

To meet people exposed to threats and serious abuse - to take care of yourself as a helper

Nora Sveaass and Helen J. Christie



Mental Health and Human Rights Info is a resource database providing free information about the consequences of human rights violations on mental health in contexts of disaster, conflict and war.

*[www.hhri.org](http://www.hhri.org)*

We share information in English and Spanish through:

- A database with more than 800 links
- A thematic page with selected topics
- A page for our Gender based violence manual (women, men, girls and boys)
- A page for you as a survivor





# About the group – a brief presentation

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Important  
point!

People have been  
exposed to gross  
human rights  
violations and  
crimes of war

We as helpers should  
have a human rights-  
based approach –  
with respect for  
persons' dignity and  
integrity

# Gross violations and stresses related to war and conflict

- **Loss of loved ones**
- **Displacement**
- **Destruction of livelihoods**
- **Enforced disappearances**
- **Being taken hostage**
- **Rape and forms of sexual violence**
- **Torture**
- **Harrassment and humiliations**
- **Summary executions**
- **Threats**
- **Being forced to witness violations of others**
- **Etc.....**

**These events effect mental health and daily lives in serious ways.**

How the  
person reacts  
– not the  
event itself

- “People are in a state of crisis when they face an obstacle to important life goals—and obstacle that is, for a time, insurmountable by the use of customary methods of problem-solving.”  
(Caplan, 1961)

A situation  
going beyond  
mastery and  
ability to  
cope

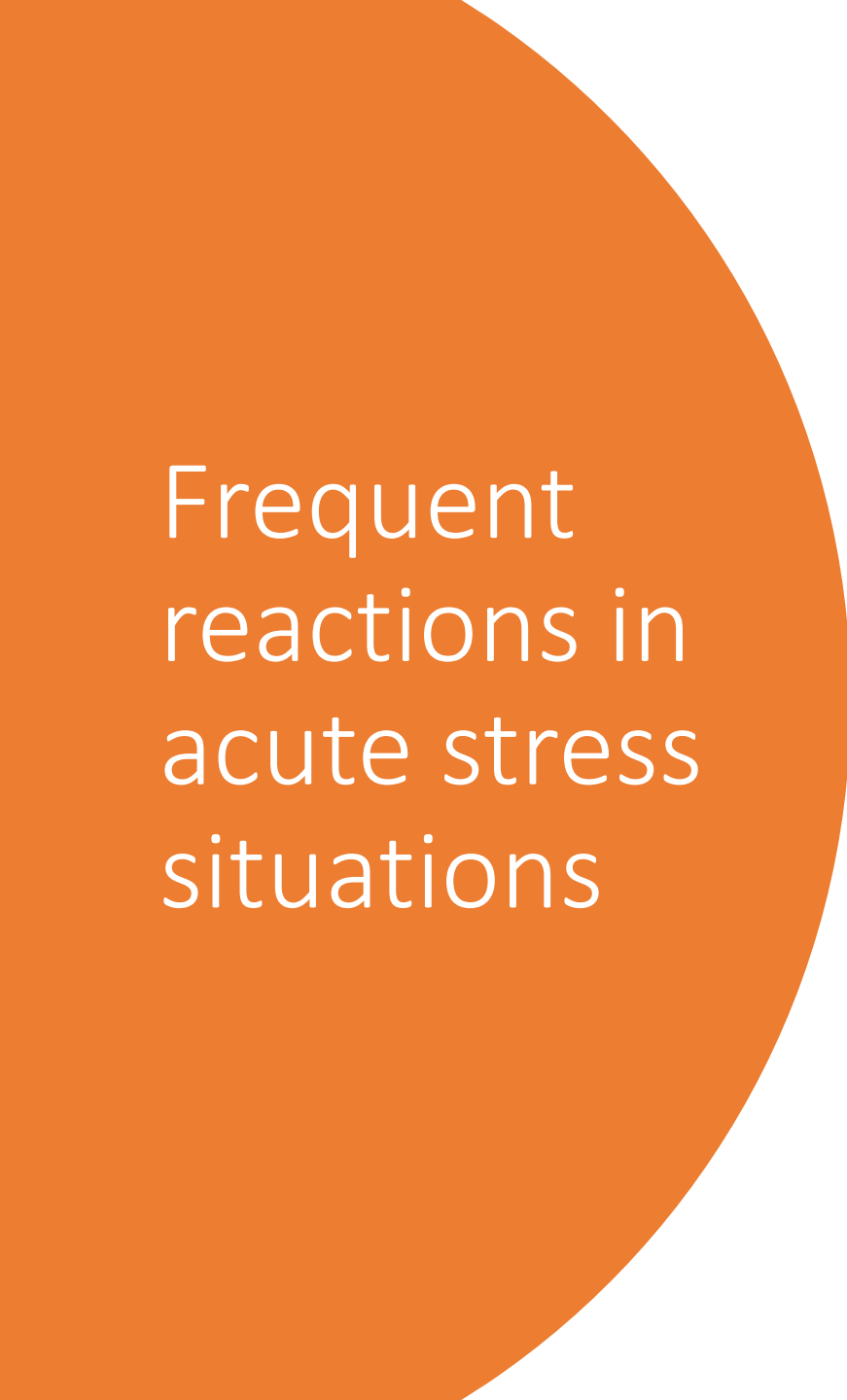
- “...an upset in equilibrium at the failure of one’s traditional problem-solving approach which results in disorganization, hopelessness, sadness, confusion, and panic.” (Lillibridge and Klukken, 1978)




