

NaWa*

*Kurdish for: „Place of comfort and security“

Informations and exercises for traumatized persons

Introduction

You are listening to this information because either you, or your relatives or friends have experienced something which was very frightening and painful, what you did not expect could happen to people neither you in particular.

Unfortunately, unimaginable acts of violence caused by people occur more often than we expect all over the world. Perhaps you were politically active and expected that violent acts would be inflicted on you, at the same time you have the feeling that these experiences place a great burden on you.

People react to acts of extreme violence with symptoms and complaints. One feels ill, is perhaps afraid of not being normal any longer, being mad. And doctors diagnose it as an illness.

However, to react against violence is not mad but normal and understandable. People should not inflict pain on others, hurt or frighten them. The reactions of your body and soul are normal responses to abnormal human occurrences. The reactions are in fact good because they show that your body and soul react and try to help and heal themselves.

There are a lot of experiences in dealing with these complaints which you feel, and experience shows, that it should not remain that way. Your situation can improve. You can support your body and soul in your attempt to heal.

The Psycho-Social Centre for Refugees in Düsseldorf has experience in handling these complaints. It advises and handles refugees who seek protection in Germany and who have fled their home countries from war, persecution, displacement and human rights violations.

With this information we would like to provide you and your relatives with some help so that you can better understand your situation and gain some courage.

In the first part of this CD we provide you with information about what a trauma is, what complaints can arise and how you can deal with them.

John and Rosi, a fictitious couple will support us through your story to better understand the situations

In the second part you will hear two exercises which will help you to deal with your symptoms better.

What is a trauma?

Sudden, unforeseen occurrences and experiences can very much change our lives. They can confuse, frighten and traumatise us. Indeed many people have experienced difficult situations, however, not all would be traumatised by them.

It is therefore important to define what a trauma is.

I will tell you the story of Rosi and John who have survived house searches, detention and torture.

Rosi and John tell their story:

Rosi: "I am Rosi . I had put my children to bed and sunk in thoughts, was busy with house-keeping. Suddenly I heard a jeep stop in front of the door, soldiers banged on the door loudly. I felt afraid and as if in a trance, opened the door. They came in and shouted at me: " where is your damned husband? A decent woman knows where her husband is". They took me away. In detention they did terrible things to me. I was shocked, completely helpless and afraid r of death. Somehow I survived it."

John: "I am John , I was politically active because I wanted to fight for my people, for the future of my children. I held out during torture and did not betray anyone. With the help of relatives, I managed to bring my family into Germany. But I often wonder if I chose the right path. My wife Rosi is ill, she tries to be considerate to me because I am also psychologically not well. We cannot be good parents for our children and have to rely on strangers for their assistance."

A trauma is when the unimaginable occurs for someone, when someone is confronted with the possibility of his own sudden death or the death of a loved one, when a life threatening situation

that one is not in a position to control sets in, and the event evokes in the affected person the feeling of helplessness, extreme fright or terror. There are two types of traumata. Traumatic occurrences are categorised into unique, coincidental events like traffic accidents, plane crashes, fire catastrophes and natural catastrophes and in long lasting traumata intentionally caused by people, like for example, torture, war experiences and sexual violence.

The traumata caused by human beings are more difficult to handle than the coincidental, like for example, natural catastrophes.

Everybody reacts differently

In our examples, Rosi and John have been victims of life threatening, man made violence. After a trauma, most of the affected have the feeling of being hurt in body and soul. However, these difficult experiences do not have to lead to psychological illness in every person.

It is important to take into consideration that people are different and individual, and that they perceive the meaning of occurrences differently.

In our example it's more difficult for Rosi to give a sensible meaning to the trauma than for John.

Rosi: "I have always prayed to god, have not sinned and have tried to be good to my husband, children and relatives. Why has god let this horror happen to me? I do not understand that?"

John: "Since my youth I swore that they would not break me down, I would fight. Not even torture would intimidate me. Let them do what they like with my body, they will not reach my inner conviction, my soul belongs to me."

Social support helps

Even the aftermath of traumas are different for every person. The social support of relatives, friends, the living circumstances play an important role. It plays a role whether Rosi is still regarded as "dirty" or respectable by her family after the rape if she dared to tell anybody about it.

How John's party developed plays a role, if he could be proud to have endured a lot for the organisation, or if it was a waste of time.

And of course it plays a role if after these life threatening occurrences, Rosi and John can some time have the feeling of living in safety. Protection and safety play an important role for the victims after the trauma.

Let's summarize

Traumata are unimaginable, life threatening occurrences, which are categorised into unique, coincidental traumata or those of arbitrary violence caused by human beings.

