



ALMHAR



Help for refugees

12 common emotional problems
and how to cope with them





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Content

FAQs	8
What is the goal of this brochure?.....	8
How can you use this brochure?.....	9
Are the tips for help always suitable for everyone?	9
Who developed this brochure?	10
Who can offer more help?	11
Stress	12
Case example.....	14
What can help	15
Anxiety	16
Case example.....	19
What can help	21
Concentration and memory	22
What can help	24
Physical pain	26
What can help	27

Avoidance behavior	29
What can help	33
Feeling detached	35
What can help	37
Traumatic memories – Reliving what you went through	40
What can help	42
Arousal and Aggression –	
Feeling on edge	45
Case example.....	46
What can help	48
Guilt	52
What can help	54
Feeling sad – Depressive mood	57
Case example.....	59
What can help	60



Sleeping problems	63
What can help	64
Grief	69
What can help	71
Background information:	
Depression	74
Physical symptoms	75
Cognitive symptoms	75
Behavioral symptoms	75
Background information:	
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	78
Case example	80



Exercises Lists.....	82
List of possible physical exercises	82
List of possible pleasant activities	83
List of possible evening rituals.....	85
List of possible soothing activities.....	85
List of possible mind-exercises.....	86
Relaxation exercises	87
PMR – Progressive muscle relaxation	87
Deep breathing.....	90
Focusing on your body and physical surroundings	92
Observe yourself.....	94
Impressum	96



ALMHAR

This brochure is designed for refugees who have had to flee from their homes and who are living in exile. There is also a smartphone application for android devices named ALMHAR (**A**pp**L**ication for **M**ental **H**ealth **A**id for **R**efugees) with equal content. **You can download the app in the Google Play Store or on the website www.almhar.org.**

Fleeing your home is an incredibly overwhelming, frightening and life-changing experience. Many refugees who had to leave their homes and countries develop some sort of emotional or physical problems due to their experiences.

If this is the case for you, it does not mean you are weak or crazy.

Such problems are mostly normal reactions of normal people to abnormal experiences!

This brochure explains the most common **emotional problems** you might experience as a refugee, and offers first support in dealing with them. It offers background information on 12 common problem areas and gives practical and easy to-do tips.

However, this brochure does not replace a psychotherapy. If your problems are severe and especially if you have thoughts about hurting yourself or ending your life, **please seek professional help!** You can for example go to a hospital and see a doctor or a therapist.

FAQs

What is the goal of this brochure?

Understanding of common symptoms:

This brochure explains how and why our mind and body react to stressful events. Understanding this can be reassuring and make it less frightening. This by itself can already make you feel better.

Develop ways to actively deal with common problems:

After each topic, there are practical tips on how to deal with recurrent problems. This brochure is not meant to replace professional help from a therapist or doctor. It is meant to give you first practical support. If symptoms do not get better with time, it might be helpful to seek more professional help (see FAQ Who can offer more help?).

How can you use this brochure?

This brochure consists of 12 topics, and you can read them as you like. Every topic describes a specific symptom, its causes, and tips on how to deal with them. Some tips may coincide. They can be applied to help with different problems.

Are the tips for help always suitable for everyone?

All tips in this brochure are known to help people to deal with these particular problems. They can help you to deal actively with the problems you experience right now and influence how you feel.

However, not all tips are suitable for all situations or for everyone. It is important to try out the tips and practical exercises to find out whether or not they are helpful for you.

If you found your method, it is crucial to practice regularly in order to achieve the best results. Give it a serious try and practice as much as your current situation allows.

Who developed this brochure?

This brochure has been developed by the non-governmental organization Center ÜBERLEBEN (www.ueberleben.org). The Center ÜBERLEBEN was founded in 1992 and was formerly known as the Berlin Center for the Treatment of Torture Victims.

The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs financed the development of this brochure. The funding agency was not involved in the development and content of this brochure. The information provided do not necessarily represent those of the funding agency.



Who can offer more help?

The practical tips we list in this brochure may sometimes not be enough for dealing with every problem or symptom. If your symptoms persist or worsen, it can be helpful to see an expert. Here is an idea of who-is-who:

A general practitioner is a physician who provides routine care (e. g. immunization, flu, cough).

A psychotherapist is an expert on treating mental problems using psychological methods. This usually involves regular talking sessions.

Social workers support people coping with problems in everyday life, like housing, food, work, childcare, education, finances. There are social services that offer specific support for refugees.

Stress

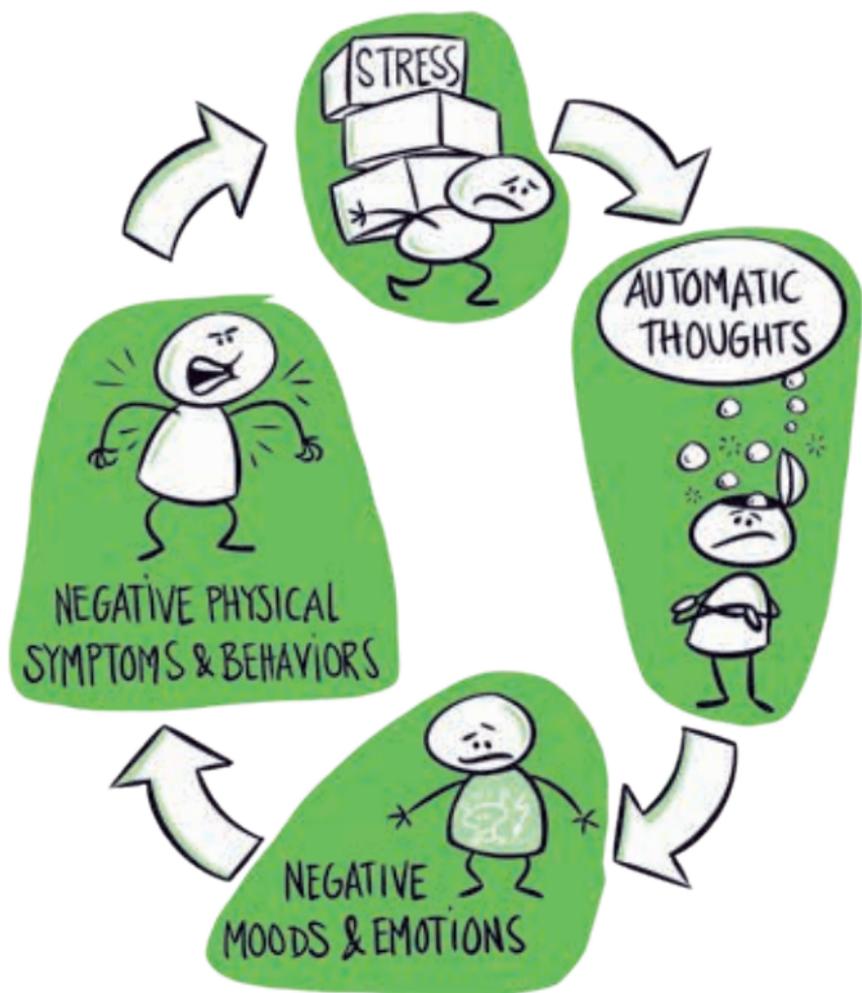
Stress can be described as feeling overwhelmed, strained or pressured.

Especially situations that you perceive as

very sudden, unpredictable and uncontrollable can lead to extremely high levels of stress. Stress influences your body and mind. You worry, feel anxious, get restless, your body tenses, you breathe differently and even some hormones change – to name just a few symptoms.

In the short term all these bodily changes help you to face immediate problems and deal with your situation (for an example, see the chapter on anxiety). But if the stress lasts for a long time, these bodily changes are hard to bear and make you especially vulnerable for physical and psychological problems.







Case example

Tomorrow, Ahmed has an important appointment. He cannot stop thinking about his appointment. Will he understand everything? Will he be able to answer all the questions? Will he get up on time? With all these questions on his mind he gets into a bad mood. He is now worried about the appointment (e. g. I will not be able to answer all the questions) and he fears that he might oversleep tomorrow. Now he realizes that his heart beats faster and he is sweating. He is really nervous and moves around, unable to eat or drink anything.

