



COALITION FOR WORK WITH PSYCHOTRAUMA AND PEACE KOALICIJA ZA RAD SA PSIHOTRAUMOM I MIR

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH MEMORIAL DAYS

CHARLES DAVID TAUBER, M.D.

APRIL 2021

INTRODUCTION

This document is being written in response to requests from victims of the Rwandan and European genocides as to how to deal with the memorial days commemorating them. It is by no means a comprehensive guide. It deals with some core ideas and measures. If people want to work further, we recommend that they work with us and/or others within a group on the traumatization. We also recommend that they learn to assist one another through our Pragmatic Empowerment Training (PET) or another program.

Here, we offer some initial suggestions.

First, recognize that you have undergone a huge trauma. This also applies to relatives and others close to the actual victims. For most people, these days of commemorating the genocide will be difficult every year. Somehow, you need to find mechanisms to deal with this period. We'll go into that a little further on.

There are a few things that are very important for working with this. The first is to find a way to get your feelings out. You don't have to "be brave" or "be strong" and hold your feelings in. If you feel like crying, cry. If you feel like screaming, scream. Do anything that you feel like doing.

Also, speak to other people, especially those who have been through the same thing and those who care about you. Support one another. Do that not only now, but in the future. Try to heal together.

Even after all this time, mourn for the people who died. They were important to you.

<p><i>Mission to Croatia</i> M. Držića 12 32000 Vukovar Croatia Tel and Fax: +385-32-441975 Website: www.cwwpp.org E-Mail: cwwppsummer@gmail.com</p>	<p><i>Office in The Netherlands</i> c/o Kupers Ds. S. Tjadenstraat C81 9663 RD Nieuwe Pekela The Netherlands Tel: +31-597-645790 Fax: +31-597-647029 e-mail: pabbv@telfort.nl</p>
---	--

Don't feel guilty that you survived. It is good that you still are here. Don't regret it. You somehow were able to get through it. The people who perished would want that for you.

You may have psychological and physical symptoms. These can be anything and everything. The psychological symptoms can include anger and rage, anxiety and fear, depression, and even going into your own world and hearing and seeing things that most people don't. You may withdraw from the world. You may not be able to concentrate on things. Physically, you may have headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, your stomach may hurt, you may have trouble breathing, your joints may hurt, and you may have things that we haven't named here. All of this is the result of what you've been through.

It's very important in this period that you do some of the things that you like to do. Care for yourself, especially during these difficult periods. Don't feel guilty about that. Find a way of surviving this time. We'll talk about healing later.

One practical technique that works for many people is called "finding a safe place". Imagine a place that you feel safe, where you like to go. That could be anywhere, a room, a place in the mountains or near the sea, a place with family and friends, anywhere. Imagine that the people whom you want to be there also are there. Whenever you are feeling bad, go there in your mind for a few minutes, at least.

Breathing also is important. When we're upset, we tend to breathe too much on the surface and too fast. Concentrate on your breathing. Breathe in and out slowly and deeply.

One more thing. Try to concentrate on one thing at a time, that is, on the thing that you're doing. Don't think about all the things going on around you, or things that you will do in five minutes or tonight or tomorrow. This kind of concentration helps you to settle a little.

THINGS THAT COULD BE DONE IN THE PERIOD BEFORE, ON, AND AFTER THE DAY ITSELF

It's a good idea to plan beforehand what you will do on the days just before, during, and after the memorial day. It's good to plan any actions that you want to take for yourself, that is to make it possible for you to get through the day, and any action you may want to take "publicly", that is, with anyone else around.

You may want to have a ritual to honor the person or people who died. You may want to plan this with other people. Either instead of or in addition to that, you may want to plan a ritual of your own, only for you or a few people close to you. These rituals can be part of the process of mourning for the people who died. They also can be a celebration of who they were as people. They can be anything and take any form that has meaning for you.

On these days, you may want to be alone for part of the time. You also may want to be with other people, people who have experienced the same kinds of things as you have, people who were close to the people who suffered, and/or people who are close to you personally. We think that it's good not to be alone for too much of the time.

As we've said above, it's good for you to get your feelings out on these days. Any kind of expression of your feelings – crying, screaming, anything – is all right. We think that holding it in is not good.

During these days, trust to yourself and do the things that make you feel better, even if other people don't like everything that you're doing. Be yourself and don't hide how you feel. Get things out and survive in your own way.