# Psychological stress and crisis

- In mental health terms, a crisis refers not necessarily to a traumatic situation or event, but to a person's reaction to an event.
- One person might be deeply affected by an event while another individual suffers little or no ill effects

Psychological Crisis Types and Causes  
([verywellmind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com))

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# Frequent reactions in acute stress situations

- **Survival strategies**
  - **But also - Confusion,**
  - **Difficult to concentrate and resonate**
  - **Changes in perception - reduced**
  - **Sadness,**
  - **Anxiety,**
  - **Agitation**
  - **Numbness,**
  - **Physical arousal**
  - **Blunted affect**
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# Common aspects of trauma – when it happens

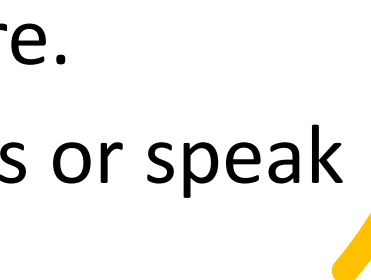
- Person is overwhelmed
- Intense fear and anguish
- Often fear of life – «this is the end»
- Sensing a total loss of control
- No way to defend oneself or other
- Helplessness and humiliation
- Feeling alone
- No place to go for protection
- Sensing a loss of dignity and integrity
- Often strong confusion – bewildered
- Total lack of information
- Problem solving capacity is gone

Most people  
are deeply  
affected by  
traumatic  
events shortly  
after they  
have taken  
place

- And in the longer run the reactions will vary a lot
- Depending on
  - Earlier life experiences including training and preparedness
  - The nature of the violations
  - And what happens afterwards – support or continued danger
- Usually, the acute reactions will be less painful or obvious after time, 1 – 3 months....

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## How to approach? How to deal with the stories

- Try to establish as safe a place as possible
  - Be calm and show understanding
  - Take time – do not rush
  - Explain that you are there to support and assist
  - Stay near the person but keep an appropriate distance depending on their age, gender and culture.
  - Do not ask a lot of questions or speak in technical terms
- 
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# How to approach? How to deal with the stories

..continues

- Never pressure or push the person to speak – explain or give descriptions
- Give the person time – give a lot of space for their reactions
- Do not promise too much
- Let the person know who you are and that they can trust you
- Try to calm the person
- Remind them of their strength and resources



## Some messages

- They have been exposed to serious crimes, such as torture, sexual violence, war crime or crimes against humanity – all of these totally prohibited human rights violations – serious acts of injustice!!
- They are in control of their story – and if they want to share it they want to do this – and that you will receive it with confidentiality
- Underline that their dignity, human rights, integrity is not taken away from them – they are survivors, and may feel that they are changed, destroyed, powerless....