The example shows, how a stressed person is focusing his/her thoughts entirely on the negative and on things he/she cannot foresee. These thoughts affect his/her emotions (feeling afraid and nervous) and his/her body (heart rate, sweat) and his/her behavior (cannot eat and drink).

Note: we all experience stress in different ways and in different situations. Any problems that might arise depend on many factors, e. g. the specific situation, your personality, how you learned to adapt to and deal with setbacks throughout your life. Fleeing one's home and becoming a

refugee is highly stressful. Our bodies and minds are not designed to be in this state of stress for too long, therefore it is normal to experience difficulties.



What can help

Relaxation:

Stress induces arousal which is the opposite of relaxation. So, you can counter stress by conducting one of the following relaxation exercises.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (p. 87)*
- *Deep breathing (p. 90)*

Allow yourself some time:

If you have recently become a refugee, you will understandably need all your energy and attention to survive and realign yourself to the new situation. What may help most, when everything else around you is uncertain, is to allow yourself some time and listen to your own needs. When your situation settles again, it will also be possible to actively deal with other issues.

Anxiety



Fear is absolutely vital for survival. When we are in danger, our bodies and minds **automatically prepare to react.**

For example, when you see a poisonous snake or you suddenly notice a car approaching when crossing the road.

What most people notice first are the **bodily reactions**: your heart rate goes up, your breathing becomes faster, you begin to sweat and your muscles tense up.

But other things happen as well, mostly unconsciously. You have thoughts about a situation (telling you if it is dangerous or not). If so, stress hormones flow into our body. **All these changes help to accurately interpret and react to the situation within seconds.** This fear becomes problematic if it is disproportionately excessive, if it lasts after the threatening situation no longer exists or if there is no actual danger. **Then it is called anxiety.**

When we feel threatened we react by:

Flight: we want to run away, leave the situation.

Freeze: we stop doing anything, hoping the situation and our fear will 'go away'.

Fight: we try to cope with the threatening situation or person.

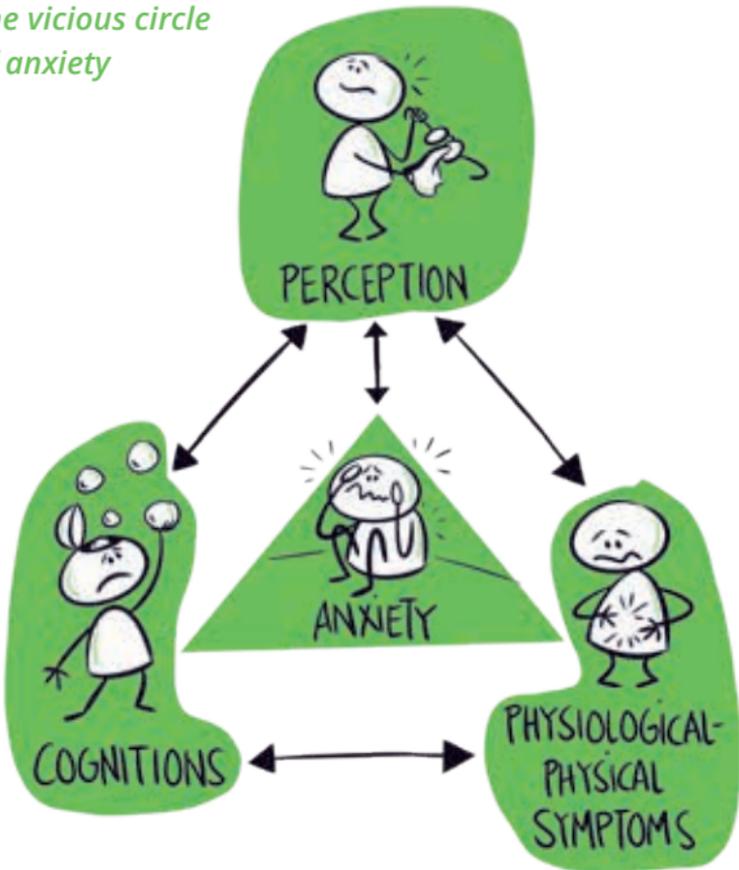
Do these reactions sound familiar? After your next experience of anxiety, perhaps you could take a moment and think about your reaction. How have you reacted? Was it a good reaction? Was it necessary? How could you have reacted otherwise?

Every person reacts differently to threatening situations. That is perfectly normal. If you are suddenly faced with a threatening situation or cannot prevent such a situation, these reactions can help to cope with the threatening situation. **But sometimes our way of coping is not the best way for us to deal with our anxiety.** Being aware of how we do things and why we do them can help us to adequately cope with a situation.

Sometimes people try to avoid situations that might become threatening for them. But in the long-term this causes anxiety to get worse and worse. Anxiety will get better if you eventually succeed in facing situations

because then you can learn how to deal with them. But getting there is not that easy. **Feeling anxious increases thoughts of fear and anxiety.** Since our feelings are influenced by our thoughts, anxious thoughts can increase anxious feelings. Due to this interaction of feelings and thoughts, the symptoms get reinforced and anxiety 'takes off' in a vicious circle.

The vicious circle of anxiety





Case example

Ahmed and his friend Rabih are walking along the street. When they turn a corner, Ahmed sees a crowd of people coming their way. Is there a demonstration he did not know about? Loud noises, screaming and honking of cars make him feel restless. Ahmed has had bad experiences with crowds. Will they attack him? Ahmed feels his breathing getting shallow and his heart rate going up. His hands are clammy from sweat and he shakes uncontrollably. He feels nauseous. Frantically he looks for a way out. At the same time Rabih is smiling. He is standing next to Ahmed, observes the crowd and realizes early on that it is a merry wedding party moving through the street. The newlyweds are sitting in the first car, cheerfully honking the horn. Many guests are walking alongside the cars.

The example illustrates how differently people can perceive the same situation depending on their personal experiences. Ahmed has had bad experiences with crowds of people and perceives them as dangerous, whereas Rabih does not – he sees the positive aspects of the crowd passing them. It also explains the relation between perception (only perceiving certain aspects of a situation), physiological reactions (breathing, heart rate, sweat, shaking hands, nausea) and thoughts ('Will they attack me?').

Note: most people fear that the anxiety will increase infinitely. But after reaching a limit, it will always go down again because it is actually physically impossible for anxiety to rise indefinitely.



What can help

Redirect your focus:

Try not to focus on your anxiety and its physical symptoms (like sweating and shaking), but redirect your focus into positive activities. This can prevent the vicious circle from 'taking off'. You could for instance listen to music you like, read a book or sing a song. You can find some examples of positive activities in the following list and create your individual list if you like.

- *Pleasant activities (p. 83)*

Relaxation:

Fear is characterized by strong, physical tension and arousal. It is the opposite of relaxation, therefore you can counter feelings of fear by conducting one of the following relaxation exercises.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (p. 87)*
- *Deep breathing (p. 90)*

Concentration and memory

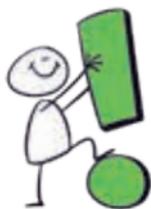
Forgetting is something we all do, every-day. It is essential for our survival and daily functioning. We hear, see and feel so many details, that our mind could not handle perceiving and memorizing them all. **Therefore,**

our mind filters out unimportant details in order to function better. In short, during stressful situations it is **very useful** that your mind automatically focuses on the important information and blocks out the rest. For example, when a car is about to hit you, you block out all other information (e. g. people walking by). This focus enables us to react (to jump back quickly).



It can be worrying and very scary if you forget too many or important details of your day-to-day life, or if you cannot concentrate for a longer period of time or at all. **This is what happens when stress lasts for a very long time, for example as a refugee.** Your mind is still in stress mode, focusing only on what is important to 'get by'. As a result, you keep forgetting other information or you cannot concentrate on anything.

