**Caring conversations** – 

**Trauma & Covid 19**

**What can be achieved in offering caring conversations?**

At the time of writing the UK has been on lockdown to minimise the spread of Corona virus. Public sector workers and those working on the frontline in key roles are more vulnerable than others in experiencing traumatic situations.

It can be a great help to have someone to talk to who can listen with empathy.



**Part 1**

## The emotional response to Covid19 or other traumatic events

It’s normal to experience traumatic stress following a disturbing event, whether it’s the Covid19 pandemic, a traffic accident, violent crime or any disturbing event. A person may feel intense shock, confusion, and fear, feel numb or overwhelmed by a host of conflicting emotions, sometimes all at once.

These emotions aren’t limited to the people who experienced the event with 24 hour news and social media coverage means that we’re all bombarded with horrific images of tragedy, suffering, and loss almost the instant they occur anywhere in the world. Repeated exposure can overwhelm your nervous system and create traumatic stress just as if you experienced the event firsthand.

### Emotional symptoms of traumatic stress include:

* **Shock and disbelief**. You have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened, or feel numb and disconnected from your feelings.
* **Fear**. You worry that the same thing will happen again, or that you’ll lose control or break down.
* **Sadness or grief,** especially if people you know died or suffered life-altering consequences.
* **Helplessness**. The sudden, unpredictable nature of crisis like pandemics can leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless, and even trigger anxiety or depression.
* **Guilt** that you survived when others died or feeling that you could have done more.
* **Anger**. You may be angry at God, governments, or others you feel are responsible, or be prone to emotional outbursts.
* **Shame**, especially over feelings or fears that you can’t control.
* **Relief**. You may feel relieved that the worst is over, that you weren’t as badly affected as others, or even hopeful that your life will return to normal.

### Physical symptoms include:

* **Feeling dizzy or faint**, stomach tightening or churning, excessive sweating.
* **Trembling, shaking**, experiencing cold sweats, having a lump in your throat, or feeling choked up.
* **Rapid breathing**, pounding heart, even chest pains or difficulty breathing.
* **Racing thoughts**, being unable to rest or stop pacing. You may also have difficulty concentrating, memory problems, or confusion.
* **Changes in your sleeping patterns**. You experience insomnia or nightmares, for example.
* **Unexplained aches and pains,** including headaches, changes in sexual function.
* **Loss or increase in appetite** or excessive consumption of alcohol, nicotine, or drugs.

**Remember we are not professional counsellors and there is no expectation of that but hopefully this Guidance note will help you be more confident talking to our members who are suffering Trauma.**

**Part 2 -** Just **be there**

You may feel you don’t have the right skills. Research shows that peer support can often be more helpful than that from a professional. We relate better to our peers even if they are strangers.

Be available by phone, video call or in person (if appropriate); don’t feel you have to offer solutions just listening, accepting and acknowledging the situation is ….desperate…..sad….frightening can be a good start.

Empathy and sympathy:

In general, sympathy is when you share the feelings of another; empathy is when you understand the feelings of another but do not necessarily share them. There is an element of pity in sympathy. It is worth while remembering to show we understand we are separate individuals, avoid “I know how you feel” insert “that sounds difficult” “that must be hard.”

You need to also need to look after your own well being and recognise when you are becoming exhausted yourself. You can’t help others if your concentration is poor.

Leave your chair more regularly as involvement emotional calls can make us unaware of the passage of time.

Share good news with your colleagues, share struggles. Make formal time for tea breaks and leave phones for a short time 15 minutes for a break with a minimum 30 minutes to eat and rest.