# Futhermore

- You may try to help the person understand that their reactions are reactions that frequently follow such violence, they may even be intended consequences (psychoeducation on trauma and trauma reactions)
- You may explain triggers – trauma reminders, intrusive memories and flashbacks – and that there are ways of dealing with this (different exercises)
- Try to help the person find ways to calm him or herself, difficult but possible.....



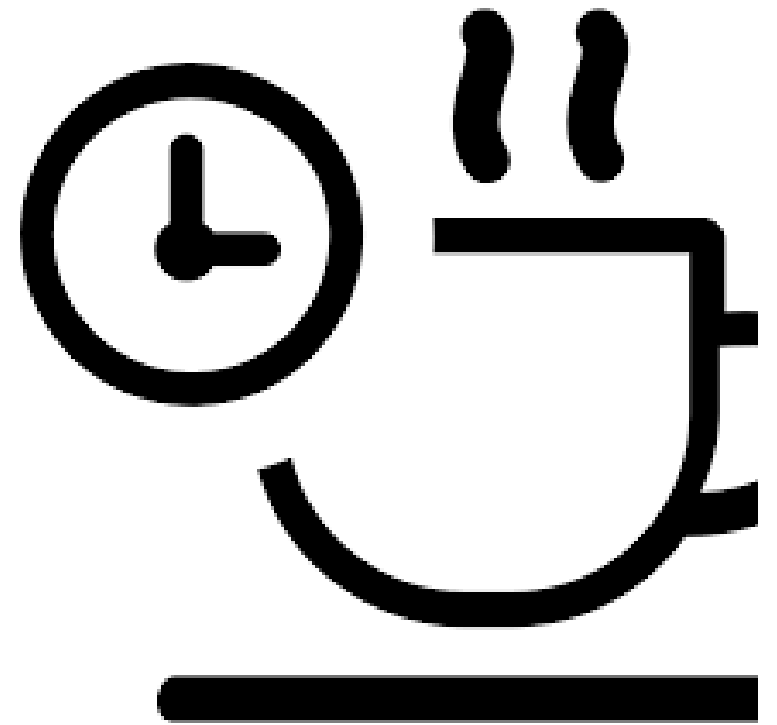


# Group reflections

What kind of reactions have you seen, encountered, heard about or observed?

# Short break

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# The toolbox – a compilation of resources for helpers

- Dealing with triggers and trauma reminders
- Finding ways to stabilize and calm
- Teaching ways of controlling reactions
- Grounding exercises
- Dealing with stress reactions
- [WWW. HHRI.ORG](http://WWW.HHRI.ORG)



# Some messages ....

- She has been exposed to a very serious crime, in fact, torture, war crime or crime against humanity – totally prohibited human rights violations – serious acts of injustice!!
- She does not need to speak or explain, you know she is in deep pain, you are there for her, respecting her, wanting to be of help....she decides, but you try to establish some trust – keep some physical distance
- They have not taken her dignity or humanity away, nobody can do that, but «they make you feel differently about everything that you may have taken for natural parts of your life, including yourself» – this is part of the evil done to her