Not only stressful circumstances, but also emotional or physical problems influence your memory. This can happen when, for instance, you are in a depressed mood, if you are feeling detached or have flashbacks. **In spite of experiencing concentration problems, it is important to realize that your memory is not permanently damaged.** Expect your memory to improve when the circumstances around you change.



What can help

Take notes:

Start a notebook or a list (e. g. on your phone), where you write down everyday things you need to or want to remember. This notebook or list should be used solely for this purpose. If you use a notebook, it should always be kept at the same place (for instance always in the same part of the same bag).

Wear a 'reminder wristband':

A wristband which is worn permanently can be a steady reminder of one specific thing you want to remember (for example exercising every day).

Plan your days as much as possible:

Many aspects of our lives will be and remain impossible to foresee and plan ahead. But maybe you succeed eventually in planning some aspects, like the time you eat, go to bed or do activities like exercising. A daily routine will help you to better manage your activities which, in return, will make it easier for you to remember more.

Mindful performance of activities:

For instance, train yourself to pay close attention to everything you see when walking in the street (you could name it in your mind) or specific actions you have to perform while preparing dinner. This will help you to keep your focus and facilitates remembering what you did afterwards.

Avoid medication that impairs memory:

Forgetfulness can also be a side effect of medication. If you take medication, always discuss possible side effects or any changes in intake with your physician. Please do not stop taking medication on your own. Always consult your physician.

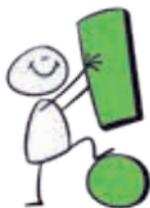
Physical pain

Body and mind interact. When we are physically ill, we suffer, get grumpy, worry or even despair about the future. The reverse is also true: when we are depressed, traumatized, stressed or angry, we often also feel it in our body and experience pain.

Any type of complaint will thus have a physical and a psychological aspect. The relation of mind and body is shown in many expressions, like 'having a knot in your stomach' or 'having a lump in your throat' to say you feel nervous.



It is important to understand the origin of the pain. Stomach ache caused by a virus will need medical treatment. But if the doctor cannot find a physical cause for your symptoms, it does not mean you are imagining the pain. The pain you feel is real, it just may have a psychological origin and will need different treatment. It is common that people who went through extremely stressful events suffer mentally and physically. If pain is caused by stress, it can be alleviated by following some strategies.



What can help

Relaxation:

Reducing stress by practicing Deep breathing or Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) can also reduce physical pain.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (p. 87)*
- *Deep breathing (p. 90)*

Physical exercise:

Sport activities will generally improve your mood and make you physically stronger, thus helping to reduce physical complaints that are caused by stress. Muscle exercises are especially important. Exercise regularly (best every morning for approx. 25 minutes).

- *Physical exercises (p. 82)*

Get it off your chest:

Talk to someone you trust about your situation, the stress you experience, your fears and thoughts. This will bring relief and subsequently reduce stress.

Allow yourself some distraction:

Pleasant activities that distract you from your worries will help you to recuperate and to increase your level of energy. Do one pleasant thing every day. You can find some examples of positive activities in the following list and create your individual list, if you like.

- *Pleasant activities (p. 83)*

Avoidance behavior

When we feel sad, angry, insecure, anxious or have bad memories, a natural reaction is to try to avoid these negative emotions by avoiding situations that trigger them. In many



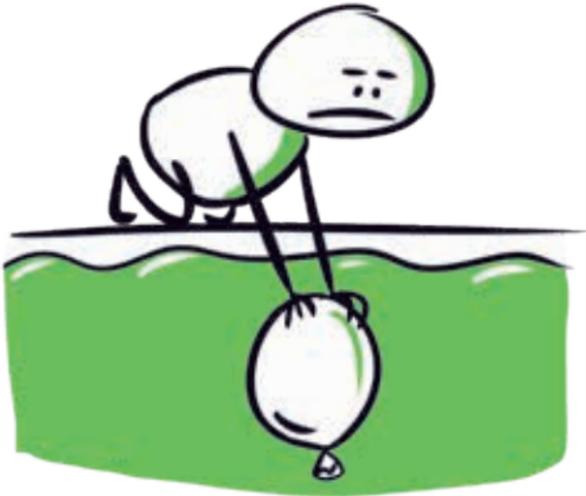
situations, avoidance is actually a very clever survival mechanism: avoiding physical harm will keep you safe. Trying to avoid certain thoughts and feelings makes sense for the short term if you are in an acute stress situation, for instance, when you are fleeing or your life is in danger. It helps you to get through difficult times.

If you have recently fled from your home or country, you will understandably need all your energy and attention to survive and to reorient yourself in your new situation. What may help most when everything else around you is uncertain, is to allow yourself some time and listen to your own needs. When the situation calms down again, it will be possible for you to actively deal with other issues.

However, if you keep trying to avoid negative thoughts and emotions for too long, it will have the opposite effect in the long term. Emotions or thoughts are within us, so we cannot suppress them even if we avoid places, people, situations, sounds or anything else that could trigger them. They will persist and the problem might even get worse.

The example of the balloon under water: why avoiding negative emotions will always have the opposite effect

Trying to suppress emotions can be compared to pushing a balloon under water. You will succeed at first, but after a while it will take more and more energy. You will notice your arms start to tremble and the balloon will shoot up



uncontrollably, splashing water around (and maybe even hitting your face). You will need time to rest before you can push the balloon under water again, and it will get harder and harder each time because you get tired.

The same principle applies to avoiding emotions. You will succeed at first, which will bring initial relief. But after a while it will get more and more difficult and you will notice problems arising: you get grumpy, tired, sad or angry. The emotions will find a way to get noticed and express themselves in an uncontrollable and inappropriate way. (For example, someone yells at you and you are unable to do anything about it. In return, you might later take out your frustration on someone else).

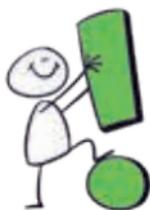


Over time it will get more and more difficult, demanding more and more energy to suppress your emotions.

By trying to avoid these negative thoughts and emotions, you will not be able to actually learn how to deal with them. In the end, you might also start to feel isolated and alienated from the people around you, because you miss out on activities for fear they might trigger a negative emotion. If you avoid many situations for a long time, it may be a sign of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Note: sometimes we use substances such as alcohol, cannabis or other drugs to make our negative emotions and thoughts 'disappear'. This is not a healthy avoidance technique, and even though it seems to help in the short term, in the long term it has severe implications. If you feel this applies to you, you might want to seek professional help from a doctor or a support group.





What can help

Allow yourself some distraction:

Pleasant activities will help you to recuperate and to increase your level of energy. It also prevents you from feeling isolated and helps you to feel integrated in the life around you again. If possible, do one small pleasant thing every day. You can find some examples of positive activities in the following list and create your individual list if you like.

- *Pleasant activities (p. 83)*

Physical exercise:

If you exercise regularly, you will feel healthier physically and mentally. It reduces stress and helps you to better relax. Try to exercise regularly (preferably every day for a short time, e. g. 15 min). You will have the best effect if you exercise at the beginning of the day (e. g. in the morning hours).

- *Physical exercises (p. 82)*

Meet with people you trust:

Social contact prevents you from being isolated and helps you to feel integrated in the life around you. Spending time with others helps you to feel better. You can also call people you like or write to them. It is a good feeling to be supported by people who know you well, be it by talking about positive or everyday things or by just spending time together.

Feeling detached

We all have phases in which our mind drifts away and we detach from the present. A familiar example is daydreaming: someone asks you a question and you suddenly realize you did not follow the conversation.

Under extreme stress, these phases in which you drift away from reality can happen quite frequently, and more and more information is 'blocked out', sometimes even important aspects of yourself or your surroundings. These phases are called dissociations.



