

# DEALING WITH STRESS, TRAUMA AND DEATH

⊕ A GUIDE FOR CARE COMPANIES DURING COVID-19

**This paper aims to:**

- **Outline what trauma is**
- **Explain normal reactions to trauma**
- **Give top tips of what to do and what not to do**
- **Suggest a daily decompression activity**
- **Includes sections specifically for leaders and sections for staff and their families**



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FOR THE CARE LEADER >

## INTRODUCTION

A key aim of care leaders should be to try and support staff by decompressing the build-up of stress and trauma as much as possible, both in themselves and for their staff. In this unprecedented time this can be difficult, as whilst we are in the midst of the fight against COVID-19 people may be restricted in getting out of the environment to recover and decompress like other services would, such as the military.

There is also trauma attached when leaving the workplace and re-entering the home environment due to risk of contamination, which could put family members at risk. Your workers will be asked to deal with situations that they didn't sign up for and haven't been trained for. The term 'moral injury' is being applied to this repeating scenario in all healthcare professions currently fighting COVID-19. This is defined as the psychological distress that results from actions, or the lack of them, which violate someone's moral or ethical code. It can lead people to think bad things about themselves or their employers. For example, having to tell a family that "We did our best with the staff and resources available but it wasn't enough" – this is a seed of a moral injury.

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## WELLBEING POLICY

With the current situation, it is critical that mechanisms for reducing stress and pressure are built into your 'Wellbeing Policy' and that action and strategies are developed as the norm and deployed daily as routine behaviour. The consequence of not implementing these could result in heightened stress in staff with a potential impact of poor performance and decreased motivation. This could cause an increased risk to staff and those you care for.

## THE AIM OF THIS PAPER

In the aftermath of a traumatic event or ongoing stressful scenarios, you could be faced with a number of differing reactions. The aims in this paper are to outline ideas for coping strategies and support resources. However, it should be noted that the information presented may not be sufficient and additional support maybe required by qualified professionals.

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## INTRODUCTION

As you read this you will see that the recurring theme is that **"YOU ARE NOT ALONE"**.

Assistance is readily available and can be used and accessed without critique or stigma.

Remember that the feelings that you may be experiencing are perfectly normal, it is the nature of the stressful incident and what is going on currently with COVID-19 that is abnormal.



## THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA

Many of you will be used to death and traumatic incidents to a certain level, however we are now in an unprecedented scenario with COVID-19 and you may be experiencing an increase of incidents.

A traumatic incident is any event that can be considered to be outside of an individual's usual experience and causes physical, emotional or psychological harm.

We all respond in different ways to any event, but this document highlights the usual responses of individuals and may offer some help in relieving the anxiety such incidents cause, support in the healing process and give some assistance in identifying further sources of help.

The determining factor around the emotional responses for anyone involved in, or responding to, an incident can centre on challenges to core beliefs about ourselves or how we see the world. It is also dependant on how our inbuilt nervous system responds to trauma – our fight / flight / freeze reflex. It is important to remember that other factors in your life may contribute to your vulnerability to any incident and its impact upon you. Reactions to a critical incident are likely to be worse if:

- There has been a death.
- There is a feeling of wanting to have done more.
- There is little or no perceived support from colleagues, family or friends.
- There is additional risk and threat to you, clients or your family.

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## FEELINGS ASSOCIATED WITH TRAUMA

**Sadness** for deaths, injuries or losses of every kind; **Guilt** for not having done more; for having survived; **Anger** at what has happened, at whoever caused it; or let it happen; at the injustice of it all; at the lack of understanding of others; at the inefficiencies in the "system"; Why me? **Shame** for not having reacted as one would have wished; for having been seen as helpless, "emotional" or needing others; **Fear** of "breaking down" or "losing control"; of a similar event happening again; **Memories** of feelings of loss or of concern for other people in your life; of past, similar events; **Disappointment** which can alternate with **Hope**.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL REACTIONS

You may have some **physical reactions**, with or without the feelings described above.

Sometimes they may develop long after the event. Physical reactions include tiredness, sleeplessness, palpitations, nausea, headaches, neck and back aches, muscular tension, tightness in the chest and throat, which may lead to panic attacks, changes in eating habits and sexual interest, stress creating events in your life.

**Mental reactions** may be loss of concentration and/or motivation, poor memory, nightmares, flashbacks (feeling that it is happening all over again), hypervigilance (always on your guard), or being easily startled. Irritability, loss of sense of humour and impatience with self and others are extremely common and can put relationships with family and friends under strain.



Try to remember that they too may be suffering additional stress, may feel left out, or do not understand how best to support you. You may find yourself withdrawing from those closest to you, unable to express your feelings, rejecting what is offered. In the case of COVID-19 you may have been forced to withdraw physically from them to protect them and therefore cannot access any support they would have given.

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## STRATEGIES TO DECOMPRESS THE IMPACT OF THE TRAUMA

After the incident there are some strategies you can use to make things easier to bear post incident. Your mind's defence mechanism may not let you feel the full impact of an incident straight away, often you are in shock. Your feelings will slowly unfold as the days go by. You may feel numb if your feelings are blocked and the event may seem unreal, almost dreamlike, and you may even wonder if it ever happened at all.

