

Safeguarding Your Wellbeing

Context: These notes should be read in the context of an evening of support held following the Hamas raids into Israel on 7 October 2023

Understanding Trauma

What is trauma?

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.

What is Secondary Traumatic Stress Syndrome?

Secondary Traumatic Stress Syndrome is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another. This can include painful news articles, videos or messages from family and friends.

What are the signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress Syndrome?

Signs of secondary trauma syndrome can include fatigue or illness, cynicism, irritability, reduced productivity, feelings of hopelessness, anger, despair, sadness, feelings of re-experiencing of the event, nightmares, anxiety, avoidance of people or activities, or persistent anger and sadness (Siegfried, 2008 & Conrad).

Common symptoms that we may be experiencing

In those first few days after the news broke people were saying things like they couldn't eat, they couldn't sleep, they felt that they couldn't function, they had racing thoughts, their hearts were beating fast. They also experienced a lowered level of concentration, feelings of general apathy and adopting rigid thinking patterns.

Experiencing hyper arousal

This is a sense of feeling out of control and totally overwhelmed which can impact our level of tolerance for behaviour that we would normally not find upsetting. This is really important to notice within relationships and might be something useful to explain to children in particular so that they don't get confused as to why they are getting in trouble for things that usually are not considered mischievous.

It's ok to react differently

It might feel confusing or scary when people close to us have very different reactions to us. Some people want to daven, others just want to cry. Some people want to dance and others want to sing. Some want to celebrate life and others want to just mourn the loss. And some people want to do all or none of the above. It's ok to react differently. We can do this in a respectful way by knowing what we need without judging what others need or want.

Tune in to what works for you

It might feel lonely if your reaction is different to those around you so it is really helpful to remember that having different trauma reactions is very normal. Tuning in to what you want and what will be helpful to you can be really useful to ensure you can look after yourself in the most effective way.

Safeguarding Your Wellbeing

Coping With Trauma

Check in with yourself and ask yourself these questions

How am I feeling today?

What do I need in order to feel better?

How do I ask for this? This is possibly the most important question to ask yourself. It can be hard to admit that we need support, but recognising that you are struggling on your own is the first stage of seeking help.

Dealing with news coverage

However tempting it might be, ask yourself what you gain from constantly checking the news. You might think it helps you to feel in control but in truth it adds to the anxiety you might be holding. Put boundaries in place that you can stick to. Limit the social media platforms you use and the time you dedicate to them. News travels fast so you will never really be uninformed for too long

Avoid traumatic images

The visual side of any coverage is long lasting. Question whether you need to see the live images and whether you need to reinforce seeing the same images. Is it possible that sometimes just hearing is enough?

Coping with feelings of guilt

Guilt is a very typical emotion. We feel privileged to not be caught up in the conflict physically, but the emotional rollercoaster can leave us feeling guilty to be alive. Change your mindset to being grateful to be alive. This might sound selfish, but it is necessary to protect and strengthen yourself.

Protecting our sense of self

We might consider ourselves to have a strong sense of self, and that nothing is going to damage it. Sadly, war and, in particular, the brutalities of war can weaken our sense of self and leave us very vulnerable and exposed. Limit what you see. Your emotional wellbeing is far more important and you should not feel guilty if you decide to distract yourself with something that takes you away from the current situation in Israel.

Creating balance in our lives

Maintaining your routine is vital at this time. Keep celebrating the good things. These can still be enjoyed despite your internal anxiety. This will help you maintain a balance to prevent you sinking into a lower mood. It will also restore your hormone levels to levels that do not become overwhelming. Doing activities that you enjoy, for example, listening to music, painting, exercising and dancing, are a way of distraction which will help you stay balanced.

Helping others

Volunteering your time is a good practical way to feel you are contributing in some way. Reaching out and helping others just by talking can be a welcome distraction which will help you and the other person to express distress and comfort one another.

Safeguarding Your Wellbeing

Coping With Trauma (continued)

It's always good to talk

Talking helps us to put things into perspective. It helps to make sense of everything and the more we repeat the words, the more our brain will process and help us to manage our thoughts more successfully. This will act as a restorative way of helping to bring ourselves back to a more positive and healthy level of wellbeing.

Distraction techniques

Mindfulness can help as can taking time out to meditate. Find a quiet space with limited distractions and focus on a part of your body that has gone into overdrive. Your breathing would be the first area to pay attention to. Is it normal for you, or is your heart racing? Remember that your breathing is connected to your thought process and, depending on whether you are traumatised by what you have seen or heard, will have an effect on your physical and emotional responses.

Dealing with panic attacks

Panic attacks come on without warning and are normally associated with chest pain or breathing problems. If you feel that you are experiencing regular panic attacks, becoming more anxious, having nightmares or flashbacks then it is important to discuss this with a professional.

Breathing techniques

You might be overthinking an event and being flooded with irrational thoughts. The first thing you need to do is to regulate your breathing. Take a deep breath in through your nose. Hold and then exhale slowly through your mouth. Repeat this process until you feel your body relax and return to its normal rhythm.

Taking care of ourselves

It is not uncommon to forget to eat when you are anxious. Always be mindful of when you last ate something. If you are having trouble sleeping then write your thoughts down on paper. The mere act of depositing your thoughts on paper, frees your mind to allow you to sleep.

To discuss your feelings or for more information please contact JCounselling:

Tel: 020 8203 6631

Email: info@jcounselling.org.uk

Website: www.jcounselling.org.uk