

Emotional First Aid for Extreme Events

Extreme and difficult events leave predictable emotional, thinking style and physical reactions for those who survive these events. These are not the fault of the person experiencing, they are a biological reaction to deal with danger. It can be difficult to deal with these reactions whilst still in danger, and also sometimes for long periods of time afterwards.

These techniques are taken from widely practiced psychology therapies designed to help with these after effects.

These techniques are designed to help with calming emotions, and developing mental space to be able to better react to the world around in the present moment. Some of these techniques work best when out of the dangerous situation, however some people are in situations that continue to be dangerous to them despite their best efforts. Please use your judgement as to how and when you use these techniques. If you try out a technique and it makes you feel much worse, please don't use it again until you've had the chance to understand why it made you feel worse, the most direct way to do this is to speak to a psychologist if one is available.

The first techniques included here can be useful at any time when you are experience physical and emotional reactions that are intense and painful. The last two techniques are easiest when practised after having survived a dangerous situation, they are designed to help you work through some of the thought patterns that often develop when people have survived. People often have a tendency to feel guilt at having survived when others haven't, to blame themselves for what has happened to them in some way, and very often to feel that they should be able to heal themselves by using will power. None of these thoughts are fair to yourself.

It is not expected that anyone should have to get through the aftermath of extreme events on their own, and these techniques do not replace friends, family, spiritual and practical support. Psychological therapy to process and heal from extreme events is not usually possible while still experiencing extreme situations and trauma. Support for dealing with the intense symptoms of trauma is very necessary however.

These techniques are designed as emotional first aid for these situations, and to help with processing afterwards. They are not designed to replace psychological therapy, if it is available.

Please note that these techniques do not have a religious affiliation, and are deliberately designed to be religiously and politically neutral. The last technique, which is a meditation technique, is taken from Buddhist practice but does not have any religious content, affiliation, nor religious goals. You may also find that your spiritual affiliation and religion has other techniques that can greatly benefit your resilience and healing.

People who have survived extreme and prolonged severe events have said that some form of spirituality and also curiosity about the future were very useful to them in getting through the experience.

Common Reactions to Extreme Events

In the short term, extreme events often create symptoms such as: feeling of a likelihood of dying soon, feeling of no future, rage, despair, insomnia, nightmares, lack of appetite (or the reverse), feeling like things aren't real, feeling unable to move or speak, feeling unable to think clearly or at all, loss of memory and ongoing memory problems, severe fear, fear of others and for others you are close to, avoiding places or other things linked to the event, strong feelings of wanting revenge in some way, or not being able to feel emotions, constantly thinking about the event, re-experiencing the event, afraid or sad, uncontrollable

crying, and physical symptoms ranging from agitation and restlessness, to complete loss of energy, hyperventilation, chest pain, racing heart, stomach pain or upset, as well as physical numbness or strong changes in the way that you feel your body.

These symptoms often diminish over time, or change into other forms of trauma reactions which quite often last for longer. Many people find that their symptoms increase slightly once they are out of danger, this is not a sign that you are getting worse, it is a sign that you are safe enough for your mind to let you feel more. There is effective psychological treatment for these aftereffects when you can access it.

The techniques in this leaflet are designed to help calm the reactions and to make it less intense and more bearable. They can also help you to (try) to maintain a more balanced mind to help you think more clearly, so as to be able to deal with aspects of your life and any other extreme events as well as you are able to.

How to Use These Techniques

Please try to practice these techniques in as safe a place as possible, as often as you feel you need to. They are easiest if you try them out during calm moments, and practice them regularly, so that they become automatic and then you can use them when feeling overwhelmed. Using these techniques regularly will create a generally calmer mind over time.

You can either read through the instructions for each technique yourself and then remember them and work through the technique on your own, or it might be easier to ask someone to read out the instructions while you try them out for the first time.

During an extremely frightening experience or during a very strong emotional reaction it can be hard to remember to use these techniques. Some people find that leaving a note where they will see it, asking others around them to remind them to use these techniques, and find ways to remind themselves. Reminding yourself could be easier if you write a note on your hand or somewhere you will see it, set alarms on your phone (if possible), or wear some other clearly visible symbol that will remind you to try out these techniques when very upset or feeling overwhelmed.

