

FROM: *COMMON SHOCK: WITNESSING VIOLENCE EVERY DAY: HOW WE ARE HARMED, HOW WE CAN HEAL*

KAETHE WEINGARTEN, PH.D.

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Appendix One:

Suggestions to Manage The Biological, Psychological, Interpersonal and Societal Consequences of Common Shock<sup>1</sup>

(These recommendations assume that you are currently safe)

The Biological Consequences of Common Shock:

1. Learn to recognize how your body feels when it is experiencing stress. For instance, do you notice your heart beating faster, your breath feeling tight, a knot or butterflies in your stomach, your thoughts racing or slowed down, difficulty swallowing?
2. Use your breath as an anchor to feel calmer. Inhale slowly to a count of three, hold your breath to a count of three, and exhale to a count of three. Repeat this sequence until you notice you are breathing more easily.
3. Sometimes as a person releases pent up stress from a common shock experience, the body trembles involuntarily. This is a natural and healthy response.
4. Make a list of 10 activities that comfort you, for instance listening to a particular piece of music or taking a hot shower. Keep the list in your wallet or someplace where it is always handy and do one activity each day.
5. Avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, alcohol, sugar or drugs, but do drink plenty of fluids and eat comforting, nutritious foods in moderation.
6. Balance vigorous exercise with relaxing exercise, e.g. running with stretching.
7. Take a warm shower or bath.
8. Try sitting on the ground. Many people find placing their bodies on the ground is comforting. If this is not possible, sit in a chair and feel the sensation of your buttocks and the backs of your legs on the chair.
9. Look at some object of natural beauty. Even one will do. Study a leaf, notice the way the light looks, look at a rock. Take a walk in a park or in an area where grass, plants or trees grow.

10. Light a candle and dedicate the light to something or someone whose presence near you will be comforting.

### The Psychological Consequences of Common Shock

1. Tell your experience to someone you trust. Don't worry if you are getting the details right; convey your overall sense of your experience.
2. Let yourself release the feelings you have. If you feel sadness, cry; if anger, yell.
3. Create an image for yourself that makes you feel part of a larger group. For instance, imagine that you are one animal in a large herd of animals or imagine that your hands are linked in a human chain that spans the globe. Use this image several times a day, perhaps before you do your breathing exercise.
4. Think of one small action that you can take, symbolic or actual, that makes you feel less helpless.
5. If you are feeling afraid in the present when you know you are actually safe, ask yourself the following questions: Am I safe now? How is the present moment different from the time when I was in danger? What can I do now to comfort myself?
6. Express yourself in an artistic medium: sing, draw, bang on plastic container "drums," dance, make a collage, etc.
7. If you feel shame, consider whether it is appropriate or not. This is a very hard idea to consider, but well worth it. If you feel ashamed of something you have done, think of a way you can make amends. Consider asking someone to help you figure this out, if it is too overwhelming to imagine what you might do to make amends. If you feel shame, but you don't believe that you have really done anything to deserve it, consider that someone may have "dumped" – transferred – his or her unbearable feelings of shame on to you. You may want to confront the person or, again, create a ritual. For a ritual, you might want to cleanse yourself of your undeserved shame by burning or burying a symbolic representation of it.
8. Do not expect a lot of yourself. Cut yourself slack.
9. Spend time with people who care about you.
10. Let others comfort you. If others need comfort, comfort them.
11. Hug friends and family members.
12. Give yourself time to heal.

### Interpersonal Consequences of Common Shock

1. Silence: It is important to feel safe and to share your experience with at least one other person whom you trust to listen carefully and to decide with you what, if any, next steps you might take to feel better and/ or to act in relation to the situation you have witnessed. In many situations it may seem impossible both to tell someone and maintain your own and/or others' safety.

However, ultimately silence or secrecy seldom keeps people safe. These are difficult choices, but speaking out has a better chance of leading to improvement than silence.

2. **Shattered Assumptions:** Assumptions are not like glass; they are built out of experiences in the world with others and these experiences can change. When “shattered,” with time, with support from others and with distance from the experiences that produced the collapse of core beliefs, related ones will form. These will form in new ways to accommodate both prior and new experience. It is unlikely that you will emerge the same, which may produce it’s own interpersonal challenges. But the changes can usually be placed in a context that makes them understandable to others.
3. **Inhibition of Self-Disclosure:** There are often times when a person needs to talk, but others cannot bear the story he has to tell. This invariably creates a sense of isolation and may deepen grief and loss. As sad as this circumstance is, it is rarely total. You may have to manage your disappointment that the person you *most* want to talk to is unavailable, but there will usually be someone available. If no one you know is willing to listen to you, look in your area for support groups led by trained professionals. Group discussion can be very beneficial when your own support networks are depleted. Or, you can seek professional help. You can contact your state’s professional organizations of psychology, social work, marriage and family counseling, or psychiatry for referral information.
4. **Problems of Fit:** It is highly unlikely that any two people, even or especially life partners, will manage common shock identically, initially or over time. As painful as this can be, it is helpful to accept this as fact. Both parties should try to be clear and direct about their needs to their partner, friend or family member and both should be candid in return about what they can and cannot provide. Try not to turn to people for something you know they cannot provide. Look for other sources of support. Trust that when the situation is more stable, the discoveries you have made regarding problems of fit can be discussed and that incremental changes in preferred directions can be made.