You may feel:

- *Detached from yourself (as if you are not yourself anymore, you are an outside observer of yourself, your bodily proportions have changed or body parts have disappeared).*
- *Detached from your surroundings (as if your surroundings are unreal, you are unable to recognize friends or apprehend reality).*
- *As if you 'do not belong' to, or are 'separated' from the people around you and, as a result, you feel 'numb'.*



Dissociations happen quite often to people who experienced very stressful events. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. Still, these experiences can be very frightening. You may even fear 'going crazy' or 'losing control'. There is a reason why our minds block out so much: we do not want to think of or remember extremely stressful life events. So, these painful memories of stressful events are blocked out as well as other associated memories. Thus, this phenomenon actually cleverly protects you from otherwise unbearable events in your life. Try to understand when and why dissociations occur. Knowing this will enable you to react early on when it happens so you can try to bring your mind back to the present.



What can help

Focus on your body and your surroundings:

Noticing all the different physical details of yourself and of your surroundings requires focus and can bring you back to the here and now.

Feel your body and perceive your surroundings consciously through ears, nose, mouth, eyes and skin (your different senses). What do you hear or see for example?

- *Focusing exercise (p. 92)*

Physically change (something in) your situation:

Changing something in your situation will require more attention and thus bring you 'back' to the present: Drink a glass of water or wash your face. If you are sitting or lying down, stand up and walk around. Stretch, straighten up your back, reduce bodily tension (e. g. loosen your jaw, back, arms and legs by moving them). – Change what you are doing. You can start cooking, cleaning or exercising. You could call a friend, or do any other simple task you were not doing before.

Realize where you are:

If you start feeling absent, tell yourself loudly and clearly where you are. Name as many details as possible. This will help you come back to the here and now: What country, city, neighborhood, street, building or room are you in? Who is with you? What are you doing?

Describe an image:

Choose an image you like and that makes you feel good (for instance, from a post card,

magazine, book or a personal picture you can carry with you). Describe this picture to yourself in detail when you start feeling absent. What scene do you see in the picture? Colors? Unexpected details? It is important to focus intensely on the picture in order to come back to the here and now.

Observe yourself:

It is helpful to interrupt dissociative phases as soon as possible. Therefore, it is important to recognize early signs of dissociation. When do the dissociations occur? Which cues can cause dissociation? Recognize early symptoms: Do you feel absent or disengaged beforehand? You can learn to recognize specific changes in your body as early as possible.

- *Observing exercise (p. 94)*

Mind-exercises:

Do mind-exercises that require focus and attention.

- *Mind-exercises (p. 86)*

Traumatic memories – Reliving what you went through

Some memories about what happened to you can take on a very specific intensity. They seem to ‘take over’ and ‘pop up’ involuntarily in your mind, over and over again. These traumatic memories are much more intense than normal memories.



They include stressful vivid images, thoughts, smells and sounds. Traumatic memories can be single fragments of the events, or appear as nightmares, full of accurate details about the events. The memories can be so intense and overwhelming that it feels as if you are actually going through the experiences again. You can have the same physical reactions as during the actual traumatic event, like sweating, increased heart rate or feeling strong fear. It can be a very frightening experience.

This happens because our brains are sometimes unable to deal with such stressful events and to process them correctly. During these recurrent traumatic memories, you lose touch with present reality, just as during dissociations. But while remembering traumatic memories, your mind actually relives what happened to you in the past. But you have to understand even though traumatic memories are very debilitating, they are not dangerous and are actually very common among people who went through traumatic events. They are a key symptom of a trauma related condition called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Specific traumatic memories are hard to pin down and are often part of a serious condition many people develop after a traumatic event. Try to understand better when and why traumatic memories occur. And when they appear, be kind to yourself and bring your mind back to the present.

If you suffer severely under these traumatic memories, it might be wise to seek professional help (e. g. a doctor).





What can help

Focus on your body and your surroundings:

Noticing all the different physical details of yourself and of our surroundings requires focus and can bring you back to the here and now. Feel your body and perceive your surroundings consciously through ears, nose, mouth, eyes and skin (your different senses). What do you hear or see for example?

- *Focusing exercise (p. 92)*

Physically change (something in) your situation:

Changing something in your situation will require more attention and thus bring you 'back' to the present: Drink a glass of water or wash your face. If you are sitting or lying down, stand up. Walk around, stretch, straighten up your back, reduce bodily tension (e. g. loosen your jaw, back, arms and legs by moving them). Change what you are doing. You can start cooking, cleaning or exercising. You could call a friend or do any other simple task you were not doing before.

Realize where you are:

When traumatic memories surface, it is important to restore your realization that you are not going through the traumatic events again. Realize where you are, by telling yourself loudly and clearly where you are and that you are safe now! Name as many details as possible: What country, city, neighborhood, street, building, room are you in? Who is with you? What are you doing? Repeat to yourself (out loud, if possible) you are safe now, you are not in the traumatic event, and nothing can happen to you anymore.

Describe an image:

Choose an image you like and that makes you feel good (for instance, from a postcard, magazine, book or a personal picture you can carry with you). Always use this picture and describe it to yourself in detail when you start feeling absent. What scene do you see in the picture? Colors? Unexpected details?

Observe yourself:

When do these memories occur? Can you detect a certain pattern? What causes these vivid memories? It may seem traumatic memories occur spontaneously, but they are often triggered by certain cues. These cues can be very diverse and you may even be unaware of them. A certain voice, object, sound or even smell can remind you of the event. It is very difficult to detect a certain pattern, but sometimes it may be possible to notice that these memories often occur in specific situations. Knowing the situation in which you often involuntarily experience stressful memories of the traumatic event helps you to better cope with the situation and to better understand your reactions.

- *Observing exercise (p. 94)*

Mind-exercises

Do mind-exercises that require focus and attention.

- *Mind-exercises (p. 86)*

Arousal and Aggression – Feeling on edge

In extreme situations, like fleeing your country, you have to be permanently alert and highly sensitive to anything around you – ready to react instantly at any possible threat. The heightened state of arousal can persist long afterwards, even after you have arrived somewhere safe.

An inner tension can make you feel restless, irritable, jumpy, anxious and easily startled (for instance after a small noise). This can lead to trouble sleeping and problems with concentration and memory. The smallest trigger (e. g. a noise or a picture that reminds you of a stressful event) can induce rage and aggressive behavior towards others (like shouting and hitting) or yourself (like hitting yourself or pulling your hair). Feeling this intense anger inside and fearing you cannot control yourself can be very scary. **It is understandable** if you feel angry towards others or 'the world' or yourself. If a form of inner arousal persists over a long time, it may also be part of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