# Some messages ....continue

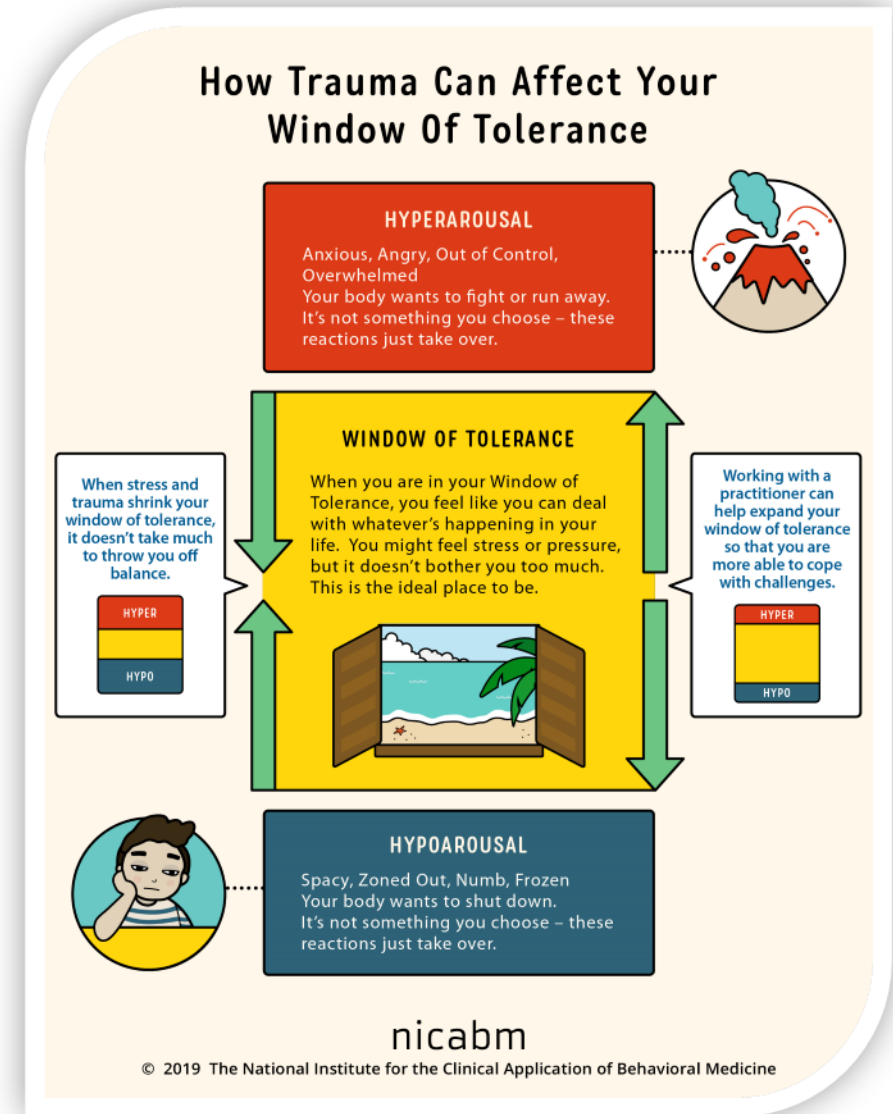
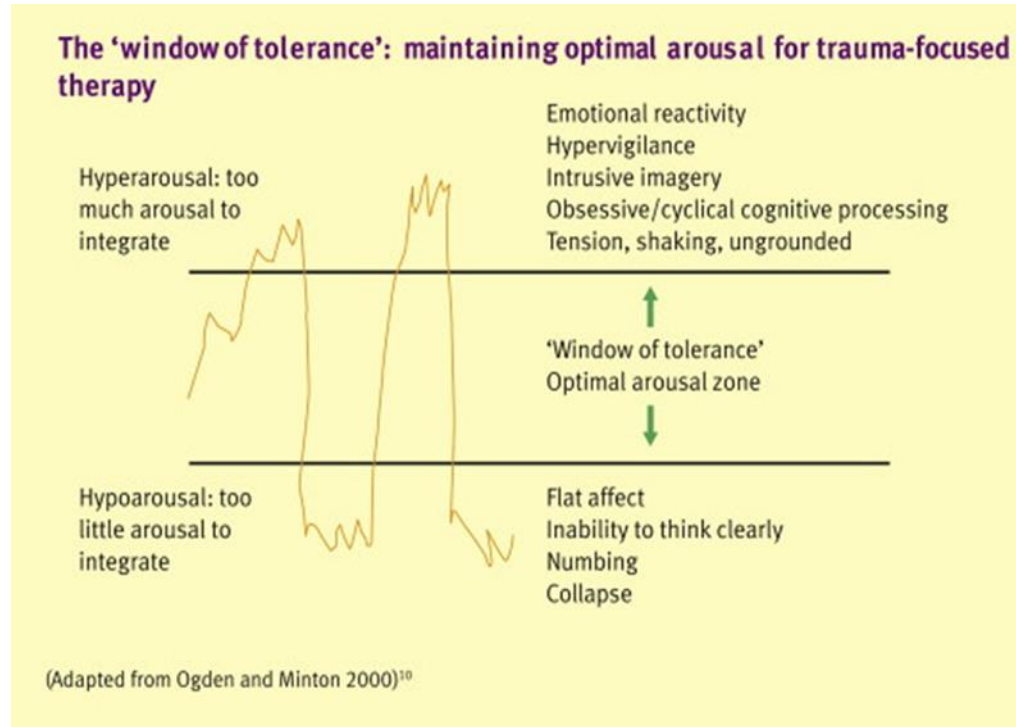
- She may feel shame and have guilt-feelings following the violent incident – listen and try to reformulate – never argue, never push
- She should be helped to understand that these are reactions very frequently following such violence, even intended consequences (psychoeducation on trauma and trauma reactions)
- She may learn ways of dealing with these reactions, including triggers, flashbacks etc. (different exercises)
- And she can learn ways in which she may try to calm herself, difficult but possible.....



