

We found out that trauma support is very narrowly focused and naturally ended up also doing also other mental health work. It is difficult to draw the line and we recognise the need for broader self-organised mental health support in our movements, but at the same time due to limited resources we could only focus mainly on trauma. It also became clear that trauma work in itself during big mobilisations can't be reduced to police brutality, because the repressive environment triggers all kinds of old trauma like childhood sexual abuse, rape and other previous experiences of brutality. It is important when doing emotional first aid to keep in mind that the person you are talking to might be carrying all kinds of old trauma with them. Also,

different people need different things, so it is important to be prepared to be able to adapt to people's specific needs and ways of coping.

There is a definite need for general welfare work - cups of tea, massages, a quiet space and blankets can make an enormous difference, and also in terms of preventing burn out. The impact of lack of sleep for example turned out to be widely underestimated.

It felt useful to blur general welfare and trauma support, especially since a lot of people feel uneasy about going to some kind of "trauma tent" (it would, by the way, be interesting to look at what different reasons stop people from coming). It is a longer discussion how to make trauma support "mentally" accessible for as many people as possible. Co-operation with prisoner support and legal teams, co-operation with general welfare services, co-operation with medics, there are a lot of links where people can step in. In the end it is important to raise awareness about the topic and to make an effort to destigmatise it by integrating and normalising it, and making support easy to approach.



We feel we succeeded in putting the topic on the agenda. Hopefully it will become an intrinsic aspect of activist work, similar to legal and medical support. However it may take a long time to change the culture in our movements to a really supportive one, where we are not ashamed of what we feel and can be sure to be respected and supported in what we are going through. We hope this is a first step and one day it will be as normal to seek trauma support as going to the medics and that one day the stigma will be overcome - hopefully not only in terms of traumatic stress, but also in wider mental health.

*A more extensive account of lessons learnt is available on email request

It is not quite clear yet in which ways this work will be continued. The Trauma working group was a group that was set up for the G8 and dissolved afterwards. However a few of us intend to continue this work, at least with work on the webpage and providing email/phone/personal support and information and maybe getting involved in other actions and mobilisations. If you

are interested in this work, please get in touch.

Support Database on our homepage:

If you can offer support in any way (counselling, healing, herbal remedies...), sign up at the Support Database on the homepage.

Reach out for help:

Don't hesitate to contact us if you think it might be helpful for you, or just get in touch with somebody from the database.

Other useful websites:

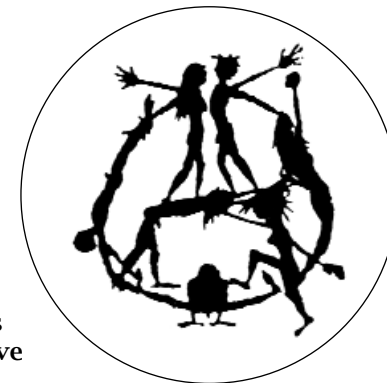
Healing activist trauma in the States:
<<http://healingtrauma.pscap.org/>>

email: activist_trauma@riseup.net

www.activist-trauma.net

ACTIVIST TRAUMA SUPPORT AT THE G8 2005 IN GLENEAGLES

If we want to be effective as a movement, we need to be able to support each other in the face of repression. We need to be conscious that what we are doing might be harmful to ourselves, and could even be life threatening. This is not to scare people off: on the contrary. But, we need to face reality, deal with our fears and sort out our support if we don't want to give their repression the means to be effective.



Mutual support in the face of repression

While "post traumatic stress" is starting to be taken seriously in mainstream society (firefighters, ambulance crews, even the police now do debriefings after traumatic experiences, treatment is finally available on the NHS...), it is surprising that we, as activists, still think we can live through situations of police brutality, fear and powerlessness without showing any emotional response. And, as a matter of fact we don't.

Reactions vary; everybody has their own ways of dealing with it. Degrees of reaction differ as well, up to the point where people drop out, disappear, stop being active, feel excluded because they feel scared or because they are suffering from post traumatic stress "disorder"* (PTSD). Inside our movement a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of these processes can be lacking. Even after terrible incidents like the Diaz school in Genoa, not enough emotional support was set up for the victims. In the long-term many of them suffered more from the emotional consequences than from the physical injuries. It is crucial to understand that emotional wounds often continue to hurt and debilitate long after the physical wounds have healed, and that it is normal that people who did not get physically hurt can suffer psychologically from their experiences.

It makes things much worse not to feel supported. If the police treat us badly we are usually not surprised, but what can really be devastating is a lack of support from our mates afterwards. To feel let down can cause what is called secondary traumatising and can be worse than the initial experience because it really shatters your fundamental assumptions. There is no need to be an "expert" in the healing of trauma, but there is a need for understanding and support.

It is not only police violence that causes trauma - statistics say 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men have been sexually abused at some time, thousands are smashed by cars. Basically any situation where the natural reaction of fight or flight is blocked can cause trauma. It is important to remember that a lot of us have been going through some of that and still carry old traumas around while being exposed to new ones...

The police and prison "services" specialise in deliberately creating traumatising conditions, especially aimed at breaking resistance. Beatings, arrests, isolation custody, violation of rights, threats, lies... Their attempt is focused on creating fear, on getting inside our heads and stopping us from taking action again. We feel that inside our movement this "internal censorship" has really not been addressed and talked about.

What stops us from getting where we want to get? Sometimes real obstacles - and lots of times, our fear. Their strategy is a psychological one - they beat one of us up and a hundred get scared and feel blocked. And maybe the one who got beaten up never goes back on the streets. This is how repression works. And this is why we need to start talking about what we are going to do about it.