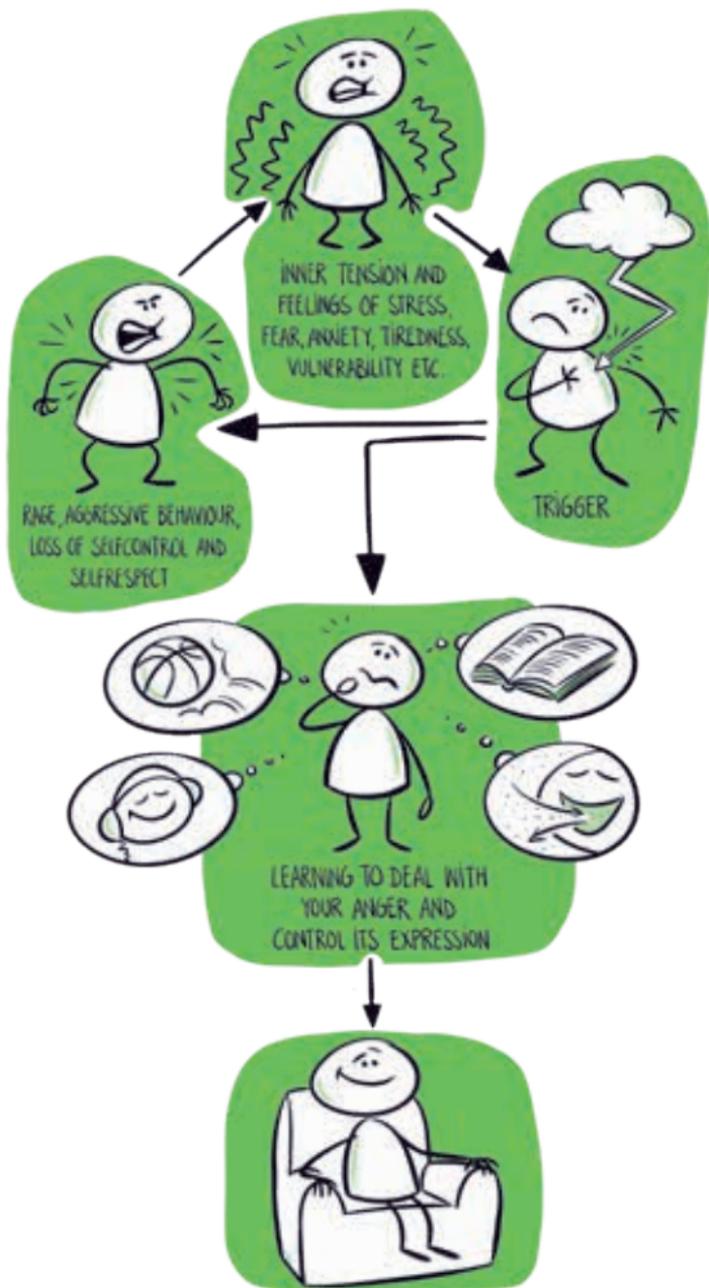




Case example

Ahmed gets up early and goes out to buy some food. Lately he has been feeling very tense and tired. He wants to have a few quiet moments to himself. When he opens the door to his flat, his two children run towards him and want to tell him about their day, giggling and laughing. Simultaneously, his wife asks him for the milk he was supposed to buy. He has forgotten it. He feels a lump in his throat, making it hard for him to swallow. His muscles tense up, and his forehead feels hot. His wife starts complaining, and they argue. The children start to cry because of the tension between their parents. Ahmed remembers all the loud noises and crying he heard during wartime. It was unbearable. Listening to his own children crying now is too much for him.

Ahmed cannot control himself anymore. He yells at the children to shut up, yells at his wife to stop nagging him all the time and throws the groceries against the wall. Angrily he runs off, feeling sorry about losing control and feeling even more tense and tired, afterwards.



The example illustrates how a trigger (crying children) can lead to an aggressive outburst (yelling, throwing groceries), especially when feelings of inner tension, stress etc. already exist. After the outburst, feelings of guilt often arise and lead to even more stress (feeling tense and tired).

In moments of tension, some people act aggressively towards others (e. g. their children) or themselves and often feel sorry afterwards. It is important to find a way to manage the aggression before losing control and hurting anyone.



What can help

Soothing activities:

Do something that normally helps you to relax (e. g. listening to music you like, looking at beautiful pictures). Feel free to create your own list of soothing activities.

- *Soothing activities (p. 85)*

Take a time-out:

Maybe you already know when you get tensed up. As soon as you notice your level of tension or aggression rising, leave the situation to calm down. If you are inside, go to another room for a few minutes or go outside to get some fresh air. Stay as long as you need for your anger to decrease.

Relaxation:

These simple techniques will help you to calm down. Practice them in a calm state first, so you know what to do when the tension arises.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (p. 87)*
- *Deep breathing (p. 90)*

Observe when inner tension and anger arise:

It is possible to learn to become aware of symptoms of inner tension and strong emotions when you start getting tense and before they appear uncontrollable. They do not appear suddenly out of nowhere. Here you can find some examples:

- *making a fist*
- *rigid tension over the entire body*
- *traightening up/making oneself tall*
- *talking in a loud, strong voice or yelling*
- *talking through one's teeth/strained voice*
- *rigid expression*
- *lump in the throat*
- *hot or burning face/feeling hot*
- *rising heart rate*
- *tearing up*
- *shaking of hands or body*

When you notice these symptoms appearing again, you can start trying to manage the aggression by leaving the situation. This will help you to feel in control again.

Physical exercise:

You can work to handle your aggression without harming yourself or others. You can choose physical exercises that help you blow off some steam, e. g. go running, or hit a punching bag. You will feel more relaxed afterwards.

- *Physical exercises (p. 82)*



Guilt

To flee from one's country is often the ultimate decision, the last resort. Many refugees endure severe hardship to finally have reached safety and possibly a better future. But after the first relief, many people feel guilt. Guilt means you think that somehow you did something wrong. You may feel it was wrong to leave alone, wrong to have left at all, or wrong you did not help others or somehow you did not try hard enough. Many people have thoughts beginning with 'If only I had ...'.



But guilt presupposes you always had a choice or you could have influenced the situation somehow. Under normal circumstances, this might have been so. But under stressful or traumatic circumstances, this is not possible. Guilt and also shame keep your focus on 'what may have been' in the past, making it difficult to adequately deal with your present situation, thus increasing the risk of psychological problems. Moreover, only few people admit feelings of guilt and shame, adding to the taboo and the burden of these feelings.



What can help

Be reasonable with yourself:

Remember flight and survival are actually an achievement. There is no offense in being alive and having made it somewhere else. Feel free to reassess your life. You are not guilty for having survived.

Assess your reasoning:

Sometimes, people feel guilty because they survived or escaped while loved ones or other people suffered or died. If you lost someone and feel guilty for having survived or escaped, it is important to deal with these emotions.

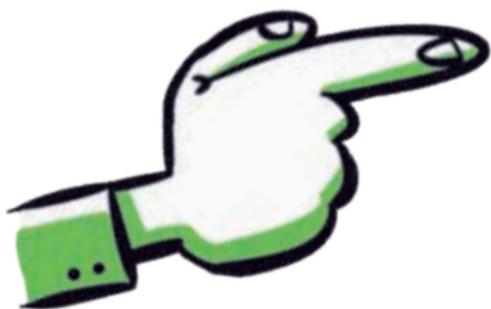
Looking back, the past events seem inevitable, and there is the impression that one should have known the outcome and could have changed it by acting differently. 'Hindsight is always easier than foresight'.

We often overestimate our scope of influence in hindsight and thus feel responsible or even guilty for the way things turned out. It is important to assess whether your reasoning is justified and relativize your scope of influence. What drove you to your decision? How did you feel in that situation? Did you have a choice? What were the opportunities? Also take into account the responsibility of other people (e. g. perpetrators) and factors that facilitated the situation (e. g. you had no time to think about your decision).

It can help to have an argument with yourself, being your own conscience on the one hand (which defends your past choices), and being your opponent (which causes the feelings of guilt) on the other hand. This technique is called 'the devil's advocate'. By taking the position of an opponent and arguing against your own reasoning, you might be able to put your feelings of guilt into perspective.

'Confess' your feelings of guilt and shame:

Keeping feelings of guilt or shame to yourself only intensifies those feelings. Talk about it to people you trust. If your situation allows it, you can also visit support groups. It will give you a chance to develop a fairer judgment about your actual guilt: Are you responsible for your situation and the decision to flee? Are you responsible for the situation in your home country? Are you responsible for what happened to you? It will also lift the taboo to talk about feeling guilty or ashamed. Feelings of guilt are actually very common among many people. There is no reason to be ashamed.



