

Whenever it rains ...

Our inner selves after the disaster

What trauma means
and how to deal with it

For many of us, flood events have turned our world upside down, showing us how vulnerable we are.

Apart from physical injuries, there are also psychological ones. And just like the physical wounds, some psychological ones also need treatment or support, because they cannot heal entirely on their own.

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1. About this booklet

Psychological injuries are called **trauma**, and they may happen in different ways. There is no general rule as to how they come about. Some people break a leg just by missing a step, while others have a fall over several metres and come out unscathed. The cause of an injury does not necessarily say anything about its severity.

The same applies to psychological injuries. This is why we want everyone to feel addressed, no matter what they have gone through. Trauma is a normal response of normal people to abnormal situations and may affect everyone.

This booklet aims to explain the **foundations** of how such injuries may manifest themselves and what you can do about it. It is strictly about the basics. Naturally, we are unable to cover all conceivable cases; there are always exceptions and peculiarities, and there is always more to learn about a topic.

Taking breaks



It can be very emotional, indeed devastating, to read about, and deal with, these issues. This is why this booklet regularly suggests taking a break.

We offer small exercises or diversions to give the mind time out in an effort to regain calm. Such “breaks” are also useful in everyday life. They are easy to find in this booklet; they are marked with the icon shown above.

About us

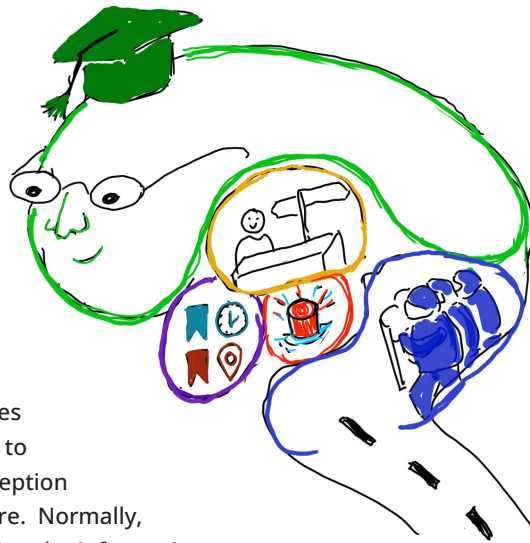
In July 2021, a devastating flood destroyed large parts of our home region in the west of Germany. It claimed countless lives and left clear traces on people’s psyche.

After the flood, a number of committed citizens set up the LEADER Region Voreifel – Die Bäche der Swist to work together to make our region more resilient. Our first project was “Whenever it rains ... – our inner selves after the disaster”, a trauma information series for which this booklet was put together.

We hope that the following pages may also offer some initial emotional help to people affected in other regions of Europe and elsewhere.

2. How trauma develops

This is a simplified illustration to help you imagine our BRAIN:



The yellow section is like a **RECEPTION**: this is where all information first arrives. The head receptionist decides what is important enough to be let in and what isn't. Reception also decides what goes where. Normally, **PLACE AND TIME** are added to the information in the purple section. In this way, you know, for example, that you see a flower and that you see it standing in a meadow today. This is passed on to the green section, which we call **DOC** because it is a super thinker. It can think rationally, weigh things and process all the information passed on by reception.

In our example, it weighs the pros and cons of picking the flower. Eventually, it decides to send the "pick the flower" information to the blue **A-TEAM**.

The A-Team comprises the **action forces** who are able to respond and intervene quickly but do not necessarily think a lot themselves. They either do what the Doc says or they respond to dangers by instinct.

In case of danger, there is an **EMERGENCY PLAN**:



RECEPTION receives something that is too much for the receptionist to deal with. It decides not to do anything except pushing the emergency button.



Immediately, the **RED ALERT** is set off to signal danger and a state of emergency. This is the sign for the action forces (A-Team): they turn out immediately, no matter what is going on where. Because everything has to happen really fast, the **A-TEAM** takes action without the **DOC**. This means, at the end of the day, that you **act without thinking**.

The **A-TEAM** makes you **fight, flight or freeze**. At the same time, it blocks the part of the brain that can think rationally. The A-Team pumps up your muscles to make them strong and drives up your heart rate and breathing so you can respond really fast. This can help save your life – because you can quickly jump aside when, for example, something heavy flies toward you.



Yet when you can't do anything or not enough to avert danger, the strength of your muscles is of no help. You feel terribly helpless. In that case, the **A-TEAM** triggers a **survival instinct**: the reflex to play dead. Your body simply freezes, unable to act or think properly. This is then a **trauma**.