# What can we do to help?

- As a helper - understand the reactions of the survivors
- .....explain their reactions to them
- (f.e. with the Window of Tolerance, and other metaphors – “Butterfly Women”)
- .....calming them down with grounding exercises – working through the body
- .....take care for yourself as a helper (you can use the same techniques to calm down)

# The window of tolerance



# Trigger

- “Triggers” are trauma-reminders - events or situations that remind victimised persons of their painful experiences and memories. Such reminders may elicit trauma reactions over and over again.
- Places similar to the place where it happened, people looking (may be just vaguely) like the perpetrator, sounds/smells etc reminding of the catastrophe.
- These reactions can be extremely distressing and create such anxiety that people are afraid to go out, see people, hear certain sounds or do many ordinary usual things.
- It is very difficult, sometimes not possible, to be aware of that triggers are connecting to events in the past.
- **It is as if it happens again.**



# Identifying triggers

It is important to learn to recognize what causes you to be triggered. It can be a great help to sort out the different types of triggers.

For example:

- Note that not everything is difficult
- You have already learned to deal with certain situations, you already know how to deal with certain triggers.
- The same situation can sometimes cause a strong reaction, and other times not so strong.
- Your vulnerability to triggers depends on your physical and emotional state at the moment.
- If you are tired or feeling down, it is harder to stay in the here and now. This also applies also when you are sick or highly stressed.
- Normal and everyday problems that arise, will make you more vulnerable to being triggered.



# To deal with triggers



If you consistently try to avoid all triggers, they will probably only be more comprehensive and stronger. Perhaps the most important part of handling triggers is therefore

- to identify them,
- to become familiar with them, and
- to become familiar with your reactions to them

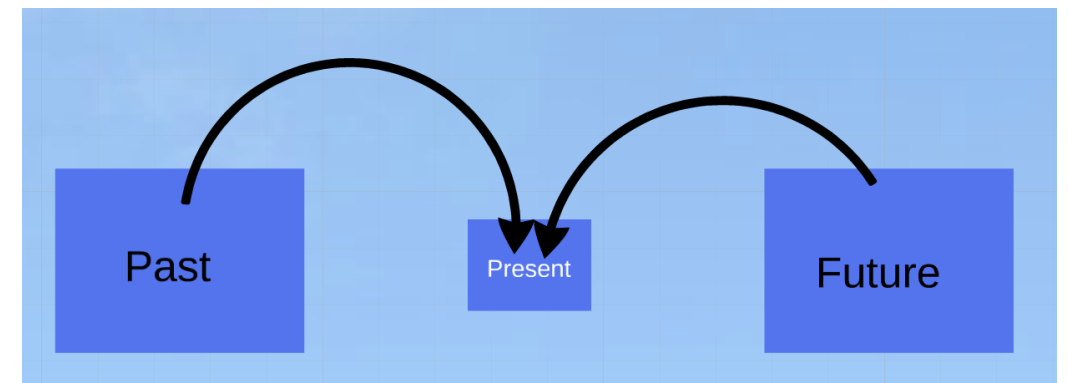
Nevertheless, it may sometimes be necessary to prevent or limit exposure to certain triggers, in order to be able to deal with everyday life and stay within their "window of tolerance".