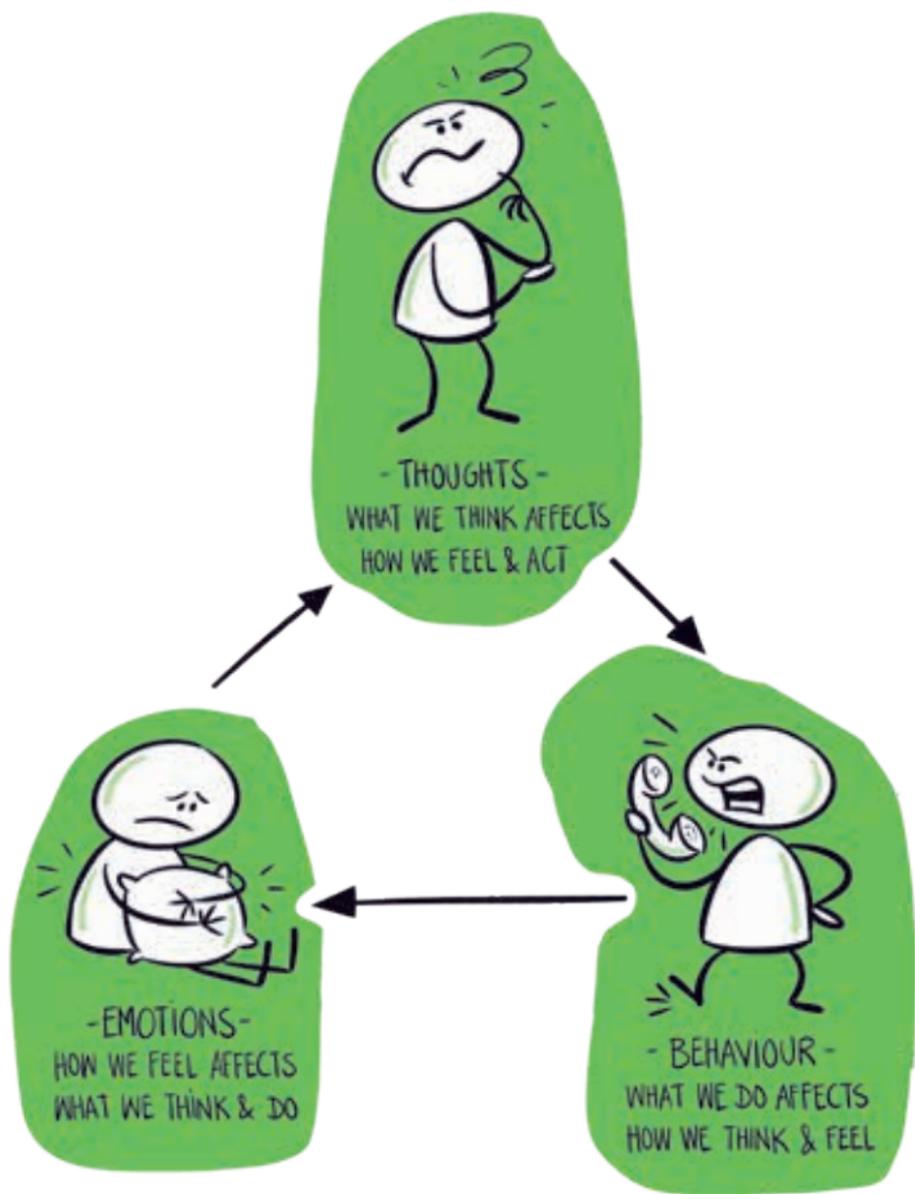
Feeling sad – Depressive mood



Sadness is one of the most basic human emotions. We cry, become quiet or withdraw from other people. Feeling sad is a natural and important process, **helping us** to work through issues until they make more sense and we can integrate them into our lives.

When we feel sad, we usually have negative thoughts (e. g. 'I will never make it. Why did all this happen to me? My life is worth nothing.'). Focusing our attention entirely on these negative thoughts, thinking about them again and again is called rumination. Rumination makes it much harder to focus on a solution or positive thinking rather than the problem.

Most noticeable, however, you may feel it in your body. You are tired, low on energy, and lose interest in activities you like. Or you might have an aching body, making the smallest activity an enormous challenge. A pronounced, overwhelming sadness may be part of a depression.





Case example

Ahmed is opening the door to his empty flat after a long day. In his new town, he does not know many people yet. Today, he was sitting alone in a snack bar. He wanted to talk to someone, but nobody seemed to notice him. He asked himself: 'What do they think about me? Surely, they don't like me. Nobody even tried to talk to me. Why is it always so hard for me? Is there something wrong with me?' After arriving at home, without turning on the lights, Ahmed walks to his bed and lies down. He feels exhausted and sad. A year ago, he had started to play football with a few people he had met in the meantime. He loves playing football, but lately he cannot make himself to go there either. He fears they might be angry with him.

This example illustrates the relation of thoughts (negative thoughts about people liking him), behavior (not talking to people, lying on the bed, not going out), and emotions (exhausted, sad, afraid).



What can help

Allow yourself to be sad:

Do acknowledge sadness is a normal reaction to many life events. Do not blame yourself for your emotions, but realize it will eventually help you to deal with important issues.

Allow yourself some distance:

Some distance through pleasant activities will help you to recuperate and gather some energy. Do one small pleasant thing every day. You can find some examples of positive activities in the following list and create your individual list if you like.

- *Pleasant activities (p. 83)*

Physical exercise:

If you exercise regularly, you will get physically and mentally healthier. Exercise will make you feel less tired. It reduces stress and helps you to relax better. Try to exercise regularly (preferably for a short time every day, e. g. 15 min). You will have the best effect if you exercise at the beginning of the day (e. g. in the morning hours).

- *Physical exercises (p. 82)*

Notice the small positive things:

When you feel sad, your brain tends to ignore the positive things. Although it can be difficult at first, writing down pleasant things automatically forces you to notice and better remember them. Keep a separate journal and write down one pleasant thing every day. This could just be something small. For instance, something beautiful you saw (a flower, a bird, a nice picture) or heard (chirping of a bird, music), a nice thing someone said, or something difficult you succeeded in doing (an activity, holding an appointment).

Meet with people you trust:

Spending time with others helps you feel better. You can also call or contact people you like. It is a good feeling to feel supported by people who know you well. You can just talk about positive or daily things. It is important to just spend time together.

Write a journal:

You can write about experiences, feelings and thoughts. It will help you to organize everything that is on your mind.

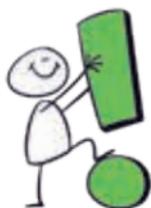
Sleeping problems

Not being able to sleep well at night is often one of the first and main problems arising when we are under stress. Sleeping problems comprise of not being able to fall asleep, waking repeatedly, lying awake for longer periods, or waking up much too early. 'Going to sleep' will become something you dread altogether.



Sleeping problems are often caused by similar reasons. It can be difficult to 'switch off' your mind during the night. Worries and thoughts keep us awake, or we relive events in our mind (common with depression or PTSD). The physical stress reactions (e. g. tension, fast heartbeat) themselves also prohibit a good sleep, because they are designed to keep us in a state of alertness.

It is thus perfectly understandable and normal to have trouble sleeping, being a refugee in exile. The incredible amount of stress connected to this event makes it almost inevitable. Expect your sleep to get better when circumstances calm down again. In the meantime, some practical tips can help.



What can help

Evening rituals:

Small and simple evening rituals before you go to bed help you 'tune in' to the night. They do not need to be elaborate. They can be as simple as putting on your pajamas. Something will only become a ritual if you do it every day before going to sleep. Feel free to create your own list of evening rituals.

- *Possible evening rituals (p. 85)*

Do not look at the clock:

Looking at a clock during the night often heightens the pressure to finally fall asleep and often results in even more restlessness and problems falling asleep. So, it is better to have no clocks etc. next to where you sleep.

Avoid or reduce substances:

Caffeine (in coffee, tea, or beverages like Coke) keeps us awake. Therefore, it should be avoided several hours before going to sleep. It is helpful to set a fixed time for yourself, after which you do not drink caffeine anymore, e. g. five hours before going to bed.

Nicotine (in cigarettes) activates our brains and keeps us awake. We have problems falling asleep. Withdrawal symptoms interrupt our sleep during the night. If you have recently stopped smoking, the sleeping problems might get worse before they get better.

Medication can affect your body and mind. Ask your doctor about your medication and always discuss a possible change in medication with him/her, especially if it is a prescription drug.

Alcohol and cannabis will at first help you to fall asleep, but will disturb your sleep during the rest of the night and cause you to wake up early.

Physical exercise:

If you exercise regularly, you will get physically and mentally healthier. It reduces stress and helps you relax and thus sleep better. Try to exercise regularly (preferably every day, e. g. 15 min). You will have the best effect, if you exercise at the beginning of the day (e. g. in the morning hours).

