

IF A LOVED ONE HAS SUFFERED TRAUMA

(A handout for family and friends of those who have suffered a traumatic event)

Exposure to traumatic events leaves most people with a variety of distressing reactions. Many of them fall into a category that professionals call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which may be familiar to you. Here are some suggestions which might make this difficult time a little easier for you of someone you know has been traumatized.

The biochemistry: It is helpful to understand how traumatic memories are different than other kinds of memories. When someone's life is in danger or when one sees something terrifying, the brain gives signals to release great amounts of adrenaline. The emotional sensation which accompanies that adrenaline release is fear. The cognitive reaction to that release is heightened sensory awareness (clearer vision, more alert). The physical reaction is greatly heightened physical energy and stamina. During the initial time most people have a warped sense of time, often have confused thoughts, and later may not remember many major aspects of the incident.

After the danger is past people usually go rapidly into shock for awhile. During this time it is important to keep them safe, as they may do something like step out into moving traffic without realizing it.

It is important to bring in someone who is trained in the psychology of trauma as quickly as possible, so that people can be debriefed. This is a specific process, and the process is quite different for victims than it is for first responders (911 helpers).

Even after people have been a part of a debriefing, it will likely take some time for the aftermath to calm. There are some likely issues that may not seem to make sense to you. Traumatized people have experienced something that makes them feel they've **lost control** of their lives. They may have lost their sense of trust in the world, their ability to keep themselves safe, even their ability to manage their thoughts and dreams. **Flash-backs** are involuntary and vivid visions of the event or a sudden physical sensation that makes them feel they are re-experiencing the trauma. Reactions to flashbacks may include an increased heart rate, immobilizing fear or other reactions similar to what they had at the time of the traumatic event. **Nightmares** are also common. Both of these threaten their sense of control, so they may want/need to control many other areas of life which were unimportant to them before. **Give them every opportunity to make their own decisions** wherever possible and appropriate. Often people assume a chronic state of **hyper vigilance** and are unable to relax, have interrupted sleep, and appear to over react to normal daily stimuli (perhaps jumping when a door slams shut). They may have a feeling of impending or immediate danger, even when the environment is safe. All of the above are signs that the person is still suffering from a traumatic reaction and would likely benefit from additional professional help. Without it people are at risk of using drugs or alcohol to try to manage the pain, confusion, overwhelm and anxiety. Sleep deprivation often results and the long-term detrimental effects are numerous.

Advice often feels to them as more loss of control. Instead of trying to tell them what you think they need to do to get better or to manage life, rethink and rephrase your advice into a statement of concern. *Own* your concern. Instead of saying "Eat something good for you. You've got to

take care of yourself and eat well,” try, “I’m concerned about whether you’re eating well. I know you like my barbecued chicken, so I just brought you some in case that appealed to you. I knew I’d feel better if I could think of something to do for you.” When someone has been victimized or traumatized, nearly every person who loves them has a piece of advice. When is the last time you had 30 people give you advice over the period of a day or two? How would it feel to you to have other people laying expectations on you at a time when what you needed was love, support, and a sense of self-control? Advice often feels like expectation even when it is really concern. Rephrase it as concern and **own it as your own concern!**

Along some other lines, here are some helpful things to try or to say:

- How can I help?
- Is there any thing I could do to take off some of the load? (Laundry? Cooking? Anything at work? Take the kids to dinner so you have some time alone?)
- If you’re having trouble sleeping, would you like someone with you at night?
- Would it help if I went with you to... (court appearances, follow-up meetings with police, doctors, whatever)
- What is it you wish others understood about how this is for you?
- What is the hardest part at this point?
- Is there someone who really understands how this is for you?
- Is there a way for us to predict some of the difficult parts yet to come and set up some temporary supports to help get you through those times? (**Very important!**)

Remember, if you ask this and they give you answers, have the grace to remember it is not an invitation for advice – it is an invitation for understanding and compassion.

Realize that many people have several kinds of **triggers**. A trigger is something that makes victims feel like they are re-experiencing either the event itself or the physiology of their reaction to the original event. A trigger can be a place (like the scene of the accident) or an unrelated but similar event (news coverage of a similar event happening to someone else, even whole states away) or even smelling cologne on a man in an elevator if it is the same cologne as their perpetrator was wearing. **Triggers often aren’t predictable nor do they always appear to make sense.** Trigger experiences are like being re-traumatized. Give people lots of support and understanding when they occur. Consider finding out whether there is a professional who can give you some help with how best to do so.

Do not criticize their reactions. They may feel anger at the police for not having gotten there sooner. You may think that their anger “should be” at the perpetrator. You don’t have to agree with their reaction, but you can accept it as being true and real for them. You don’t have to lie and say you think so, also. You can say, “I can imagine that if I were in your shoes I might feel the same way,” or “Is there more about that?” or, “Is there a constructive thing I can help you do with all the energy or power of your anger?” The woman who started MADD found a very constructive way to channel her anger!

Recovery from trauma can be complete and successful, but two things are essential – the victim has to do the work, and if there is a therapist involved, the therapist must have specific knowledge and skill in the area of trauma. Traditional counseling techniques are not helpful. Recovery from trauma always takes longer than we wish, and *the mere passage of time is not*

helpful. Even if people are able to bury it for awhile, it will surface at some point later in life, and will then be more complex to handle. Timely professional help makes the greatest difference in recovery.

Accept that this has changed your life, too. While you encourage others to take care of themselves, you do so, too. Let them teach you about how this is for them and what they need from you. Ask what would be helpful. Don't make assumptions. Hang in there with them for the long haul. Voice your impatience to others who can listen to you, not to the victims. They're impatient enough already, wishing this were over! Know that every good deed you do for them will be appreciated for the rest of their lives...the goodness that comes out of these times brings about a very special bonding.