How the environment and aftermath are, and whether the affected has social and emotional support equally plays a role.

How do we react after a trauma? Why are trauma reactions natural reactions.

Almost all people have a particular emotion, thoughts and bodily reaction after a trauma.

Rosi and John narrate:

Rosi: "The images keep coming even if I do not want them to. Sometimes I think I am mad. I will at last forget but t' not possible. Even in sleep I can't relax. I cannot be a good mother, I shout at my children, do not manage to cook for them, I am nervous and frightened. I shudder even if my husband is beside me. I lie mostly with headache in bed, do not want to speak to anyone. I am no longer myself, do not really live, live in a dream, and have the feeling that nobody can help me."

John: "I have heard my wife's screams, sometimes I am sorry for her sometimes I hate her, sometimes I feel guilty. But I cannot speak to her about my feelings. I don't want to hurt her and I am also afraid. My children no longer have respect for me, how can they either? I cannot offer them anything. What I experienced keeps coming to my head including worries. My head threatens to burst. Then I shout at my children or at times beat them, then I feel sorry afterwards. In order to forget everything I get drunk in the evenings in front of the television."

Rosi and John describe different symptoms like headache, listlessness and sadness, altered self insurance distrust, the feeling of being dirty or guilty, hopelessness, nervousness, difficulty in orientation.

Rosi narrates that even if she tries to prevent or push aside, unwanted noises, images and other emotions and thoughts about the trauma often come to her head.

Perhaps you know that. That can be confusing and shocking and you ask yourself if you can ever be in control and in charge of your thoughts and emotions. Perhaps you are afraid of going mad.

However these reactions are completely normal reactions to a frightening occurrence, a trauma, an "abnormal" situation.

What happens when we expect a life threatening situation?

Imagine you are taking a walk in the forest and suddenly see a snake creeping in your direction. You become alert, your body reacts instinctively. You tense your muscles, you are attentive and wide awake.

You think of running away or picking up a stick to fight or to stand still without moving until it creeps away from you. That means you are tuned to flight, fight and stand still in order not to be recognised. You feel how your body becomes warm, your heart beats faster because a pore in your body automatically secretes the hormone adrenalin which makes you and your body ready to fight. This body mechanism is a protective system which exists in human beings and animals in order to protect our lives.

When a person becomes, for example, a victim of violence, then this protective system is activated the body is mobilised for a fight or flight, but due to the violent situation it's not in a possibility to fight or defend itself. The bodily excitement is present, the threat to life is present without the possibility of acting. It's like an interrupted action, like a fight or attempt to flee, without success, in a life threatening situation.

We human beings have the tendency to revive and complete things which we didn't finish. As long as we haven't completed an activity, it will keep bothering us. Imagine if you are watching a TV series and while waiting for the next episode, cleaning the table and the telephone rings. Even while talking, you would have an unaccomplished feeling until you have completed the activity and the table is clean.

Those are trivial, daily things and our memory and body react to them. In life threatening situations these reactions are stronger though. We again and again remember the occurrences, the images and emotions which were associated to them.

People can only have symptoms when they defended themselves or tried to flee in the life threatening situations.

That means, trauma symptoms emerge because they are a natural part of the human system, which tries to adjust and therefore contain sudden, unexpected life experiences.

What are the typical trauma symptoms, the usual reactions ?

There are three typical trauma symptoms:

1. Repeated and tortuous memories of the trauma
2. Numbness and avoidance reactions and
3. Reactions of over excitement

In the following text I will explain these three symptoms in detail.

Typical symptoms: Recurring memories

The first typical symptom that we describe are the repeated and tortuous memories of the trauma

Rosi made a statement on repeated and tortuous memories of happenings in which, like in a film, scenes of traumatic occurrences repeat themselves. Sometimes there are only fragmented memories, which could also be smells, noises or body feelings, pains or tensions in different parts of the body.

Perhaps you know that. This re-experience can shock, annoy make helpless or sad. Perhaps due to the trauma you feel hurt or wounded. Perhaps you have feelings of guilt and think that you could have prevented that if you would have acted differently.

This re-experience can also over power you in the so called „Flash-backs“.

A flash-back embodies a sudden, lively re-experience if the trauma which is accompanied by a strong emotion. Like John's case, it can occasionally, lead to a dissolution of your immediate environment.

John: "I suddenly see the faces again in front of me, I have the feeling that it will -happen again, It is as if I am lamed. I am then gone, no longer

here, when I am again there, I realise based on the time, that I was away for quite a while."

Flash-backs can last anything from mostly seconds to many minutes. In a few cases they can also last for hours. It can happen that you no longer remember what happened to you during the flash-black.