Keeping yourself occupied with other things may help, your hobby, physical exercise, etc. However, when combined with the numbing effect, this can be overused and delay your recovery. Talking to colleagues, who were also involved, about the incident and how you feel is essential at this time. They are the only people who have been witness to the same situation and this will form an essential part of your recovery.

Returning to the scene of the event is one way of confronting the reality of it all. Dreaming about the event possibly repeatedly, is not uncommon. This is nature's way of helping you to collate and absorb the information.

Having the support of others can be invaluable. Don't say "no", if it is offered. It may come from others who have had a similar experience. It is important not to isolate yourself. If you are feeling this way, then it is safe to assume that others have done so too under similar circumstances.

There are times when you may need to be alone with your thoughts and feelings. Again, this is natural. Equally, you may need the company of your family and friends. Pain, unfortunately, will be a part of the healing process.

You should not give yourself a hard time over events that have already happened. Instead, try to re-orientate yourself and think about the event in a positive way. Review the whole event in its real place within your life (like a small pebble on a big beach). When recounting or mulling over stressful incidents, it is unhelpful to review or self-critique your actions in a negative light. Instead, think about the event in a beneficial way and concentrate on the positive aspects of the incident. To do this effectively takes some effort (you may not be used to doing this, but like physical exercise it gets easier with practise).

Remember, fortitude brings its own very positive rewards. Remember that with COVID-19 you have been part of something on a worldwide scale. Many people have fought the same battle and had the same terrible experience that you have had. Remember too that you have survived. This will be a time in history and you will live on to tell your part in it.

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## INTERVENTION TO SUPPORT TRAUMA DECOMPRESSION

**Stress Risk Assessment** – When and if the scenario or incident involves death or serious injury you should actively support your staff with some form of stress risk assessment. The aim of the risk assessment is to ascertain how much stress an individual has assimilated as a result of an incident. It's at this point and based on other observations that should determine if additional support is required for team members and even yourself. Notice the ones who seem to be coping OK, they may be avoiding dealing with their feelings and could get triggered at a much later time when all of this has died down. Allow individuals to behave and respond as individuals – never compare them in their grief reaction as no two people will have had the same experience.

**On-going Observations and Risk Assessment** – Intuition and observation of behaviour will be critical to offsetting risk and should allow you to see how you or staff are coping in order that you can help to get any assistance you might need or feel you is needed. Hopefully, you will gain reassurance about natural reactions to traumatic situations and have an opportunity to discuss coping strategies. Finally, build in check reviews daily within your team meetings to create a transparent and positive communication pathway and this will assist in pooling your experiences and resources.

**Confidentiality** - Everything that is said should be confidential. That said, if you become concerned about issues that affect safety, or the safety of your colleagues, reserve the right to take action and inform a line manager. However, in this event, You should give your assurance that you will always discuss the issue with the team member first.



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## POINTS TO COMMUNICATE WITH STAFF - DOS AND DON'TS OF DEALING WITH FEELINGS

**Don't** bottle up your feelings.

**Don't** avoid talking about what happened.

**Don't** expect the memories to go away immediately, they may be with you for quite some time.

**Don't** be too hard on yourself, give yourself a bit of 'slack' whilst you adjust to what has happened.

**Do** express your emotions - to someone.

**Do** accept opportunities to share your experience with others - they may have something to offer

**Do** make time to review the experience within yourself, but try to avoid isolating yourself.

**Do** take the time to be with your family and friends.

**Do** try and tell your family, close friends, colleagues and managers how you feel.

**Do** try to keep to your routines as much as possible.

**Do** drive with greater care, your concentration may be impaired.

**Do** be more careful - accidents are more likely to happen at this time.

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## WHEN TO LOOK FOR ADDITIONAL HELP

If you feel you are not able to handle intense feelings, or physical reactions continue.

If you feel numb and your feelings are detached.

If you have to keep highly active in order to cope.

If you continue to have nightmares, or are sleeping badly.

If you have no one, or a group with whom to share your feelings, and you feel the need to do so.

If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.

If you are having accidents, or your work performance is suffering.

If you are smoking or drinking to excess since the event.

If you are suffering from depression or exhaustion.

If you cannot control your memories of the event and they are affecting your sense of personal wellbeing.

**Remember** you are the same person that you were before the event and that talking about the event and your feelings can help.