The powers of repression are in their hands - the more effective we are in our struggle, the harder the repression - but it is in our hands how we respond to it. What we are going to do with our fear, what we are going to do about our pain, how do we support each other through all this and how do we show our solidarity.

Trauma work is part of resistance

Activist-Trauma Support was started in 2005 in order to provide support especially during and after the G8 in Scotland. Previous experiences have shown that while self-organised medical support for victims of police violence was quite well organised, there was a serious lack of assistance on a psychological level.

Working during the G8

For some, the idea for ATS was born from experiences from the Aubonne Bridge Action against the G8 in Evian 2003 (www.aubonnebridge.net). In Aubonne one person was seriously physically injured - and got lots of support. However several others suffered from various degrees of psychological trauma but did not get the support they needed or deserved. This was when we realized the pressing need for organised awareness raising, information and support.

In preparation for Gleneagles a 6-day training was organised with a professional trainer from a charity focused on trauma care called ASSIST (www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk). Most of these participants, plus some new people afterwards, formed the Activist Trauma Support for the G8 in Scotland. As far as we know it was the first time active trauma support has been taken on board for a big mobilisation. It was new ground to step on since no experience could be called upon from previous times and we spent a lot of time in advance trying to figure out what would be needed and useful.

And how do we, as activists, start to model better ways of being, start to create a world where we can be strong but also vulnerable, where acknowledging our need for support is respected rather than pathologised, where fighters also take care of themselves and of each other.

*the term “**disorder**” is controversial. Reactions to traumatic experiences are not a disorder, but normal. We use it here to differentiate between post- traumatic stress reactions that heal in 4-6 weeks (PTS) and the condition where symptoms persist after that period (PTSD).

www.activist-trauma.net

In the end the group which was offering emotional first aid was split between the campsite in Stirling, where a big recovery dome was set up, and Edinburgh in the Forest Café, on the ground floor of the Indymedia Centre, where the missing persons helpline and prisoner/friends support were also organised from. Both groups ran a 24hr phone helpline.

The recovery dome saw a steady flow of people coming to find somebody to talk about what they were going through, to get a massage (which also often ended up fulfilling the same purpose), to find a quiet place to cry, to retreat or to just calm down with a cup of tea and a blanket. Some people came once, some several times.

It seemed that our presence in itself was known by quite a lot of the people there and it gave them some level of comfort even if they did not use the facilities - rather like the assurance when you know there is a medical first aid tent. Situated in a quiet corner of the eco-village, the recovery dome made up part of a healing area that contributed a bit of space and calm on the edge of some very frenetic activity.

At the office in Edinburgh, phone support and personal support took place, but turned out to be much less needed than at the campsite. So we started focussing on avoidance of trauma - doing prisoner support (sending cards, money, organising visits) and helping their friends out (making phones available to call families, lawyers, police stations, embassies...). This was not originally intended to be part of our work but turned out to be very useful. We also think it proved effective in blurring the distinction between “trauma support” (which sounds quite dramatic and off-putting), prisoner support and “general welfare”. We want to normalise and destigmatise trauma, but we recognise there is a long way to go.

We also realised that the first thing people need after distressing experiences is to see their friends, and a lot of the times in such situations it can be hard to find them, which can be very upsetting in itself. That is why we had also set up a missing persons helpline, which was run in close connection to the legal team. This also served to deblock their phonenumber from people calling to find out about their mates.

Furthermore we organised a secret “safe space” some miles away from any action for people who really needed to get out of the area. It fortunately proved not to be necessary this time (at least we hope this is true).

In terms of education we had set up www.activist-trauma.net, printed and distributed flyers about what we offered and what to do after instances of brutality, as well as a 6-page briefing about PTS“D”. Fliers also gave information and advice to friends and family of people in distress, on ways to offer support, and help prevent PTS“D” from developing. We also did a few workshops, but should have done more and advertised them better.

The long-term support on phone, email and in person after the G8 was less than expected, (not sure if it was not needed or if people felt reluctant to use it or if we did not do sufficient outreach), but the hits on our webpage after the G8 were really high. We have started setting up a public contact base for support, accessible through the webpage, where people who need help can find people who offer to help in different ways.

Experiences, lessons learnt and conclusions

After a month we had an internal weekend with the aims of debriefing and looking into group dynamics, and then evaluating our work in order to draw lessons for other people who might want to do this work.*

The general consensus was that all of us enjoyed doing the work: it felt useful, appreciated and it is rewarding to feel that somebody actually feels better after talking to you.

Internal group dynamics are often complicated and this is especially true if people have been traumatised in the past, as all of the people in the working group had in some way or other. Summits are stressful situations at the best of times, they “trigger” people’s memories and remind them of previous traumatic situations. Additional factors were that a lot of the people did not really know each other beforehand and had very different personal and professional backgrounds and attitudes.

We concluded it would be better for a future trauma support group to really try and get to know each other beforehand and put effort into trust building and group bonding, since we need to be able to draw strength from the group rather than having to deal with internal conflict. It might have been a good idea to have an external supervisor on site who was independent of the group and could provide support for the supporters and group facilitation if necessary.

From the beginning we had made it clear amongst ourselves that we were offering emotional first aid and not therapy or deep counselling, since a campsite with police at the gate is not the right space for that, and therapy is a longer term project anyway. It turned out that it is not so easy to draw the line and opinions differ with different theoretical orientations. For any future work we think it would be important to have an in-depth exploration of this topic beforehand and to agree some ground rules.