Unfortunately we can even in sleep, be tortured by recurring nightmares.

Rosi narrates like this: "Sometimes I don't have the courage to sleep because of fear of my nightmares. Because in my nightmares I re-live the terrible things once again, in fact worse than in reality. I am completely helpless. Even after waking up I need a long time to realise that I had only dreamt. Later John tells me that I had screamed in my sleep and beaten about me."

When you observe these symptoms of re-experiences, of flash-backs or nightmares in yourself, these are not signs that you are „going mad“ but that you are dealing with a difficult and overpowering experience which you still haven't handled. A traumatic experience is stored in an unprocessed, ungraded form, unlike the remembrances of other experiences which belong to the past. At the same time the memory of these experiences are often only in disjointed parts. Eventually you cannot remember some parts, or you are not sure in what sequence they happened. This makes the memory particularly confusing and burdening.

„flash-back“ means that you remember the trauma, images appear, noises, smells or other cognitive perceptions as if you would again re-experience the traumatic situation. Since that is very burdening, you try to avoid the memory.

Rosi describes an image which helps her to understand her "trauma-memory":

"Trauma-memory"

„My therapist explained to me that: normally when I remember personal experiences like for example my wedding or the birth of my children, I can quite well remember how it was, how I felt. Of course I do not have these emotions in the same intensity as those days, I do not hear the music played or the noises that were made at the time. That's because the memories of this day are stored in a wider form. They were arranged in other personal experiences.

Like how one takes photos of an event and then glues them in an album in one line after the other. But the experiences in detention and during the house search were so bad and unexpected that it's simply not easy to quickly store them.

Now photos of this experience fly about in the album. Sometimes they fall out and are there even if one does not want to look at them. And when one looks for them, they are not orderly.

It's not clear how the sequence is. When one wants to restore order, one must look at each and every photo, sort it and then orderly glue it in the album."

You can be sure that looking at the photos, perhaps together with your therapist, will with time lead you to remember the occurrences less and not at all. It's like a colour photo which you have often looked at for a long time under the sun. With time the colours will fade.

We give you concrete tips to deal with flashbacks.

Advice for flashbacks

Touch your hands and knead them. Feel how your feet touch the ground. Eventually remove your shoes and walk a few steps in the room. Change your position and assure yourself that you are in the present, that you are in a position to move and control your body.

Use all your senses in order to come to the present from the images and impressions of the past:

Smell the flowers and smells that you like.
Look at the items in the room, touch and feel them.
Touch your own body, for example by rubbing your hands together.
Breathe deeply, perhaps near an open window.
Eat and drink

Speak internally to yourself, address yourself and name these now:

Name what you now perceive, for example:

"I now see a red car and a bus and a tree".

"I now smell the smell of food".

"I now hear the rattling of a tram passing by".

"I now feel the raindrops on my face".

Typical symptoms: Avoidance reactions

Another typical trauma symptom was avoidance reactions

Its only understandable that Rosi would at best, not like to sleep that she is afraid of the nightmares or that John would not have the courage to watch the news because through the television images his own war images are brought to life to him.

It burdens both when they are reminded of their painful experiences through particular situations.

John: "The security forces in uniform have implanted in me so much fear that I now avoid every contact with the police. I try to remain at home and send my eldest daughter to the foreign office to renew my documents. I also avoid going shopping."

Rosi: "I am often always sorry, but since this experience I can hardly tolerate the intimacy of my husband. I cannot speak to him about it, I don't know how he would react. When he seeks my intimacy, I am afraid that what happened in the past would be repeated. He mostly leaves me in peace since he sees that I have a terrible headache. Sometimes he curses that he has no wife."

The fear of re-experiencing parts of a trauma are very burdening, that's why many people try to control them by avoiding everything that could remind them of the traumatic experience, for example places, persons, particular colours, pieces of clothes, television programmes . Or they try, by every means, to avoid the memories and thoughts associated with the trauma. Avoidance is an understandable way to protect one self from things which appear to be dangerous. As understandable as how one would draw away the fingers from a cooker .

But unfortunately you would perhaps have experienced that this way of avoidance does not always help, neither short nor long term. You may perhaps have realised that thoughts also re-emerge when one tries to suppress them.

John: "My therapist has tried something with me. I should not think of the red and yellow flowers in a vase on a table standing in front of us. I ought to think about possibly anything I want, but only not about the red and yellow flowers in the vase ... do you know what happened? At some time I broke into laughter because I could think of anything other than the red and yellow flowers in the vase ... try it out yourself."