**Remember** help is available.

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## POSITIVE COPING ACTIONS

Individuals who will have experienced unpleasant events need to take active steps to deal with their physical and emotional reactions. Often these steps involve making a series of thoughtful changes in lifestyle to reduce symptoms and improve the quality of life. Common lifestyle changes you may wish to consider include:

### Physical Self Care:

- Eat regularly and healthily eg, breakfast, lunch, dinner
- Exercise
- Get enough sleep
- Seek help if feeling unwell

### Emotional Self Care:

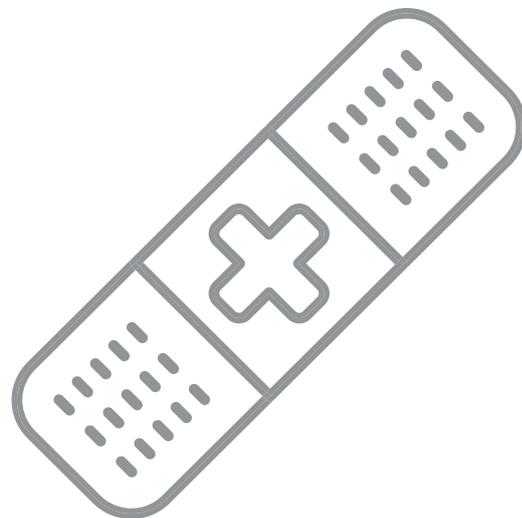
- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Find a way to increase your sense of self esteem
- Re-read favourite books
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places and seek them out
- Find things to make you laugh
- Relax

### Psychological Self Care:

- Make time for self-reflection
- Read literature that is unrelated to work
- Notice your inner experiences
- Listen to your thoughts, judgements, beliefs, attitudes and feelings
- Practice receiving help from others (counselling, help, advice, friendship)

### Spiritual Self Care:

- Make time for reflection
- Be open to inspiration
- Cherish optimism and hope



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FOR FAMILY, FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES >

## INFORMATION FOR OTHERS AND LOVED ONES

In the aftermath of an incident, you may become aware that the character or personality of a person close to you has changed. This is likely to be a temporary change and, with your help and support they will quickly resume their normal persona. To assist a person who has been exposed to traumatic events it may be useful to employ the following steps:

- Listen carefully.
  - Spend time with the traumatised person.
  - Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help, reassure them.
  - Help them with everyday routine tasks.
  - Allow them some private time.
  - Do not take their anger or other feelings personally.
  - Do not tell them that **you will get over it** or to **pull yourself together**; these statements do not console traumatised people. Instead tell them that you recognise such an event has occurred and that you want to understand and assist them.
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FOR THE CARE LEADER >

## SUMMARY OF KEY MESSAGES FOR CARE LEADERS

- Review your wellbeing policy and practices immediately.
- Healthcare staff are at increased risk of moral injury and mental health problems when dealing with challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Healthcare managers need to proactively take steps to protect the mental wellbeing of themselves and their staff.
- Managers must be frank about the situations staff are likely to face especially new hire staff who may not have any care experience.
- Staff can be supported by reinforcing teams and providing regular contact to discuss decisions and check on wellbeing.
- Once the crisis begins to recede, staff must be actively monitored, supported, and where necessary provided with evidence-based treatments.

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## END OF THE DAY ACTION FOR TEAMS

Try to build a routine at the end of shifts or during handover where you and your staff can go through a simple drill of open questions. This can be done in a group or peer to peer (buddies). It is critical that any heightened concerns should be raised, and closer support and mentoring put in place for staff who need it. Create a positive culture of transparency and the 'normal' is asking for help, getting support when it's needed and offering to help more.

This simple 3-stage open question quick drill can be extremely useful but it's critical that the process is an ask-style session with minimal telling, so individuals have ownership of answers and action. All participants need to give maximum empathy without any judging or comparison to others because everyone will suffer or cope in different ways.

## ACTIVITY

One person should lead the activity and it need not be the team leader all the time.

Ask the following to each individual in turn:

- **How are you feeling now and please describe it with 3 x feeling words?**  
(these can be positive or negative)
- **What you are going to do for yourself now and before your next shift?**
- **How can we support and help you more?**
- Finish with a group hug/virtual for support, empathy and compassion.

By making this activity the norm and part of every day routine it will encourage individuals to open up about their feelings, and they may share a struggle early enough that you can catch it and take action or intervention at an early stage.



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## SUMMARY

COVID-19 has hit the sector hard and people are being stretched physically and emotionally, especially when there are incidents of the virus infiltrating into a care organisation. The potential increase in deaths and additional risk to personal safety will be creating stress and trauma.

Due to the nature of care sector work it is very difficult to come out of the environment and decompress as effectively as would be desired and therefore the aims should be to support staff and be extra vigilant in recognising poor wellbeing and high stress. Be prepared to refer staff immediately who appear to be suffering badly from a traumatic event or series of incidents. It is critical that you reduce the build-up of trauma based stress as much as possible by propping up and supporting your staff during this crisis and then start to deal with potential Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in your staff.

## ABOUT

This guide was written by the team at Judgement Index, who work with care companies across the UK supporting the recruitment and retention of staff, developing culture and running leadership academies and workshops.

Rob is an experienced leadership consultant and performance coach and served 26 years in the British army. You can find more information at [www.judgementindex.co.uk](http://www.judgementindex.co.uk).

Special thanks to Sally Atkinson from Rutland Counselling for clinical guidance.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[www.rutlandcounselling.com/](http://www.rutlandcounselling.com/)

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/treatment/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/treatment/)

[www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/](http://www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/)

[www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk)

[www.thecareworkerscharity.org.uk](http://www.thecareworkerscharity.org.uk)