Please note that healing is possible even after extreme and horrifying events, but it is not usually possible to fully heal if you are still in danger. Be gentle with yourself.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing is a style of breathing which (if done well) can slow down your heart rate and rate of breathing. It has been shown to lower your overall level of physiological arousal, and to calm your thinking, making it easier to think clearly in difficult situations.

This breathing technique is also a simple but effective way to improve your overall resiliency to stress. It is useful to learn and practice regularly, so as to be able to calm your reaction to stressful situations in a controlled and deliberate manner.

The basic technique is as follows;

Find a calm and quiet place to sit or stand without being interrupted. Place your hand flat over your lower abdomen, over your navel area.

Consciously take a deep breath in, slowly counting to 4 (or 6 if you can). While you do this, make sure that your hand (over your navel region) is being pushed outwards with the downward expansion of your diaphragm. Your chest area should also expand outwards. Be careful that your shoulders are not rising or falling while you breathe in or out.

Once you have finished breathing in slowly, then breathe out in the same slow, controlled manner, counting slowly to 4 (or 6), and making sure that the hand over your navel is drawn in towards your spine again by the movement of your diaphragm as you breath. Once you are more comfortable with this technique, you may wish to pause slightly between each breath in, and out, and count to 2 – 4.

NB. If you become dizzy make sure to stop the exercise, your breathing should return to normal quickly if you distract yourself. Dizziness could be a sign that you are hyperventilating, which is not possible to do if you are breathing using your diaphragm, please reread the instructions, or consult with a professional if you need further help.

Notice the speed of your heart rate and breathing. Has there been a change?

It's best if you practice this exercise regularly, for at least a minute, particularly before situations that are likely to be stressful, or when feeling overwhelmed.

Butterfly Hug Instructions

This technique is used to calm down strong emotions and physical symptoms that are linked to the body being too worked up. You can also teach it very easily to children and others.

It can be used whenever you are experiencing a strong emotion, a flashback, or the after-effects of a nightmare.

Ask the person to cross their arms across their chest, and lay their hands on the opposite shoulders.

Rapidly tap each hand in rapid alternation like the flapping of a butterfly's wings, for as long as it takes for the emotion to subside.



Grounding

It is very important to be able to be fully present so as to be able to think as clearly as possible and respond as needed to your current life and interactions with people. The tendency to make the world and emotions less real is a natural psychological protection mechanism that is very common for people who are or have experienced dangerous situations that they are unable to get away from. Becoming more aware of your environment can be painful if you are in an ongoing dangerous or upsetting experience.

Some types of dissociation are normal, for example when absorbed in an activity you don't notice other aspects of your surroundings (eg. driving home and not remembering the journey), but dissociation can be a problem when it occurs very frequently and out of context, or in association with traumatic experiences. There are several easy techniques you can use if you notice that you feel 'floaty', 'spacy', or as if things around you aren't quite real.

Other symptoms of dissociation are feeling emotionally or physically numb, feeling detached from yourself, a blurred sense of identity, and for more severe dissociation, memory loss for certain time periods, events, people, or personal information. These are signs you need emotional support and potentially could benefit from help from a psychologist.

Five Senses Grounding Exercise

This aims to engage all of your senses and orient you to your current surroundings and experience. Name five things you can see: take a close look at your surroundings, both those things in the foreground and the background.

Hear: Become aware of all of the noises that you can hear, both those close by and those in the distance. What do you notice?

Touch: Focus on the feeling on your skin- can you feel your clothes against your skin, the weight of a bag or anything you are carrying, what are your hands touching, feel the ground and inside of your shoes with your feet, and the temperature of the air as well as any breeze.

Smell: What can you smell?

Taste: Become aware of any taste in your mouth, have a drink of water, or slowly chew a piece of food and swallow, paying attention to it.

A shorter version of this is to rub the palms of your hands onto a flat surface or your knees, paying close attention to how they feel, then to do the same with the soles of your feet.

Body Scan Instructions

This technique comes from psychological therapies designed to help people recovering from the effects of trauma, particularly related to the physical effects of trauma, and the changes in how the body feels and functions.

A body scan literally means becoming aware of your body in minute detail. It can be very useful to do this after having survived an extreme event, as many people tend to tune out their bodily signals at least to some degree, and these signals are important in letting us know when we are tired, hungry, full, thirsty, or feeling emotions that are useful to us. It can be useful to purposefully check-in with your body in this way on a regular basis, particularly at times of stress.