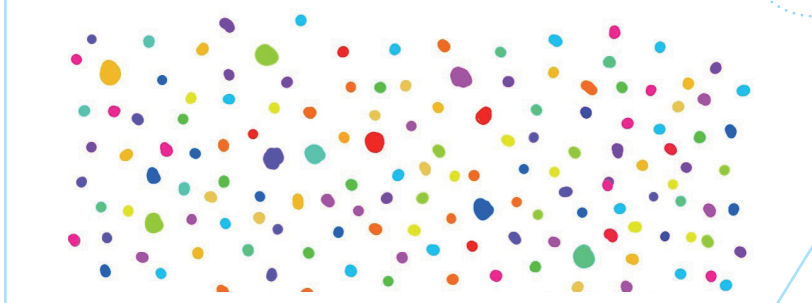
The **EMERGENCY CENTRE** will remember the situation for the future so that it will not repeat itself, if at all possible. It will save it, so to say, as “danger to life” in the speed dial memory.

As a result, in the future, anything that indicates a similar situation (e.g. a smell, a sound, a feeling, an image, no matter what) will be directly regarded as an emergency.

The **ALERT** will be triggered before the **HEAD RECEPTIONIST** is able to respond at all, while the **ACTION FORCES** turn out even when nothing has happened. They either run down Panic Lane or smash everything to bits. Because there are no markers for space and time, they often do not really know when they are where. The Doc only wakes up after the event to wonder what has actually happened.

If that happens in the brain, it's called a “flashback”. It is an effect of the trauma and feels dreadful in most cases. Yet those affected are unable to explain it.

Which colours can you currently see around you? Please tick.



3. Types of trauma

There are many different types of trauma. First, we have to distinguish between the *event* and the *consequences of the event* to the individual. People would mostly call both a trauma, but in reality, it is only the response that is the actual trauma.

Monotrauma

Events can be of a very different nature. In case of an individual event, the term is monotrauma: a single dreadful experience that is traumatizing but is over soon, such as a car accident, an assault or the like.

Sequential trauma

We speak of a sequential trauma when there is one bad experience, or several smaller ones, that lead to many other insecurities. For example, the flood which destroyed people's homes meant that everything had to be rebuilt from scratch which in turn led to financial worries etc.

Complex trauma

Another case is people having terrible experiences again and again over prolonged periods of time, e.g. abuse, war or domestic violence. They change especially children's and young people's feelings of security in the very long term. This is then called a complex trauma.

These types of trauma are not mutually exclusive. It is always possible that several things come together. Often, a new trauma reminds the brain and the body of previous traumatic events. It may be that you are hit harder than those without pre-existing traumas. However, none of that is predestined.

4. Trauma-related disorders

Apart from the different types of trauma caused by a variety of events, there are also various consequences. Symptoms and illnesses developing in the wake of trauma are called trauma-related disorders.

The consequences of trauma interfere with your **daily life** on a longer-term basis, for example through

- Nightmares,
- Sleeping disorders,
- Hypersensitivity:
Irritations, angry outbursts, crying fits, extreme body tension, feelings of intensity,
- Hyposensitivity:
Everything feels dull, nothing feels real,
- Bodily pain and stress,
- Racing thoughts, a chaotic mind.

A trauma may cause a variety of **mental health conditions**.

Examples are:

Depression

- Everything seems to be too much;
- Everything appears to be somehow meaningless;
- Sometimes, there is no strength to do anything at all;
- Often, you feel somehow stupid, dull and worthless;
- You are unable to feel real pleasure.

Anxiety and panic disorders

- Anxiety is omnipresent: it either turns up suddenly in certain situations or you worry all the time about trivial things;
- A strong feeling that everything will go wrong;
- An inability to relax, because you always worry about the next anxiety attack.

Post-traumatic stress disorders

- Nightmares;
- Memories of the events or of dreadful experiences come back, even against your will;
- Thoughts, feelings, images, sounds or smells associated with the traumatic situation pop up out of nowhere;
- A reluctance to think or speak about what happened because it's so terrible;
- An inability to think or speak about anything else because you are so troubled by it;
- Restlessness, jumpiness and nervousness.

Children and young people

Trauma symptoms manifest themselves a little differently in children and young people. They, too, are anxious or nervous, have flashbacks and nightmares. Yet in contrast to adults, they are not really able to avoid remembering traumatic situations because their daily lives are often determined by others. In addition, they also show the following symptoms:

In children

1. Repetition in play and games

Small children, in particular, replay or draw the traumatic events or parts of them again and again.

2. Developmental regression

Things that have already worked well no longer do, such as falling asleep alone, going to school, stopping bed-wetting etc. This can refer to all sorts of things depending on how old the child is and what they last learned.

In children and young people

3. Loss of trust

Children and young people suddenly no longer feel safe with people they could previously trust. They often become more anxious and mistrustful.

