage (well, rage is the sane response to what happened, but crippling or self destructive rage, or anger directed at the wrong targets, can be a symptom.)
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol for self-medication.
- Fear, anxiety, panic attacks and phobias.
- Guilt, regret, and self blame. Witnesses who escaped suffering the worst may be especially prone to 'survivor's guilt'.
- Overwhelming grief.
- Inability to function normally, to plan or make decisions, or to carry out normal life activities.
- Shame.

- Suicidal thoughts and feelings.

What you can do for yourself:

- Reach out to your friends and allies for help and contact. Don't isolate yourself.
- Remember-what happened is not your fault. You don't need to feel ashamed or guilty, although you may find yourself having these normal responses to trauma. The guilt belongs to the men who beat, tortured and murdered people, and to those who gave the orders, not to you. You coped the best you could with an utterly brutal situation.
- Being at a mass mobilization or protest for justice is a mark of your courage, commitment and integrity. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. Be proud.
- Friends and family members, in their own distress, may behave in ways that make it worse. You have the absolute right to stop them, to leave a destructive situation, and to find real help.
- Remember that people do survive even these terrible things, and can comeback stronger. But you may need time to focus on your own healing.
- Don't worry right now about whether or not you will go back to an action again. Know that healing yourself from this one is a political act.

What you can do to support your friends:

- Find them. Contact them. Don't let them disappear into isolation. I'm especially worried about those who might have come to the action alone, or without friends in their own home city. They need to have contact with people who have been there, who understand at least something of what they went through.
- Keep in contact. Call them, ask them how they're doing, if they're sleeping. Remember that people may think they're fine at first, but later begin to suffer the effects of the trauma. Commit to remain in contact over a period of months, not just the first few days.
- Help them to talk. We need to tell our stories, sometimes over and over and over again: ideally to someone who has been through it and understands, but if that's not possible, to someone who can simply listen, accept the full range of our feelings, without trying to make us feel better.
- Feed them, shop, cook and clean for them, take care of some of their creature comforts.
- Accompany them. Help them get where they need to go. Be an advocate for them in medical, legal or mental health measures. Help them make and get to appointments. Go with them. Help them fill out forms, write statements. Find appropriate help and resources for them. Be an advocate for them with their school or job.
- Help support their family and friends who may also be in grief, shock and rage. Be an advocate, or a buffer, between them and family members, lovers or friends whose own level of stress and fear may cause them to react in ways that are not helpful. Be willing to let them get mad at you.
- Help them bear witness, but take their lead. Some people may find their greatest relief comes from speaking out and telling their story publicly. You can help interest the media, or set up venues for them to talk to groups. For others, however, this might be too overwhelming or restimulating. Help them find other ways to witness: writing their story,
- writing statements that can be read by others for them, making tapes or videos at home.
- Carry on the struggle. Find ways that they can stay connected and be a part of it even if they are not able to go to actions.

In all these things, remember that your friend is in charge of her or his own healing. Don't patronize or infantilize them, but support them to make their own choices.

Resources and Further Help:

Some people may need experienced, trained help to get through this. A group of us have been in the process of setting up a database of care providers who are committed to working with activists, if necessary on a no-fee or low cost basis. (This may not be such an issue for those of you with national health services, but some activists may be unwilling to trust those services and need private help.) This website can be found at this URL: www.walterzeichner.com/aftercare/html