Its easier not to violently suppress and avoid noises, colours, images which are associated with a trauma, but to let them pass away like clouds. Moreover if you only avoid, you cannot have the experience that it can also be different, and a feared danger doesn't emerge. It prevents getting well.

John remembers such an experience:

"I previously made a detour around the foreign office because I was afraid of being deported. In my head I new that nobody was waiting to take me away, but I realised that my heart beat less faster when I took a different route."

Typical symptoms: Over excitement

Over excitement is a further common symptom after experiencing a trauma. Rosi and John are both nervous and restless. Here is how they describe their restlessness

Rosi: "I am always scared, when the door bell rings I shudder with fear. Even if I want to speak quietly to my children, I get irritated by trivial things that I shout. I am so restless and do not expect anything good. I distrust life and other people."

John: "I feel an indescribable urge in myself. It doesn't leave me in peace. I cannot sit a couple of minutes on a chair without standing and walking about. I cannot concentrate while reading a newspaper, or when visitors come I cannot follow the content of conversations. It makes me sad if I see one of my children for some time without being able to remember the name."

This constant restlessness, the bodily excitement which you feel, is closely related to the trauma you experienced and most of all, it is a protective mechanism. Trauma is perceived by the body as a life threatening situation. Our body reacts to danger by increased secretion of a nerve hormone, the so called adrenalin. This hormone should in case of danger make as ready for action and alert for a fight or flight. However, when the trauma is not yet handled, your survival system interprets situations as dangerous which are actually not, as if the body has not yet understood that the danger is gone. Reactions of over excitement can be: bursts of anger and irritability, concentration and memory problems, increased alertness, distrust, exaggerated worries, sleep disorders, exaggerated fear.

You will feel particular excitement when you encounter situations, people and stimulants which remind you of the traumatic experience. At times it's a colour or a noise. Through self observation you can see what triggers high excitement in you. When you know your own trigger, when you know what gives your brain information that there is danger therefore leading to a hormone release and alertness, then you can by yourself give the all clear signal.

In the relaxation exercises on this CD you will find tips and aid to calming yourself down and relaxation. There are more possibilities of helping yourself. We will present you now a few.

**How can I overcome trauma?
Advice for self help**

Self-help possibilities can be individual and culturally different, but there are also some experiences here which can be helpful to you. What goes for all traumatised people is, that the feeling of safety and calmness helps. And also the ability to calm oneself.

Rosi und John give us a few tips from their experience:

John: "Speaking helps: Treating a trauma means giving expression to a happening, So speak either in therapy or in a conversation with a trust worthy person, about everything, what burdens you, what worries you, about your dreams, thoughts and emotions."

Rosi: "Normality helps: give yourself a few daily treats, make it a habit to do things which make you feel well daily, a small walk, listening to enjoyable music, reading poetry. Make activities which are desirable to you become a habit, to rituals of your life."

John: "Contact helps: to be in contact with other people, to speak to them, to laugh or to cry."

Rosi: "Creativity helps: either singing, baking, cooking, painting, playing with children, hand-work, production, expression, movement, all that helps."

John: "Movement helps: whether it's a walk in nature, sports or dancing."

Rosi: "Obligations help: like shopping, caring for children, housekeeping and work."

John: "It helps, internally, "despite" despite everything experienced to say "yes" to life."

Rosi: "It helps to strengthen ones own morals, either family, political or religious. Giving up and carrying on as usual does not help."

Neither you nor us can undo the happening, but in this way you can help yourself to again be a part of life.

The effects of visualisation

Perhaps you suffer from one of the following symptoms:

Excitement of the body with nervousness and disquiet, increased wakefulness, trembling, fright, irritability and sleep disorder.

Or you live in constant alertness, cannot concentrate, are dejected, cannot feel any emotion. Perhaps you have the feeling that you are not in control and that you consider the happenings in the world and your future negatively.

Through relaxation and imagination procedures, you can learn how to have active control over specific body processes.

The exercises cause a reduction in the general excitement levels and a decrease of body tension. This leads to a lessening of stress and pain will decrease. You will feel better, sleep better and can better concentrate. Your fear will reduce.

Through regular exercises your body's cognitive functions will get better, bodily disorder will get better or be prevented. Pain will be relieved.

In general these exercises will help you to relax, to find quiet and safety. You will learn to consciously let positive, good feelings emerge.

When you ask yourself how the work with internal images functions, then simply imagine you were biting a lemon.

Watch the reaction this imagination would trigger in your body

Perhaps you would distort your face and tightly close your eyes, perhaps you have the feeling that you really have a sour taste in your mouth and your mouth pulls itself together, perhaps you shake a bit. – Pause –

Your body reacts to this imagination as if you really had bitten into a lemon.