**So here are a few tips**

* Let the person speak at their own pace
* Let the person know that you’re there to listen and adopt Active listening which means being patient and waiting for the gaps.
* Don’t let fears about saying or doing the wrong thing stop you - Use similar language, not to an extent that you feel uncomfortable but flex your style to be more or less formal.
* Make notes, if you are used to typing everything use a pen for now, the keyboard noise can be distracting for some.
* If the person becomes overwhelmed tell them you have time and can wait just reassure them you are still there. If you need to ask if you can call them back...
* Be mindful of your own wellbeing if you are finding it difficult , perhaps because of past experience, and get a colleague to call the person back
* Understand that everyone thresholds are different.
* When appropriate maintain your support – maybe through your Branch Welfare Officer or signpost to GP or other Professional services
* Take talk of suicide very seriously**.** If a grieving person talks about suicide encourage them to talk to their GPOffer to call them back to see how they are and you should discuss any concerns with your Line Manager/Colleague

**Part 3. How can someone be less anxious and more Resilient?**

Situations where we have no control, where the future is uncertain or where we are dealing with many unknowns including dealing with illness can impact on a persons resilience to Trauma.

After allowing the caller to describe their situation, it may be appropriate to lead the conversation to things they do have control over. Be aware of your own resilience and what boosts or weakens your own resilience?

If the person is open and would find it helpful make suggestions.

**Things you could suggest:**

* Ask the caller what they would normally do to de-stress.
* Common helpful behaviours include, anything which resets anxiety and anxious breathing, walking, talking, singing, repetitive tasks, baking, bird watching, having a bath, helping others, faith, spirituality.
* Controlled breathing in for 2 out for 3, in for 3 out for 4 there are claims this helps with sleep too. It helps us to breathe deeper whereas anxious breathing is shallow.
* Reminding people that tasks requiring concentration are more difficult when we feel anxious and can lead to further anxiety and frustration.
* On the other hand short practical tasks seem to draw many people hence the increase in cleaning and clearing out.
* Encourage people to reach out particularly if they live alone, Get in touch with people you haven’t seen for a while. Their news is new.
* Note, sometimes people may feel that being asked to be more resilient seems like being asked to take responsibility for feeling better/ doing better when this may feel impossible, it is likely if the person feels like this you will know because they will find it difficult to engage in any listing of helpful behaviours, in which case allowing the person to describe how they feel will be helpful for them.)
* Avoid reliving the incident or constant news watching which increase and maintain anxiety.
* Encourage healthy eating and good sleep – avoid alcohol and substance use
* If overly self critical re-assure them



**Part 6: Offering practical assistance**

There are practical ways as UNISON Activists or Staff we can help a person with assistance or by signposting and making them aware of services from UNISON and other organisations:

**UNISON There for You**

UNISON's Welfare Charity assists members experiencing financial and emotional difficulties. Members can contact our welfare charity "There for You" which provides a confidential advice and support service for members and their dependants.

<https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/>

**Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)**

UNISON Staff can use our EAP helpline and online resources. This service is entirely confidential. If a member of staff would like to speak to a trained counsellor, please telephone 0800 072 7072.

Staff can also access lots of information and guidance on a variety of practical, medical and wellbeing topics through the [EAP Online Portal](http://www.axabesupported.co.uk). When prompted callers should enter the username "unison" and password EAPun08. Staff can also have counselling via am online "chat" service if they prefer not to speak on the phone.

**Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland**

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland (CBCS) exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people in Scotland. CBCS seek to help anyone experiencing bereavement to understand their grief and cope with their loss.

They have specific information about bereavement and the pandemic.

For more information on Bereavement see our Caring Conversations - Bereavement & Covid19 Guidance Note

E-Mail [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk) Telephone 0808 808 1677

**NHS Inform**

Scotland's national health information service can be reached at www.nhsinform.scot. NHS Inform provides information on how to look after your mental wellbeing.

**Samaritans**

Samaritans provides phone and email support for anyone who's feeling low, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide. Phone: 116 123 (24 hours a day 365 days a year).

**Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)**

Scotland's national mental health charity. Provides information, links and resources about how to protect your mental health. Contact [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk)

**Young Scot**

Scotland's national youth information and citizenship charity for 11-26 year Find them here: https://young.scot/

**Breathing Space**

Breathing Space aims to provide the people of Scotland with assistance at an early stage in order to stop problems escalating with empathy, understanding and advice through active listening as well as direction for those who do not know where to seek help

<https://breathingspace.scot/how-we-can-help/what-we-do/>

Helpline number: 0800 83 85 87