- *Physical exercises (p. 82)*

Avoid emotional excitement:

You need to be relaxed to sleep well, so avoid excitement before and during the night. For instance, in the hours before going to bed, do not have heated emotional discussions or go on the Internet to look for news about your home country. What happens in your home country understandably preoccupies your mind, but dealing with this (or other emotional topics) will make it even more difficult to sleep.

Relaxation:

Practice these simple techniques shortly before you want to sleep. Generally, anything that helps you to relax before you go to bed will help you to sleep better.

- *Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) (p. 87)*
- *Deep breathing (p. 90)*

Sleep schedule:

Try to always go to bed around the same time as well as getting up at the same time to teach your body a consistent sleep-wake rhythm. If possible, avoid daytime naps. A clear distinction between day and night will help you to sleep better.

Sleeping environment:

It is very hard or impossible to influence your sleeping conditions during flight or in a refugee home. If you are able to influence your conditions, there are a few things you can do. Try to arrange your sleeping environment to be as dark, cool, with good ventilation and as quiet as possible during the night. For instance, try not to have any loud conversations or music directly next to you. If there is daylight or another source of light, you can cover your eyes (with a piece of clothing or a towel). Against noise, you can use earplugs. When you go to sleep, your bed should be used solely for the purpose of sleeping. There should be no other items or food in or on the bed, nor should there be other people sitting on the bed.

Grief

Grieving is universal and a natural response to loss. We grieve when we lose a loved one, but we grieve in other situations as well. For instance, when we lose our homes, countries, sense of security, hopes, health. People grieve in many different ways. Crying is very natural, but any other reaction is perfectly healthy as well, even if for others it appears unusual.

When we mourn, we normally go through different phases.



The phases of grief:

One phase is shock, denial of the loss, emotional numbness and apathy.

In another phase, strong emotions like deep sadness, anger, restlessness and anxiety occur. Sleeping problems, symptoms like being cold or losing appetite often begin during this phase.

A strong longing for the person lost or the past and a permanent (painful) confrontation with reality classify another phase of grief.

Finally, there is acceptance of the loss. A level of normal functioning in daily life is possible again. The loss is integrated into the 'new' life. New relationships and new possibilities can be envisioned again.

But the process of grieving is very personal and differs from person to person. Phases sometimes overlap, can be longer or shorter or can be skipped completely. Some factors can make it more difficult to actually grieve and deal with your loss. For instance: If you lost a loved one through violence, if you still live in an insecure and difficult situation, or if you lack support from your surroundings. But even then, there are ways to ease the process.



What can help

Allow yourself to grieve:

Allow yourself to grieve and expect to feel better with time. Acknowledge that grief is a normal and important reaction and absolutely necessary to overcome loss. Any form of grieving is okay, whether it is crying, shouting, being silent, talkative or anything else. Give yourself as much time as you need for the grieving process. Allow yourself also to feel better with time. This does not mean your loved one (or your country) is forgotten! Your past and your loved ones will always be a part of you, but dealing with your grief will also allow you to direct yourself towards the present and your future.

Grieving rituals:

Grieving rituals bring relief and will help you to regain control over your feelings. What rituals you find helpful may depend on your culture or religion. Plan times when you remember and grieve. For instance, one day a week or a limited time every day. Reserving time to consciously grieve will allow you to focus on other aspects of your life at other times. There are religious grieving rituals you can carry out in private like praying or reading a holy book. Other religious grieving rituals you can perform with or in the presence of others, like singing, praying, organizing a memorial service. You can also write a letter to the person you lost as a grieving ritual. Keep a journal in which you regularly write about the difficult time in your life.

Support from people around you:

Accept expressions of condolences and sympathy. Talk to people you trust about your loss. Explain to your surroundings that you need time to grieve. Talking about your loss to others can be a great source of comfort.

Support groups:

If your situation allows it, you can visit support groups. Some communities offer the possibility to meet with people who offer support in times of need.

Allow yourself some distance:

Some distance through pleasant activities will help you to recuperate and to regain some energy. Do one small pleasant thing every day. You can find some examples of positive activities in the following list and create your individual list if you like.

- *Pleasant activities (p. 83)*

Background information:

Depression

The main symptoms of a clinical depression are an overwhelmingly low mood and loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities that you enjoyed before. These problems have to occur for at least two weeks. The symptoms cause problems in daily functioning (for instance, you will not be able to hold appointments or meet friends, do household chores, cook, etc.). The activities you are engaged in require an incredible amount of effort and energy. Other symptoms can be divided into three groups:



Physical symptoms:

E. g. poor concentration and memory, forgetfulness, sleeping problems, fatigue, headaches, digestive problems, changed appetite (most commonly – but not always – losing appetite, resulting in weight loss).



Cognitive symptoms:

E. g. ruminating or a preoccupation with negative thoughts (about worthlessness, inappropriate guilt, helplessness, hopelessness, and thoughts of death or suicide).



Behavioral symptoms:

E. g. withdrawal from social situations and activities, reduced sex drive, agitated or lethargic behavior, slowing down of movements.

These symptoms all interact with each other. Someone who is overly tired and who suffers from headaches, will understandably not go out so often. This will reinforce negative thoughts like 'I am good for nothing', 'I am weak' or 'I cannot handle it anyway'. And these thoughts will make someone less likely to be active (e. g. not meeting friends, watching television all day, not taking a shower), which in turn can lead to more physical complaints.



All these different symptoms interact in what is called the feedback loop of depression'. The depressed mood is maintained and further pushed downwards by this loop.

If this is the case with your symptoms and you suffer severely, it might be best to seek professional help.



Background information:

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

A trauma is a profound damage to your mind. Just as you can get physically injured, your mind can get seriously injured as well. A trauma is evoked by experiencing, witnessing or hearing about extremely shocking and overwhelming events, such as the death of a loved one, torture, sexualized violence, a bomb attack and many more. These events often involve serious physical injury or death (of someone else), making you fear for your life or security, and making you feel completely helpless.



After a trauma, some people develop PTSD symptoms:

- *Reliving a trauma through involuntary memories during nightmares or during the daytime can make it seem as if you are back in the traumatic situation.*
- *Hyperarousal (e. g. inner tension, restlessness, outbursts of rage, sleeping and memory problems)*
- *Avoidance behavior (e. g. avoiding certain people, places, thoughts, topics associated with the trauma).*

The symptoms can start within a few weeks after the traumatic experience, but they can also start months later.



Case example

Ahmed had to flee from the violence in his country. During his flight, he was detained in one of the transit countries, where he suffered from bad conditions and maltreatment. Even though he is in a safe situation now, he continues to feel threatened, tense and restless.

Ahmed is on his way to visit a friend who lives close by. As always, he constantly checks his surroundings for possible threats making it hard to concentrate on the right direction. Suddenly he hears the sirens of a police car and they remind him of his detainment. Covering his ears and eyes does not prevent the memories of the past events to come up. It feels like he is back in the past, and it takes him a while to come back to the here and now. His heart is racing, his skin is wet from sweat and he cannot stop shaking. He goes home, deciding not to visit his friend anymore or even to go out at all, unless it is absolutely necessary. Ahmed goes to bed, but falling asleep is hard. All the time, he has nightmares of his detainment.

This example illustrates, how a trigger (sirens of a police car) can lead to involuntarily reliving of a trauma (memories of past events coming up) and to the feeling of being in the situation again with the same physical symptoms (racing heart, sweat, shaking body). Constantly feeling threatened leads to hyperarousal (feeling tensed, restless, sleeping and concentration problems). Consequently, avoiding certain situations seems to be the only option (not to visit a friend, not to leave the house).

The symptoms are a normal reaction to abnormal experiences. Nearly everyone would be affected after such experiences. When the post-traumatic stress symptoms go on for too long, they are called a post-traumatic stress disorder. If this is the case with your symptoms and you suffer severely, it might be best to seek professional help.

