



The British  
Psychological Society  
Crisis, Disaster and Trauma  
Psychology Section

## Guidance for counsellors and therapists wishing to offer support to adults and children affected by trauma

### What can I do to help?

*The urge to offer support to victims of disasters is very strong. However, when thinking about how you could help following a major incident it is important that you consider your training, experience, resilience and availability. In addition, it is essential that whatever you do is carefully recorded, managed and audited so that in the future it will be possible to assess and evaluate the outcomes of your efforts. The following guidance is offered to anyone considering offering early post-trauma interventions or longer-term trauma therapy as a trauma practitioner.*

#### Training

It is important that anyone offering psychological or counselling interventions for traumatised people has had training in dealing with trauma. The British Psychological Society recognises three levels of trauma practitioners, each can offer support but need to be mindful of their limitations and need for supervision and support.

1. **Trauma Informed:** Graduate level psychologists and accredited counsellors trained in the nature and impact of different psychological traumas.

*They need to demonstrate an awareness of:*

- Current research into psychological trauma
- Appropriate skills in responding to traumatic disclosures
- An awareness of cultural diversity
- Their limitations of their role and competency.

*The trauma informed practitioner needs to be closely supervised and supervised by a Trauma Expert level supervisor.*

2. **Trauma Skilled:** These include post graduate psychologists and qualified trauma counsellors who currently provide services to trauma survivors using evidence based interventions.

*The trauma skilled practitioners should demonstrate competence in:*

- Undertaking trauma assessments and be competent in recognising the needs of survivors for trauma
- Case formulation and planning therapeutic interventions
- Ability and experience in working within agencies
- Adhering to the need for clinical governance and effectiveness monitoring.

*These practitioners need to be in regular supervision with a Trauma Expert level supervisor.*

3. **Trauma Expert:** These practitioners will have PhD status for their work in trauma. They will be Health & Care Professions Council members and have a track record of working with trauma survivors including those with special needs.

*The Trauma Expert practitioners should:*

- *Have national and/or international recognition in a specialist area of trauma interventions*
- *Be competent in dealing with simple trauma responses as well as work within their specialist area e.g. working with children, young people, disabled, complex trauma, refugees, traumatic grief*
- *Preferably be experienced in multi-agency working and/or working with emergency service personnel*
- *Provide tailor-made assessments and interventions for a range of traumatised groups*

*These practitioners need to be in supervision and they may also provide supervision to others.*

## **Experience**

Working with major traumatic events can be extremely emotionally demanding for practitioners. Despite the wish to help others some people do not have the emotional resilience to undertake disaster work. The risk of becoming a victim of secondary trauma or compassion fatigue can be reduced if you have been through appropriate training, engaged in delivering an evidence based intervention, worked within a supportive therapeutic team and are constantly monitored and supervised by a Trauma Expert.

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- *Am I mentally prepared for what I might see, hear about or experience?*
- *Have I had enough training to allow me to deliver an evidence based intervention?*
- *Am I able to offer enough time to make my involvement worthwhile?*
- *Is my supervisor able to work with traumatic stress?*

## **Resilience**

Personal resilience in disaster work is essential. People who have experienced significant trauma in their own lives may find that their personal traumas are reactivated when they work with disaster victims and survivors. In addition, there is evidence to show that certain people lack the personal resilience to undertake this kind of work. This includes people who are highly sympathetic, but may be prone to compassion fatigue and secondary trauma.

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- *Have I been through a recent trauma or a trauma like those I would like to help?*
- *Have I had any treatment for anxiety or depression in the past two years?*
- *Am I going through some form of adversity such as a relationship breakdown or bereavement in past year?*
- *Can I deal with listening to traumatic stories without becoming emotionally distressed?*

## **Availability**

Availability and continuity of care is paramount. It is not helpful to offer temporary or sporadic help. To be valuable you need to commit to longer term involvement. Working at the scene is also not typically useful; you may need to work with clients within GP practices, counselling services, within local authority or charity locations. Also, please remember that organising trauma interventions in a disaster requires a lot of administration and the last thing that those responsible for the delivery of services need is to have people who are not part of the delivery system. You may find that even if you have the skills and willingness to help your services are not required.

*Questions to ask yourself:*

- *Am I prepared to work with others to provide the interventions or services that are requested by the organisers?*
- *Can I give an indication of how much time I am prepared to give to providing the initial and/or ongoing services?*
- *Would I be expecting to be paid for my time or expenses?*
- *How would I feel if I were told my services were not required or appropriate?*

## **Structure**

It is very important that services are coordinated. If you are to offer your services make sure that they are coordinated with others. Seek out the lead agency for the incident and find your role in the overall response.