### Societal Consequences of Common Shock

In a calm moment of reflection, ask yourself the following question: Has violence, retaliation or revenge ever produced lasting peace and harmony in families, communities or nations at any time or in any place in history?

### Suggestions for Parents

These suggestions cannot cover all circumstances and will not be appropriate for all ages. They are meant to stimulate your own thoughts about how to assist a particular child in the particular circumstance you and your child are in.

1. The first task is to remember that you are your child's primary resource. Your child will be attuned to your feelings at a non-verbal as well as a verbal level. As best as you are able, try to achieve some measure of physical calm. Use the suggestions in the sections above to assist you with this. At all times monitor your own state of arousal as well as your child's. Use whatever physical means is age appropriate and acceptable to your child to induce physical calm, be it a hug or a light touch on the arm. If either you or your child is becoming more aroused as you try one of these suggestions, pause and slow down or stop what you are doing.
2. Like you, your child needs to feel safe above all else. Assuming that your child is now safe, reassure your child that this is so.
  - a. Help your child communicate what he has witnessed and what has been disturbing. In some situations accurate detail is important, but between parent and child, usually, you don't want to interrupt the flow of your child's speaking and you are trying to listen for the overall sense of his experience, not grill her for accuracy. Remember that memory can be altered under extreme emotional arousal.
  - b. If your child can talk, let your child tell you as often as he wishes about what he has witnessed and in whatever media works best: words, drawings, puppet play, or gestures. Older children may want to write in a journal.
  - c. Help your child recognize the physical signs or feelings that let him know he feels upset, unsafe, frightened or angry. For example: What do you notice about how your body feels when you are frightened (unsafe, upset, etc.)?
  - d. Help your child identify what reduces the physical or emotional feelings of distress. For example: How does your body feel when you feel safe and comfortable? What kinds of things make you feel this way? Let's try a few things to see which ones work now. I'll make a list so that we have them for the future.
3. Establishing routines is essential to helping restore a child's biological and psychological integrity. Sleep is particularly vulnerable to disturbances and it is especially important to re-establish good sleep habits. Try to provide nutritious meals as well. This is a good time to help your child learn the foods he considers comfort foods. Make this a game. Is spinach a comfort food? Is ketchup a comfort food? What about applesauce? A young child might be able to identify two, and an older children might be able to identify five or six comfort foods.
4. Your child may have many thoughts on her mind that are disturbing to her and many questions. Try to be patient if she seems aloof. Let her know that you are there for her to talk about whatever she wants to discuss or ask. Depending on your child, you could gently probe. For example, what do you think about the most? What would you like to be thinking about? How can we help you turn the channel to the "station" you want to hear?
5. Conversely, if your child is badgering you with questions, be as patient as you possibly can. If it gets too much for you, enlist allies to help you with the

- child's questions. At some point, you may want to say something like, "I keep having lots of thoughts in my head about this too, but I know that they will go away soon."
6. If your child feels helpless, think of one small action that she can take, symbolic or actual, that can make her feel less helpless.
  7. Sometimes children blame themselves for aspects of situations they have witnessed. Your child may directly let you know this, or you may infer that this is the case. If you think this is happening, you can say, "What kinds of names are you calling yourself? What kinds of talk do you hear inside your head about you? Are they the kinds of names and is it the kind of talk you want to hear? If not, what might you prefer to be hearing?"
  8. Children's emotions vary widely. Expressing emotions in a constructive way is helpful, even though it may be hard on parents to hear what our children feel. For young children, parents can help children manage the intensity of their feelings by being a container for them. Letting children know that nothing they think or feel is too difficult for you to hear is a great gift. Then, if it *is* overwhelming, share your feelings with someone else. You may need support to support your child.
  9. Older children may be ambivalent about turning to parents rather than peers. Still, it is important to stay available, even if you feel rebuffed. Providing opportunities for adolescents to get together in guided discussion with adults in the community is a good strategy. Schools, churches, even sport teams can do this.
  10. If possible, avoid lengthy separations from your child. Your reliable presence will be soothing. At the same time, you cannot always meet your child's needs, especially if he is more demanding than usual. Try to take responsibility for your own limits. You can try saying something like this: "I know you need me now, and I wish I could be here for you, but I am just too tired now. If I rest for awhile, I will be able to give you my attention when I feel better."
  11. Provide as much physical comfort as your child will permit. Hugging heals!
  12. Assume that your child's behavior will regress. Be patient. Don't let your reaction to the regressed behavior – aggression, clinginess, whininess – make it even worse for both of you. Have faith that it will pass.
  13. Build on your child's resources. When the time is appropriate, access his humor; provide age-appropriate responsibility and give positive feedback for success; support your child's efforts at making meaning of the experience. If spirituality is a source of comfort to your child, support this. Help your child to connect to other supportive adults.
  14. One of the most challenging tasks for parents is how to balance protecting their children from their own distress without pulling out of an authentic relationship with them. While it is essential not to overwhelm your child with your own feelings, it is also crucial that your child feel that you are fully present and not feel disconnected from you. Sharing your feelings in a way that helps your child feel connected to you is helpful.