- Removing objects or avoid situations that trigger (temporarily)
- Likewise, you may decide to avoid - temporarily – certain situations that create a lot of anxiety or other emotions.
- Anticipate triggers or trigger situations, plan ahead
- Exercises imagination to be prepared for certain situations
- Finding alternatives
- Gradual exposure
- Neutralization of triggers

# What is stabilization?

- An approach that helps to handle trauma-related reactions, to improve the ability to be present in the here and now. Techniques or therapeutic actions to make a survivor react in a normal manner to stress factors. Education about the effects of trauma helps survivors better understand their own stress responses, and knowledge of coping strategies provides a sense of control over these responses.

- To be able to concentrate, to learn and to understand it is important that the survivor is present in the here and now – that means that the survivor has to be stable. Some traumatized survivors can go from being stable to unstable during your meeting and need to be stabilized before we can start or continue talking. This will be one of the tools you have working with survivors.





# Grounding exercises

Grounding is a stabilization method for handling strong emotions of fear or triggers, when a memory 'takes over' and is experienced as if it happens in the present.

Grounding exercises can help a survivor to reconnect:

- With the present moment in time
- With the here and now
- With her body, and reassert personal control
- To the safe context of the room in which she is

Grounding is one way to reduce reactions or symptoms of anxiety or panic that threaten to overwhelm a survivor.

# Grounding the body

This exercise can help a survivor to come down from hyper arousal and find a more balanced emotional state. It can also be used to focus survivors who are in 'freeze-mode'.

Before you do this grounding exercise, scan the five focus areas **breathing, thoughts, feelings, heart and body**.

Use the window of tolerance to see if there is a difference before and after doing the grounding exercise.

*Sit on your chair. Feel your feet touching the ground. Stamp your left foot into the ground, then your right. Do it slowly: left, right, left. Do this several times. Feel your thighs and buttocks in contact with the seat of your chair (5 seconds). Notice if your legs and buttocks now feel more present or less present than when you started focusing on your legs.*

*Now move your focus to your spine. Feel your spine as your mid-line. Slowly lengthen your spine and notice if it affects your breath (10 seconds). Move your focus toward your hands and arms. Put your hands together. Do it in a way that feels comfortable for you. Push your hands together and feel your strength and temperature. Release and pause, then push your hands together again. Release and rest your arms.*

*Now move your focus to your eyes. Look around the room. Find something that tells you that you are here. Remind yourself that you are here, now, and that you are safe. Notice how this exercise affects your breathing, your presence, your mood, and your strength.*

Source: Jacobson, Edmund. 1974. Progressive Relaxation. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Midway Reprint.



**Thank you**

[www.hhri.org](http://www.hhri.org)



- Psychological first aid: Guide for field workers
- [9789241548205\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=A106F099C33F62C3675B5EA0A4851AE5 \(who.int\)](#)
- [Doing What Matters in Times of Stress \(who.int\)](#)
- [Manual – Mental health and gender based violence in conflict:  
www.hhri.org](#)



**SWPS**  
**University**



TARAS SHEVCHENKO NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF KYIV  
**FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY**



# Thank you for your attention!

Questions can be directed to:  
[nora.sveaass@psykologi.uio.no](mailto:nora.sveaass@psykologi.uio.no)

**UiO** : **Department of Psychology**  
University of Oslo