The basic method is as follows;

Run your awareness through your body, and if you notice an area of pain or discomfort, focus on that area and breath into it for a moment or two. You may find that the discomfort shifts slightly.

Bring your awareness to your body. Start by taking a deep breath into your abdomen, and letting it go. Notice how you feel.

Next, start by focusing on your feet, and notice the feeling in your feet where they are touching the floor, the weight and pressure, and possibly heat. The feeling of contact with shoes, if you are wearing them. Next, notice the feeling in your legs, the feeling of your clothes pressing against your legs, how strong (or weak) your legs feel.

Notice your hips, and lower abdomen. Pay attention to how your legs connect to your hips, and your posture and how you are holding your lower back. Move your awareness up through your lower spine and into your ribcage, and then draw your awareness through your lower abdomen and up through your center, noticing any discomfort or tightness, and also your skin, where it touches your clothing.

Draw your attention through your chest, and back to your shoulder blades and the tops of your shoulders. Pay attention to how the muscles and bones feel, and the touch of clothing over them.

Run your awareness through your hands, up through your wrists, forearms, upper arms, and back to your shoulders, then draw your awareness up your spine through your neck to the base of your skull. Notice any tightness, and how you are holding your head balanced on your neck, take a moment to rebalance this if necessary.

Pay attention to your throat, and draw your awareness up through your neck and throat, to your jaw and face. Notice any tension that you are holding in your jaw and facial muscles. Finally, run your awareness through your ears, and the top of your head, paying attention to how your scalp feels, and the weight of your hair.

This is the basic process for a body scan, but feel free to adapt it to suit your individual way of doing things and the time you have available. Over time you will notice that gets easier and faster to reconnect with your body.

It's best if you practice this exercise regularly, for at least a minute, particularly before and after situations that are likely to be stressful, or when feeling overwhelmed but needing to function well in your life.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Cognitive Defusion Exercise

The common thinking reactions that are created by experiencing extreme and dangerous events can be intensely difficult to manage, and will also usually exacerbate the feelings and symptoms you are experiencing. It is very difficult to think clearly when experiencing strong emotions.

This technique is taken from the therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, it is designed to help you to detach from your thoughts, and observe them, without being drawn into struggling with them.

This is NOT designed to make painful thoughts go away, or to stop all thoughts. Please do not try to suppress or stop your thoughts in any way.

The technique usually makes thoughts easier and have less emotional effect or effect on reasoning.

It is normal to have constant mental activity, and there will usually be new thoughts as you let go of old thoughts.

It's important to remember that thoughts matter how intense or painful, in their essence are just mental events, created by our minds as a normal part of thinking.

We don't need to struggle with them, suppress them, or even be convinced that they are completely real. The aim here is not to get rid of all thoughts, but rather to detach from them, to be aware of them, and to let them flow while watching them.

Like many things, the intensity and duration of any thought depends on the amount of energy and struggle we devote to it.

Let's try out the exercise to see how this works in practice.

Find a comfortable moment and place, and briefly close your eyes.

Get in touch with your thoughts in the current moment, and watch and experience them briefly for a moment. Then imagine that you are sitting next to a stream, with leaves floating down the stream. Take a

moment to fully visualize the stream and the leaves, the sounds of your environment, the smell of the water, trees and earth, the sun on your back and the warm, supportive rock on which you are sitting.

After a moment, imagine yourself taking the next thought that you have, and placing it gently onto a leaf, releasing the leaf onto the water, and letting it float away. After a moment, imagine yourself taking the next thought, and place it onto a leaf and let it go. Try not to get distracted by watching the leaves as they float away, but rather draw your attention to the next thought as it appears, so that you can put it onto a leaf and then release it. Continue to do this for a while, quietly.

What do you notice?

Did your thoughts slow down, did they shift and change? In what ways?

Did you notice a reoccurring train of thought that you recognize as a habit? If so, what would you name that train of thought?

If you have trouble visualising a stream with leaves, you could try imagining putting the thoughts into balloons and letting them float away, or visualise them printed on a screen and scrolling upwards, getting smaller and smaller.

ACT Mindfulness: Emotional Defusion Technique

This technique is also taken from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Emotions after an extreme event can be overwhelming and difficult to think about, and they can decrease your current coping and badly affect your future decisions and actions. The aim of this exercise is to detach from your emotions, and observe them, make contact with them, without being drawn into struggling or trying to repress them.