4. Emotional overload

Many withdraw or are downcast. Some may become aggressive because they don't know what to do with themselves.

5. Nervousness and restlessness

Those affected are no longer able to focus. Often, they have problems at school or give the impression of being distracted and somewhere else.

6. Physical symptoms

The body responds to psychological injuries. Many are in pain or feel unwell. Some fall ill repeatedly without an identifiable cause.

These are indications, but no clear-cut, reliable signals. It is necessary to have a close look and consider the individual case.

Secondary traumatization

It may happen that people who only wanted to help are traumatized themselves. This may even be the case when they were not in the traumatizing situation at all. They may, for example, advise or support others and hear many dreadful details. They may read about terrible events and see images and will sympathize with the people who went through all that.

It may then seem after a while as if they went through all the bad things themselves, which in turn may trigger trauma-related disorders.

This is why it is especially important **for all those in supporting roles** to be aware of this and take care of themselves!

5. Types of therapy

There are different options for treating trauma. The two essential approaches are top-down and bottom-up.

Top-Down

The top-down approach focuses on the brain and understanding. The idea behind it is that trauma is something so serious that it is too much to understand and imagine. When the experiences can be explained and understood, the trauma is undone.

A therapy based on the top-down approach involves talking about events, trying to understand them and put feelings into perspective. Internal images and ideas are also part of the process.

Examples are:

- Narrative therapy,
- Imagination therapy (e.g. PITT, TRIMB),
- Working with internal elements.

Bottom-Up

The bottom-up approach starts with the body. The idea behind it is that trauma is fear stuck in the body and the nervous system. When helping the body to release energy and calm down, the trauma is processed.

Examples are:

- Somatic Experiencing
- Trauma Release Exercise
- EMDR

Both types have a good track record and are supported by research; there is no right or wrong. Success may depend on the timing or person, or simply on what feels better to you. There are also numerous therapies working with a combination of both approaches.

Relaxation methods

Apart from specific therapies, there are also simple exercises and relaxation methods helping the body to calm down. They can also do you good when done in parallel to therapy, or without therapy, just like that. These methods include, for example, yoga, Qigong, Tai Chi, autogenic training and progressive muscle relaxation.

Note

All these activities may also trigger unpleasant feelings. Do nothing on your own initiative when you are not familiar with it or unable to assess its impact.

Finding a therapist

Sometimes, you need professional help to deal with trauma. This is normal; after all, you would see a doctor when you have broken your leg to make sure it heals properly. Looking for therapy makes sense when

1. You feel overwhelmed;
2. Things have not improved at all after three months;
3. You are simply feeling terrible.

It is important for you to feel taken seriously by your therapist, that you can trust them and that your questions are answered.

6. Emergency relief

Apart from therapy with long-term effect, there are small first-aid measures you can take yourself to make things a little more bearable. The basic principle is: whatever keeps you in the here and now is good. This includes, among other things, **physical activity, sensory awareness and distraction**. The following activities can be useful when you feel stressed out or tense or when you are mentally stuck.



Physical activity

Stand with both feet firmly on the ground. Your torso and arms are relaxed. Breathe deeply, in and out, **swinging your arms** around your body.

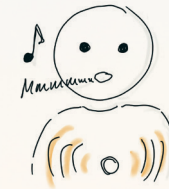
Physical activity

Stamp your feet or jump up and down to feel the ground under yourself. **Shake** your arms and hands downwards as if you have to shake something off.



Physical activity

Tap your body with your hands, above all your arms and legs. Start on the outside going down and continue on the inside going up.



Sensory awareness

Vibration can help the body to calm down: loud **humming or droning** while breathing out will make the chest vibrate. Loud sounds also help: imagine you are a ship horn or a foghorn.

Sensory awareness

To return to reality, it can help to take off your shoes and socks and **feel** the ground barefoot; perhaps even going outside.