THINGS THAT COULD BE DONE MORE OR LESS CONSTANTLY

In this section, we will give you some ideas about how you can decrease and make more sense of the impact of the genocide. The events always will be there. You cannot forget them. What you can do is to make it easier for yourself to live.

Something that we have repeated in this document and in which we strongly believe is that holding your feelings inside is bad for you. Sooner or later, the pressure of those feelings will make you explode or implode. That means that you could fall apart internally, psychologically and/or physically, and/or you could explode to the outside, that is, get violent or behave in ways that you don't really want to.

Thus, any ways that you can get your feelings out are very valuable.

One way that we feel is valuable is writing. There are several things that you can do.

It is a good idea to write out the events, minute by minute. Also, write your feelings at each point of what happened. This may take you a long time to do. Read it and revise it until you are completely satisfied with it. You will remember more and more and you will allow more feelings to come out as you do that. This entire process is very good for you.

Another kind of writing is to keep a journal every day or even several times a day. Record not only the events of your life but also how you are feeling, not only about the events, but in general. This lowers the pressure and allows you to make sense of things.

This journal doesn't only have to be in written form. You also can make audio and/or video recordings. These can be useful in that they give you facial and bodily expressions, your tone of voice, etc.

Also, other creative activities are helpful. This can include art, music, theater, etc., thus anything that will get your feelings out. If you are using theater, sometimes known as psychodrama, you can create dialogues between participants in the situations and/or with external people. You can take all of the parts, and imagine how each person would react. This can be very helpful.

Something else that we would suggest is to join a support group if one exists in your area or online or to form one if it doesn't. In such groups, people see that they are not alone and can support one another. People also can exchange strategies for dealing with the situations.

Important issues in all of this are guilt and shame. A first principle in this is that you always are doing the best that you can, given your education, your personality, the way that you were brought up, the circumstances at the time, etc. Thus, in general, there is no reason for shame. Also, there is positive guilt and negative guilt. Positive guilt is a situation in which you see that you could have taken another action. Thus, you can learn from your actions. You also may want to find a way of "restoring", that is, repairing the results of your actions or compensating for them in some way. Negative guilt is feeling that you've done something wrong and not learning from it. Negative guilt and shame are destructive.

Another important aspect of dealing with your situation is to develop the sense of your life. We recommend that you look up existential psychology on the Internet. There you will find the dilemmas of life, that is, death, meaning and meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom and the associated responsibility. We recommend that you explore these slowly, both in a group and for yourself.

We believe that finding sense in life is very important. We follow Viktor Frankl, himself a victim of the European Holocaust, in working on three aspects of this. The first aspect is a goal in the sense of a job or hobby. This can be anything – paid work, work in a non-governmental organization, work on a hobby, etc. The second sense is that of relationships, which can be divided into a number of categories – intimate relationships such as those with a partner and/or very close friends, friendship relationships, and official relationships. It thus is good to define and maintain those relationships. The third meaning of life is that with the universe. For believers, this is the relationship with a Higher Being. For others, this is how they see the universe, nature, and their own mortality. Again, it is important to work this through individually and perhaps as a group. We see working through this as a very important part of coming to terms with the genocide.

Another aspect of the process that we have emphasized in this document is developing an attitude of being open with your feelings and in your communication. We find that this lessens the pressure on you and allows other people to respond to you in a better way. Some people are afraid of hurting others. Also, the pain, when it comes out is just that – painful. However, as we've said elsewhere, holding it in makes it all worse and can have severe psychological and physical consequences.

One point to remember is that, consciously or unconsciously, the traumas and their psychological aspects will be transmitted to other people, that is, to future generations and to people in your environment. The traumas can be transmitted over quite a number of generations. Not talking about this doesn't prevent it. The only real method of prevention is to deal with it yourself.

Something that can assist is contact and reconciliation with the group that committed the genocide. We realize that this is very difficult, and may not be possible in many situations. There always are members of the other group who regret what happened and who also wish contact. Sometimes, it is good to find an external person or group who slowly can assist contact between the groups and individuals who are willing to start.

Finally, we recommend that you take courses and work through how to assist one another. There is a large amount of material on the Internet. We, the Coalition for Work with Psychotrauma and Peace, offer online courses without charge and are in the process of translating our work into self-paced online courses. Our website is www.cwwpp.org. Please see the section on Pragmatic Empowerment Training (PET).

EPILOGUE

We are aware of how difficult it is to survive genocide and to be reminded of it constantly.

We hope that this document is of at least a small amount of assistance.

Please communicate with us and let us know your thoughts and suggestions.