This is NOT designed to make painful feelings go away, or to stop all feeling. Please do not try to suppress or stop your emotions in any way. Rather, this technique is designed to help you sit with your feelings, observe them, and not be overwhelmed, and not necessarily to have to act on them. Very often this experience helps the emotion change to something else, usually something easier to experience, and often helps more positive emotions, such as calm, hope, acceptance, love, and joy, to come back and be more present.

It is normal to have a constant flow of emotions, and also for some emotions to stick around longer than expected. Generally, people deal with positive emotions by trying to hold on to them, and painful emotions by trying to ignore, deny, or distract from them. Unfortunately, the more we struggle with a feeling, the more it can stick around. The aim of this exercise is not to try to change your emotional state, but rather to make contact with it, accept it, be as aware as possible of the emotions, accept that they are there for a reason, and allow them to be there as long as they need to be. Paradoxically, quite often people find that when they do this, their emotional state becomes more bearable, and their emotions start to shift and flow more.

Like many things, the intensity and duration of any emotion depends on the amount of energy and struggle we devote to it. It's important to remember that we don't need to struggle with emotions, suppress them, or even to act on them, we just need to notice them and let them pass in their own time.

Let's try out an emotional defusion exercise to see how this works in practice.

Sit quietly for a moment and run your awareness through your body. What do you notice that you are feeling, and where?

Take a moment to really tune into these feelings, almost to the point where you can see these in your body.

What do you see?

Where is it localized?

Is there more than one feeling?

What are the edges of the feeling like? (smooth, rough, hazy, polished?)

What is the feeling like – is it heavy, light, moving, still, is it all the same throughout, or made up of different parts?

If you could give it a name, what would you call it?

Now, take a moment to just sit with this feeling, and allow yourself to accept it. It may help to say something to yourself like,

‘Even though I don’t like this feeling, I accept that it is there for a reason, and I allow myself to sit with it.’

Take a few deep breaths into your stomach, and almost visualize yourself expanding around the feeling, making space for it, not trying to change it in any way, but finding yourself changing around it.

Do this a few times if you want to.

After having tried out this exercise, what did you notice?

How are you feeling? Be aware that the feelings as they are will continue to change, and dissipate and transform over time. If you find that you are feeling something too intense for the moment, try to sit with it, however you can also distract yourself out of it for periods of time if you need to by focusing on something else, or changing your location and activity.

The Imagined Future Self Exercise

This technique is a strength building exercise frequently used with people who have survived multiple and very difficult situations. It can be used while still in danger.

The exercise involves imagining your best, wisest self, immersing yourself in the experience of that imagined sense of self, and then making use of the wisdom that you can share with yourself. For some people this experience can be difficult or cause emotional pain, as one of the effects of extreme experiences is that people sometimes lose a sense of hope.

This technique is designed to create a sense of psychological future for you, and to uncover what advice might be helpful to help you survive, heal and get to that point in time in the future.

The steps are simple:

Imagine yourself in the future, living your life, having survived all that you have experienced.

Imagine yourself in 5 years, or 10 or 15 years’ time. After you have lived through, survived, successfully dealt with in some way the problems you are currently struggling with.

Imagine that you have achieved, succeeded and completed everything that you are struggling with now, and that you are proud of your achievements.

Fully immerse yourself in your ideal, imagined future self. You may even ask your future self - how did I do it? What got me through? What changes can I make right now? What do I need to do?

Try to actively embody the wiser energy, the strength and calm serenity you might feel in your future self, knowing that you are able to overcome and live through the experiences of what you are currently facing. Imagine what you would feel and how you would behave.

Then, think about what are the next steps to get to that future experience of self, and start to make plans, or goals, while holding onto the connection and knowledge that you are able to access your self in the future and the store of potential wisdom that it holds, at any time you need it.

Pay close attention to what is under your control, what you might need help with, and who you could ask for help with the various aspects of what you need to do.

Self-Compassion: the Empty Chair Exercise

This exercise comes from Gestalt psychology. It is designed to make painful emotions and thoughts conscious, develop a different perspective on them, not to be overwhelmed by them, and to help transform them. It is usually a technique that would be used when safe after having survived an extreme event, it is designed to help process the typical thoughts and difficult reactions that people often develop at this time.

