



# Out of Action

Emotional First Aid

**... on traumatising effects  
of police (and other) violence and  
how we move beyond it**

A small companion for political activists  
with a special focus on dealing with challenging experiences  
before, during and after actions.

## What is it all about?

Those who are politically active can get into situations where they themselves or friends and loved ones are exposed to repressive violence. Experiencing or instance direct violence at the hands of the police at protests, physical confrontations with neo-Nazis, or persecution by secret services can cause anxiety, loss of perspective, stress and inner turmoil. The impact of attacks like these can affect us emotionally long after visible physical injuries have healed.

Not every experience of violence necessarily causes long term stress or even trauma. A variety of factors come together in the development of long term effects. Everyone deals with the experience of violence and repression in their own individual way – People's reactions and boundaries are as diverse as their personalities. We need to respect those individual ways of processing events, support the person and centre their individual needs.

If this doesn't happen, for instance if talking about fear is taboo, people who are having a hard time dealing with their experience often withdraw from their political and social circles.

Part of the long term aim of violence and repression is to frighten people and make them feel helpless in confrontation with the power of the state. Learning to deal with fear, anxiety, stress, and other negative emotions in healthy ways needs to be an integral part of our individual and political radical identity.

In theory any challenging situation that leaves a person feeling helpless can cause trauma. Lack of support from friends and comrades can aggravate the negative reaction. Lacking support can even have a more devastating impact on the person than the original challenging experience.

Consequences of repression, including emotional ones, are not the personal or private issue of one person. They concern all of us and we need to stand together in solidarity and support each other to move beyond them.

## **Possible Reactions to Challenging Situations**

### **Re-living the experience**

Not being able to stop thinking about the experience, intrusive imagery and thoughts, flashbacks (feeling like you are literally going through the same experience again), nightmares.

### **Avoidance**

Increased alcohol/drug consumption, withdrawing and isolating from friends and family, avoiding social occasions, memory loss, avoiding everything that might remind one of the experience, distancing oneself from what happened, changes in eating, sleeping and sexual habits.

### **Irritability**

Insomnia, restlessness, mood swings, lashing out in anger, trouble concentrating, jumpiness, irritability, uncontrolled crying, stomach aches, indigestion, muscle tension, anxiety, hypervigilance.

## **Other Possible Reactions**

- Panic attacks, feelings of guilt and shame, blaming oneself.
- Not being able to find any joy in life, feelings of loneliness and abandonment, feeling numb or „switched off,“ trouble making decisions.
- Questioning political engagement and interpersonal experiences.
- Feeling like life has become meaningless.
- Fresh memories of previous traumatic experiences, believing you will feel this way forever, not being able to make plans for the future.

Sometimes reactions are delayed and can surface weeks, sometimes even years after the event. We can learn how to support ourselves and each other in processing challenging experiences. One of the aims is to integrate the experience into one's life – and accept that it may change the person and cannot be undone. Every person has their unique way of dealing with and processing challenging experiences.

## What you can do as a group

- BEFORE an action talk about how you are doing and where your limits are. Come to an understanding who will support you in unforeseen circumstances, including who will come with you if you have to walk away from the situation. Organise in affinity groups and watch out for each other.
- Find some time after an action to talk about how things went. Make space for everyone who participated and wants to share, to talk about their experience, where they were, what happened, what they saw/hear, what they think about it and how they feel about it. This way the story becomes more complete and better to understand.
- Not only people with physical injuries need support, supporters as well need to be mindful of their needs and limits and sometimes need support.

## How to support your friend

- Don't wait until someone reaches out for help, try to be proactive about being there for your friends. The days following a stressful situation are an opportunity to talk and listen, later a lot of people shut down. Traumatized people tend to isolate themselves.
- Maybe you are unsure what you can do to be supportive. To get a better understanding why your friend may react a certain way, read up on the topic of trauma. Just being around them and behaving as usual, without pitying or pushing your friend can be very helpful. Try to be accepting of their reactions. It's important that your friend can feel safe and relaxed around you.
- Don't forget that people can appear to be doing alright for a while after the event, and the onset of traumatic reactions can be delayed.

- Try to be a good listener. We often tend to give advice instead of focusing our attention on listening.
- Talking about what happened helps to process it. Encourage your friend gently and without pushing them to tell you about what happened chronologically: Feelings, thoughts, sensory perceptions...
- Being pressured or pushed often causes people to withdraw and distance themselves
- While processing traumatic events, taking care of every day tasks such as cooking, cleaning, shopping can become overwhelming. Helping out with running errands and general maintenance can be very supportive, but watch out to not take over and limit your friend's agency.
- Try not to take it personally if your friend is irritable or distanced and aloof, and don't withdraw your support because of it. These are common reactions in the aftermath of stressful events.

- Try to be patient. The only thing you achieve by telling someone: "You should be getting over it by now, you need to get a grip!" more often than not is to alienate them.
- This can be a challenging time for you as well. Make sure to take care of and be good to yourself. Remember to open up to your friends and let them know how you are doing.

## **What you can do for yourself**

- Remind yourself that your reactions are normal and it's ok to reach out for support. Take your time, be patient with yourself and try not to judge yourself for feeling the way you do. Emotional wounds take time and rest to heal, just like physical wounds. This is a difficult time but it will pass.
- After a challenging experience: Try to get to a space where you can feel safe and comfortable. Try to relax and allow others to take care of you.

- Physical exercise helps your body to get rid of stress. Walking, running, dancing can be more relaxing than sitting down.
- Try not to isolate yourself. Reach out to friends you trust for support.
- A very common reaction is to feel hurt if others seem to have a much easier time dealing with what happened while you are struggling. Keep in mind that everyone reacts differently.
- How strongly you react can be connected to previous traumata. It is not a sign of weakness to experience pain after an injury.
- Blaming yourself for what happened is a common reaction to trauma. Remind yourself that it is not your fault that you were attacked. The perpetrators are the ones to blame.

- Family and friends may not know how to support you. If their behaviour is not helpful, speak to them and ask for what you need.
- Tea, e.g. Valerian, can be soothing, just like a massage or a hot bath. Try to figure out what works for you. Alcohol and drugs can affect your recovery negatively in the long run.
- To get a better understanding what is happening with you, read up on trauma.



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If there is no local OoA group, please get into contact with a group nearby via email.

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