

What to do as a group?

- it's better NOT to do a plenary debriefing in the first days after the event. This might worsen reactions and cause feelings of guilt or shame. If people feel the need to talk about the event, it's better to do this in personal conversations.

- whenever possible, try as much as you can to proceed to a legal follow-up on any complaints about police violence or mistreatments at the police station.

- contact the Support & Recovery team.

- We react to (police) violence, repression or other high-stress events. It's not only normal, but also a fact. Don't contribute to macho group cultures where dealing with these reactions seems to be a taboo. It's not beneficial for anyone: not on a personal level, not for the people around us, not for the political movement in general. Care for ourselves and each other should be taken seriously.

PREVENTION IS BETTER

- use the tips as described at 'important for recovery' not only during crises, but also in your normal daily life. If your basis is stable, you'll get less out of balance and the impact of events will be smaller.
- be well prepared when participating in an action. Use buddy systems and affinity groups and take the time to discuss each others boundaries before going to an action.
- take conscious decisions before or during actions. Make sure you are well informed and keep your boundaries at that very moment in mind.
- it's a good habit to not only use a legal team for actions, but also a Support & Recovery team. Contact them in time. The Support & Recovery team can also facilitate trainings, such as an Interrogation Training, a workshop in Mental Resistance during Actions or a workshop on Reactions after High-stress Events.



SUPPORT & RECOVERY TEAM

sr-team@xs4all.nl

<https://supportrecoveryteam.wordpress.com> (NL)

<https://activist-trauma.net> (ENG)

RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

How to deal with psychological and emotional reactions after (police) violence, repression or other high-stress experiences

One of the most amazing things of activists is that we often expose ourselves deliberately to violence if we think it's necessary. What is also amazing, is how little we know about the psychological effects of violence. We should be prepared and support each other when dealing with mental and emotional consequences of high-stress experiences.



THREE REACTIONS...

...that could occur after direct or indirect stressful experiences. You could notice all of them, a few or just one. Your balance might be disrupted by personal experiences, witnessing other people's extreme experiences, by exposure through media or conversations or by a feeling of powerlessness when it happens to others.

1. Re-experiencing

- re-occurring images and memories, when you're awake or during sleep as nightmares
- the feeling that you cannot let go of the experience
- flashbacks: the feeling of re-living the situation

2. Avoidance or suppression

- withdrawing or isolating yourself, letting go of social activities
- avoiding people, places or things that could recall memories
- loss of memory
- feeling a strong resistance or not being able to talk about it
- problematic, frequent or ongoing use of drugs or alcohol
- overloading yourself with tasks or work so that you don't have to think about it

3. Amplified emotions

- problems with sleep or concentration
- agitation, easily being startled, fears or panic attacks
- irritation, anger, emotional outbursts, feelings of shame or guilt
- depression, suicidal thoughts, re-appearance of earlier trauma's
- feeling cynical, suspicious, pessimistic or powerless
- problems with functioning in daily life or taking ordinary decisions

These are all **normal reactions** to extreme experiences. Many people have gone through this and have recovered. People will react in different ways, not only by the nature of reactions, but also in intensity. Sometimes you may notice these reactions right after the events, sometimes it might take a while before they appear.

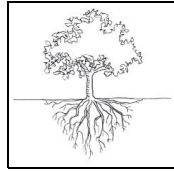
These reactions are not only normal, but they also have a **healthy function**: these are all mechanisms of the mind to process the experience or protect you against harmful stimulus.

For about 70% of all people these reactions will fade away after four to six weeks. Be patient and allow yourself the time for recovery!

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR RECOVERY....

IMPORTANT TIPS FOR RECOVERY

Whether these reactions are intense or not, you've gone through an extreme experience. You'll help yourself, now and in the future, by taking your recovery seriously. It's important that we take good care of ourselves and each other: for ourselves, the people around us and the groups that we are part of. Check the tips below to see which ones would suit you. You can rely on things that you already know as beneficial, but you can also experiment with things you usually would do less or not at all.



Stabilize the basics

- get yourself medical care if you need it
- find a safe place with people you trust for the coming days
- make sure you get enough sleep and healthy food, get physical exercise
- routine activities and a daily rhythm are really beneficial now!

Make use of the restorative power of nature

- get yourself in touch with nature, for example by going for a walk, working in a garden or spending time with animals/pets
- camomille and passion flower tea are helpful when you experience agitation or sleeping problems

Take some time for yourself

- protect yourself from overstimulation and get some quietness if you need it
- be patient, mild and kind with yourself

Take some time for each other

- find the company of people you trust and who energize you positively
- use the buddy system or affinity groups (even after the events) and regularly check in with each other
- take the time to talk with each other, but also to do fun stuff: give massages, celebrate what has been accomplished, play games, throw a party!

Be creative when processing the experience

- it helps to write down what you've experienced and how you're doing, but you could also process it by drawing, painting, writing poetry, dancing, sculpting...
- making music (or listening to music) is really beneficial

Put your brains to work

- provide yourself with meaningful (and attainable) tasks: the best way to get back in control is to use your problemsolving skills
- start a study, do some course or find another way to learn something new

Remember the good reasons you have to do all this

- reflect on your inner motivation and why it is so important for you to engage in social action
- try mindfulness or meditation exercises
- get hope and trust through a form of spirituality that suits you

Support yourself

- remember: your reactions are normal and there is support available. It's a difficult phase but you will get through. Be patient with yourself: just like physical wounds, mental wounds need time to heal.
- you might feel bad because you think that other people deal with this in a better way. We all have different reactions and there is no 'better way'. It is not a sign of weakness to feel pain when you have been the victim of violence, in any form.
- perhaps you feel guilty about what happened. Remember: it is not your fault, the ones to blame are the aggressors!
- If you think 'I don't have the right to feel bad because what happened to person X was much worse', be aware that you have all the right to feel how you feel. It doesn't help to compare violence in intensity.
- avoidance and denial are often harmful on the long run. Although drugs, alcohol, medication or overloading yourself with work seems to help for now, it's not beneficial on the long term.
- family and friends often do not know how to support you. Tell them what you need and what you don't need.
- Be careful when looking at footage of the events in the media. This might increase strong reactions.

How to support others

- don't wait for someone to ask for help. Just be there for this person, even if people are isolating themselves. But be there without forcing or patronizing.
- do not force someone to talk about the experience if this person is not willing to or not capable of talking about it.
- a lack of support can worsen the situation: this is called a secondary trauma and needs to be taken very seriously. It's all about broken expectations: we know that we can expect violence from the aggressors, but if you have the feeling that your friends don't support you, it might feel as though the whole world falls apart.
- irrational behaviour, ingratitude, distancing and emotional outbursts are all possible reactions. Don't take it personally and keep supporting.
- it really doesn't help if you tell someone that 'they should get over it'. It will only create more distance.
- important: caring and supporting could be exhausting, for you as well. Make sure to take care of yourself and do things that make you happy. Finding support for yourself will help you when supporting others.



What if it doesn't pass?

For most people these reactions will slowly but surely fade away during the first four to six weeks. If it doesn't seem to pass, for example because reactions stay the same or even get worse - or if you have such strong reactions during the first weeks that functioning in daily life is impossible - you should take it seriously and consider to seek professional help. Find info on PTSD and contact a general practitioner. PTSD can really be treated in a good way, but it's important to seek help in time.