It can bring up a painful emotions, so please only do this if you feel safe enough and ready to work through the feelings. It could help to have a supportive friend available to talk through what you experience, if you choose to.

Think of something that has recently caused you to feel despair or as if you are failing. This exercise will require you to take on three different perspectives and really embody these. You might choose to do this by organising three chairs to sit on when taking the different perspectives.

The first chair is the voice of despair.

The second chair will represent the emotionality or sensation of feeling despairing.

The last chair takes the perspective of a supportive friend or wise counsellor.

Your job is to play the role of each voice represented by the respective chairs.

First, sit from the perspective of despair or failure. Out loud, explain why you are despairing. If your despair or failure could speak, what would it say?

Notice the tone of voice you use, and the emotions this evokes, your physical posture after expressing this.

Next, move to a different chair, to represent the emotions of despairing. Express in words how it feels and your reaction to feeling the emotion of failure and despair.

Notice the tone of voice you use, and the emotions this evokes, your posture after expressing this.

Next, move to the chair that represents the friend or wise counsellor. This might be someone you already know, or someone you haven't yet met.

Drawing on your own compassion, respond from the wise counsellor's perspective to the voice and emotions of despair.

Speak to both, in turn, out loud.

What do you say? What is your perspective on their points of view? What advice are you giving them? Address both perspectives out loud. What do you say? What advice do you give? How do you relate to each perspective from a more detached point of view?

Notice the tone of voice you use, and the emotions this evokes, your posture after expressing this.

Now, take some time to reflect on what you have experienced.

What can you take forward from the perspectives you have experienced just now?

What can your sense of despair or failure, and your self-compassion teach you? How can you draw on your inner wise advisor in future when feeling overwhelmed?

Is there some way to remind yourself to remember that all emotions and perceptions are transient, no matter how intense they are in the moment?

Self Healing with Meditation (Tonglen)

This meditation practice is designed to help you with self healing and acceptance, as well as compassion for others. It can help strong emotions from past events to be released from your mind and body, which can greatly change how your emotions feel in the here and now, to help you move forward in a way that is best for yourself and others. It is not, in any way, meant to excuse or justify the behaviour or actions of others who may have caused harm.

This technique is easiest to use when out of danger, to work through the past, but it is also possible, although more difficult, to practice it while still in a dangerous situation.

It does not replace the need and human right to get yourself to safety and to take reasonable steps to protect your safety.

The exercise can be very challenging to begin with, so it might be best to target situations, groups of people, and situations that are less intense, and then gradually build up to those aspects of your experience that have been more intense.

As you work through this technique, many people will experience a sense of lightness and better understanding towards yourself, and also towards whatever or whomever you are concentrating on with this technique.

If you practice this exercise regularly, over time you will notice that the way you feel, or the situation or the relationship you are working on feels different. Your perspective will also be different, you may experience insights into past situations and yourself.

Take a moment to get in contact with a feeling of calm, take a moment to center your attention on your breathing, notice your in-breath, and your out-breath, and pay attention to these two processes for a moment, while you let other thoughts in your mind drop away.

Take a moment to get in touch with the parts of yourself which have suffered, which carry your hurt and past pain, your fear, anger, and difficult memories. Breath in the pain from these parts of yourself and imagine it entering your heart. It may help to visualize this suffering moving into your heart area like smoke, or a particular colour.

Then, imagine the wiser and calmer part of yourself, the strong side of yourself that has allowed you to survive these experiences. Breath out the calmness and strength of this part of yourself, allowing the emotions to turn towards joy, feeling these emotions of joy, wisdom and strength in your heart.

Repeat this exercise with each breath, switching your attention between the two aspects of yourself and emotional experience. It may help to imagine the stronger and compassionate part of yourself hugging the wounded and scared part of yourself, and comforting it.

Feel the emotions transforming in your heart with each breath.

You can also try out this exercise with the focus being on yourself as you were at a moment in your past that was difficult, or yourself in different relationship or roles. You can extend the practice to focus instead on an external person (living or passed on), an external conflict, or a group of people.

In this case, you breathe in the pain of that person, group or situation into your heart, and you then breathe out a sense of love, compassion and joy.

Over time, this can release and change the emotions and perceptions related to difficult aspects of experience.