Exercises Lists

List of possible physical exercises

The list below offers suggestions for possible physical exercises. You can also try out your own ideas.

- stretch
- go for a walk
- run
- sit-ups
- pull-ups
- push-ups
- air-bike
- bicep workout
- gymnastics/aerobic
- skip rope
- play soccer
- play tag
- throw a ball
- ride a bicycle
- squats/knee bends
- triceps-dips
- climb stairs

List of possible pleasant activities

*The list below offers suggestions for pleasant activities.
You can also try out your own ideas.*

- play a board game
- play cards
- read religious text
- pray
- read a book
- read a magazine
- play an instrument
- sit somewhere and have some quiet time to yourself
- hear some nice music
- go for a stroll
- play soccer
- smell flowers
- do needlework
- knit
- crochet
- enjoy the sun
- watch the stars
- look at nice pictures
- draw
- shower
- eat sth. you like
- study/learn something new
- repair sth.
- collect nice things
- spend time with/observe animals

- listen to sounds of nature (birds, leaves in the wind ...)
- dance
- meet others
- help others
- sit in the sun
- spend time in/
observe nature
- watch the sky/clouds
- write a diary
- daydream
- go to a library
- call friends/family
- cook food you like
- eat with friends
- chat with somebody
- go to a religious event
- jogging
- go to a hairdresser/
barber
- share a smile
- smoke a cigarette
- hum to yourself
- sing a song
- invite friends
- watch the sky/clouds

List of possible evening rituals

The list below offers suggestions for possible evening rituals. You can also try out your own ideas.

- put on pajamas
- drink a cup of tea
- offer good night wishes
- say a prayer
- read a (holy)book
- do a crossword puzzle
- hear some nice music

List of possible soothing activities

The list below offers suggestions for possible soothing activities. You can also try out your own ideas.

- look at a nice picture
- drink a cup of tea
- draw
- say a prayer
- read a (holy)book
- do a crossword puzzle
- hear some nice music
- look at a nice picture
- watch the sky/clouds
- enjoy the sun

List of possible mind-exercises

The list below offers suggestions for mind exercises. You can also try out your own ideas.

- count your steps (or every second step)
- name first names starting with the letter A (and B, C, and ...)
- name cars, plants (or any other object) in alphabetical order
- spell words backwards
- count back from 100 to 1
- name the capitals of all the countries you know
- count back from 100 by subtracting 7 each time
- say the alphabet backwards

Relaxation exercises

PMR – Progressive muscle relaxation

Our body and mind are connected. When we are in stressful situations or have stressful thoughts our body automatically tenses and vice versa. We can positively influence our mind by deliberately relaxing our body.

In PMR, each muscle group is first tensed, and then released, causing the muscles to relax. This allows you to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation, thus leading to a heightened body awareness and enabling you to relax your body accordingly. The main goal of PMR is relaxation. If any part of the exercise is uncomfortable (because it is too difficult for now or you have any injuries) you can just skip that part.

Note: Sometimes it is difficult to relax at all after bad experiences and your body feels tensed all the time. PMR helps in this situation as well, because muscles automatically relax after being specifically tensed and your body learns how to relax again.

Below you can find a written version of the PMR-exercise.



Sit or lie comfortably. If you want, close your eyes. Focus your attention on different parts of your body in sequence. Go through the sequence three times.

After each round, notice the difference between tension and relaxation

- ***First round:*** tense & release. Tense the body parts, hold it for a few moments, then relax.
- ***Second round:*** lightly tense & release. Tense the body parts with just enough tension to notice, then relax.
- ***Third round:*** release only. Just pay attention to each muscle group and decide to relax.

Recommended sequence for the body parts:

- ***Right hand and arm:*** clench the fist and tighten the muscles in the arm.
- ***Left hand and arm:*** clench the fist and tighten the muscle in the arm.
- ***Right leg:*** tense the leg, lifting the knee slightly.
- ***Left leg:*** tense the leg, lifting the knee slightly.
- ***Stomach:*** tense the muscles in the stomach
- ***Back muscle:*** pull the shoulders back slightly.
- ***Neck and throat:*** push the head back slightly into the pillow/surface.
- ***Face:*** scrunch up the muscles in your face.

After each part feel the effect and linger for a moment in the relaxation.

Exercise regularly, possibly every day. It is usually a good idea to start practicing regularly when you are relaxed, and then use this technique routinely when you come across any stressful situation.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing is a natural and relaxed form of breathing and we do it automatically whenever we are relaxed. We can use the relation between deep breathing and relaxation and consciously breathe deeply in and out to relax ourselves when we feel e. g. anxiety or stress. When we feel tense, angry, scared or stressed our breathing becomes shallow. If our breathing is shallow, we do not get the amount of oxygen that our body needs to function properly. With deep breathing, a maximum amount of oxygen goes into our bloodstream and nourishes our brain and all of our cells.

Below you can find a written version of the deep breathing-exercise.



Sit or lie comfortably. If you want, close your eyes. Take a smooth, deep and slow inhalation through the nose (rather than your mouth), to a count of 4, then pause for a moment.

Exhale slowly and completely, again to the count of 4. Make sure your exhalation is particularly smooth.

Repeat this 5–10 times, several (e. g. three) times a day.

It can be helpful to put one hand on your chest and the other on your belly while breathing. This way, you can feel where the air flows.

Find a slow breathing rhythm that is comfortable for you. Counting to 4 isn't an absolute rule. Try 3 or 5. The important thing is that the breathing is slow and steady.

Some people find the sensation of relaxing to be unusual or uncomfortable at first, but this normally passes with practice. Do persist and keep practicing.

It is usually a good idea to start practicing regularly when you are relaxed, and then use this technique routinely when you come across any stressful situation.

Focusing on your body and physical surroundings

Noticing the different physical details of yourself and of your surroundings requires focus. This brings you back to the here-and-now and reduces stress.

Below you can find a written version of the focusing-exercise.



Try to focus on everything you can smell, taste, hear, feel or see around you as consciously as possible. These are our senses, through which we perceive the world. Focus on the different senses one by one. You can describe every aspect in your head or out loud, and in as much detail as possible.

What can you smell?

Intensive smells like flowers, perfume, foods.

What can you hear?

Can you hear music, the tweeting of birds, cars humming, people talking, the wind? Do you hear different sounds? Do you hear any low noises in the background?

What can you taste?

Try some very strong, intensive tastes, like hot pepper, chili, lemon or ginger. What do you notice in your mouth? And in the rest of your body?

What can you feel?

Do you feel the clothes on your skin? The light pressure of armrests or your shoes? You can also snap a hair tie around your wrist, hold a rough stone/massage ball in your hand or rub it on your skin of your arms and legs, rub a cold/cool object on your skin (like an ice cube or a cool pad wrapped in a cloth).

What can you see?

Visually describe your surroundings: where are you? What objects do you see? What colors and shapes? First describe the generalities, then slowly go into more detail as you proceed. Do you see dust or any unexpected details?

Observe yourself

Before inner tension and emotions seem uncontrollable (e. g. before having a rage or feeling deeply sad), there is normally a phase where you could observe first signs (muscles tensing or a negative thought popping up in your mind). Although it does take some practice, it is possible to learn to observe these signs clearer and earlier in the process, thus giving you a chance to react.

Below you can find a written version of the observing-exercise.



Train yourself to observe your emotions. For every emotion, notice what is happening in your body and what thoughts you have. It can be helpful to imagine describing all these aspects to someone else. Someone you would like to understand exactly what is happening with you.

First, practice naming the physical signs/symptoms and thoughts accompanying positive emotions, for instance, when feeling relaxed or looking forward to something. This is normally easier than naming the signs/symptoms and thoughts accompanying negative emotions.

Gradually practice naming physical signs accompanying less negative emotions, like eating food you do not like or being tired.

Finally, try naming your physical signs/symptoms and thoughts when you have strong emotions, like when you are really angry or deeply sad.

Exercise regularly, whenever possible. It doesn't take much time and when it becomes a routine, it will get easier and easier.

Impressum

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