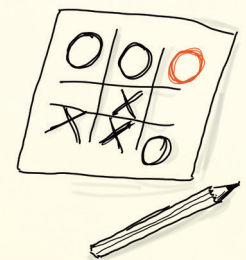


Distraction

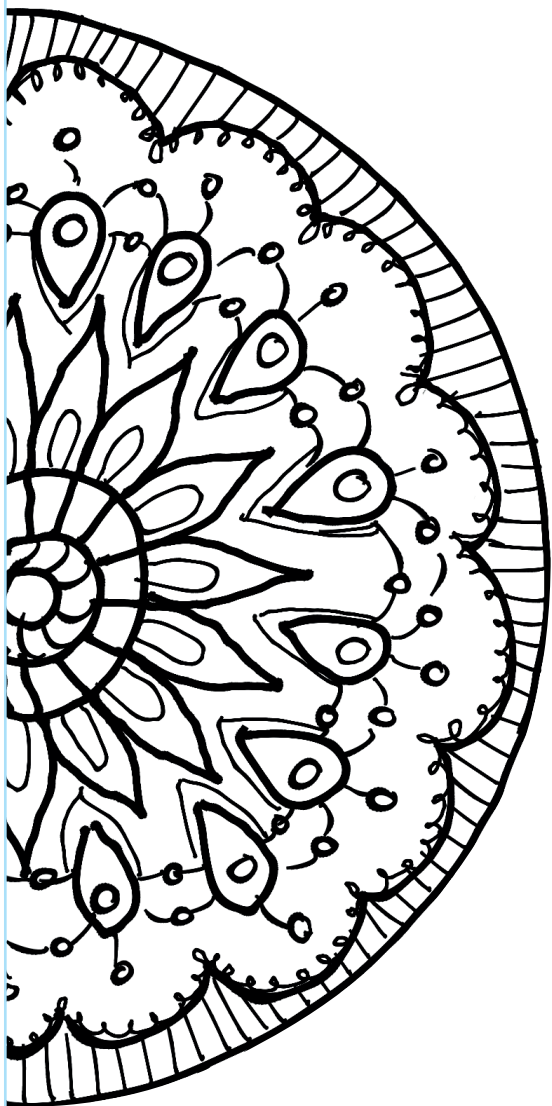
To remain in the here and now, it is sometimes enough to briefly **leave your current situation**. You could go to the loo, for example, even if you don't have to, or get up to open a window. Often, it helps to breathe **fresh air** or hold your hands under running **cold water**.

Distraction

Another method is to busy your mind with something else. Try to solve **a math puzzle** or a **Sudoku**. Or play games such as **Memory** or **TicTacToe** (also on your smartphone). Another idea is to recite all European capitals or **say the alphabet backwards**.



Colour in the mandala to give your thoughts another direction.



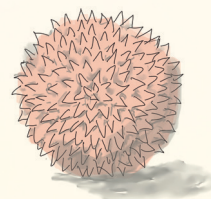
The 5-4-3-2-1 technique

No matter where and how you are, name (aloud) the first five things you see. Then, name five things you hear. Then, focus on what your body feels (e.g. the jacket on your skin, the chair on which you sit, wind in your face etc.). In a second round, you focus again on what you **see**, this time just list four things; the same goes for **hearing and feeling** something. Follow the same procedure with three, two and one thing. This helps to collect your thoughts.



Little tools

Some people wear a **rubber band** or a **scrunchy** around their wrists. They snap it when stress sets in. The pinch on the skin gets them back to the here and now. Spiky massage balls or other things to touch and feel are also helpful.



Scented oils

Scented oils can ground you by tapping your sense of smell. Carry a small bottle with a fragrance you like with you and sniff at it when you don't feel well. **Tiger balm** may also help. It has a very strong smell and leaves a cool feeling on the skin.



7. Helping others

It may happen that others near you don't feel well. If you want to help them, you could show them the above exercises and supervise them. However, take note of a few basic rules.

Addressing the person

Start by addressing the person concerned by their name, if possible. Sometimes, this alone helps. You can then ask whether they need something specific or have a request. In most cases, people know quite well what is good for them in a given moment.

Waiting for a response

Wait for a response even when the person concerned is no longer able to respond well or move. Try to wait for a reaction even when you do not get a direct response. Maybe they nod or blink, move a hand or something similar. This lets you know that you've been noticed and that you can communicate.

Telling them what you'll do next

The worst that could happen to people is to be left entirely helpless. Knowing what happens around them gives people a strong sense of safety. The rule, therefore, is to tell them what you are about to do before you start doing it. This is especially important when you leave, come close to the person or even touch them. Many people don't like to be touched when they are under stress. You could say, for example, "May I take your hand now? May I help you to get up? Let's try to take some deep breaths together."

After that, the most important thing is safety. **Make the environment safe** (taking the person concerned away from crowds or out of a room, for example) and make the situation safe (bring in familiar people, keep a distance, do not overtax anyone).

No matter what that person feels or whatever feelings are there at that moment: take them seriously. You do not know what is going on, and even when you think it's not dangerous, the person concerned could feel something completely different.

In addition: **DO NOT probe!**

It is not your job to find out any truths, and you do not need to know what happened to the person to offer a little help. You can offer help, for example, by showing them the above exercises, or simply fetch a glass of water. Perhaps you know the person quite well and such a situation arises more often. In that case, you could think together beforehand about what is good and helpful.

When you feel overtaxed yourself, support could mean to ask others for help. You do not have to manage alone.

8. Sources

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