



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

and what you can do to help break the cycle of violence



WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is a deeply disturbing experience. It is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that goes beyond a person's ability to deal with the emotions involved.

WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

This is an event that an individual experienced directly or witnessed. It can involve death or injury as well as any threat to the physical, emotional or psychological safety of the self. Examples include witnessing the loss of a loved one, physical pain or injury, e.g. after an attack, or being held-up at gunpoint and robbed.

Most often people feel fear, panic and helplessness after a traumatic event.



LIVING IN A SOCIETY WITH HIGH LEVELS OF VIOLENCE

South Africa is one of the 10 most violent countries in the world.

Every day 56 people are murdered.

23 of these people are murdered with a gun: 20 are men and 3 are women. This means that many of us are exposed to high levels of violence in our day-to-day living and most likely know someone who has experienced some form of violence.



THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

Trauma affects people in different ways.

Experiencing a traumatic event can cause us to question our beliefs, e.g. trusting that all people will not hurt us; or believing that the world is a meaningful and orderly place where things happen for a reason.



EXPERIENCING A TRAUMATIC EVENT DOES NOT ALWAYS MEAN YOU WILL BE TRAUMATISED

Some factors - stressors - can make it more difficult for someone to deal with a traumatic event, whereas other - protective factors - can help reduce stress, improve coping mechanisms and protect the person from being traumatised.

STRESSORS

- ▶ Poverty and low socio-economic status
- ▶ Major changes in one's life
- ▶ Long-term distress
- ▶ Prior exposure to trauma
- ▶ Illness
- ▶ Difficult childhood
- ▶ Poor social support systems

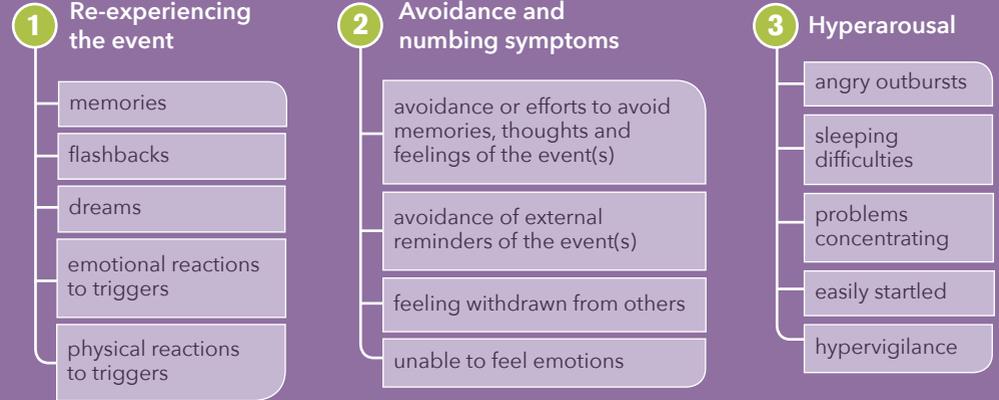
PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- ▶ Living in a secure environment
- ▶ Personal resources
- ▶ Family support
- ▶ Strong social network
- ▶ Ideological/ political/ religious consciousness



COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

People normally respond to trauma in the following three ways:



These reactions are normal and can continue for up to a month after the event. If after a month you are still experiencing a majority of these reactions you might need the professional assistance of a psychologist or social worker.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOURSELF?

take a deep breath...

Deep breathing exercises have been shown to help calm you down and clear your mind. Use this at times when you feel overwhelmed.

1. **Take a slow deep breath** in through the nose, filling up your lungs completely
2. **Exhale slowly** through your mouth until there is no air left in your lungs
3. **Repeat** this until you feel calm
4. **Concentrate only on your breathing:** feel the breath going in; and feel the breath going out
5. If you feel dizzy while breathing like this, stop, and start breathing normally

If you do not feel like you can speak to those around you, try find someone you feel comfortable speaking to, like a counsellor, or religious leader. There are also organisations that provide free counselling support.

No two people experience an event in the same way, so you cannot judge yourself on how other people say you should respond after a traumatic event.

ASK FOR HELP IF YOU NEED IT.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP OTHERS?

BE SUPPORTIVE AND LISTEN: the person may be finding it hard to cope and needs to feel supported. Let them know that you are there if they need help.

BE AWARE: if after a month the person is still not coping, you may need to help them get professional help such as trauma counselling.

BE PATIENT: do not ask the person to repeatedly describe what happened as this can be very traumatic. The person will talk when they are ready to.
You can also get help by going onto the GFSA website:
www.gfsa.org.za/take-action/how-to/survive-an-incident-of-gun-violence.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND HELP?

Here are some organisations that can help you deal with trauma.

▶ LIFELINE SOUTH AFRICA (NATIONAL)

Anonymous counselling over the phone 24/7
Toll-free number: 0861 322 322

▶ SOUTH AFRICAN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY GROUP (SADAG) (NATIONAL)

Counselling services and online information
Website: www.sadag.org
Suicide Crisis Line (8am-8pm) toll-free number: 0800 567 567, SMS: 31393
Mental Health Line (8am-8pm) tel: 011 234 4837

▶ TRAUMA CENTRE (CAPE TOWN)

Counselling for survivors of domestic violence, sexual offences and crime
Tel: 021 465 7373

▶ TRAUMA CLINIC (JOHANNESBURG)

Counselling for trauma survivors in all of SA's official languages
Tel: 011 403 5102



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