

Have you
experienced
armed
conflict?



EXPERIENCES OF ARMED CONFLICT AND REHABILITATION

Everyone who has been exposed to extreme situations in armed conflict will be affected by their experiences. The manner in which reactions are expressed will vary from person to person, however. Some will react immediately, for others it may take years. Age and phase of life also affect reactions, with children often reacting differently from adults, for example.

It would be more unusual not to react



Are you concerned about your own reactions or the reactions of your relatives to experiencing armed conflict? In this brochure you will find information about the natural reactions people have after being exposed to the atrocities of war. Being able to understand some of these reactions, and knowing that they are completely normal, can be helpful in the process of moving on. The brochure also deals with a variety of reactions and coping strategies that are particularly relevant to adults who have had extreme experiences of armed conflict.

How do people react?

Shock, disbelief, inability to talk, withdrawal and denial are typical immediate reactions to experiencing armed conflict. Other emotions, such as anger, fury, fear, grief, confusion, guilt and frustration may appear later. Even though reactions vary according to the individual, there are a number of emotions and reactions that victims of violence have in common, particularly those who have been exposed to repeated or persistent violence.

Extreme experiences of armed conflict affect how you function physically and mentally. Everything from emotions, behaviour, physical functioning and relationships with other people can be affected. Here are some typical examples of how experiencing armed conflict can affect people in their daily lives:

Effect on thinking

- difficulties in remembering certain things
- concentration problems
- trouble making decisions
- confusion
- self-recrimination
- too many thoughts at once
- suicidal thoughts
- intrusive memories
- episodes which are replayed again and again



Effect on emotions

- feeling of helplessness and hopelessness
- grief
- difficulties in recognising your own feelings
- fear/worry about your own safety
- fear of what others are thinking
- fear of violence/terror continuing
- feelings of guilt
- feelings of vulnerability and dependence
- anger/rage
- mood swings
- nightmares
- feelings of inferiority
- feeling isolated
- feeling a loss of control over your own life

Effect on physical functioning

- fatigue
- altered sleep patterns
- reduced appetite
- stomach problems
- retching/diarrhoea
- sweats and high pulse rate
- chest pain
- headaches
- back and neck pain
- catches colds or gets influenza easily

Effect on behaviour

- alcohol/drug abuse or abuse of prescribed medicines
- strong reactions to small changes in your surroundings (sounds, visitors etc.)

- avoidance of things which are a reminder of painful experiences
- reduced interest in things which previously interested you
- unable to carry out tasks you previously managed

Effect on relationships with other people

- difficulty in trusting other people
- change in sexual activity
- difficulties with close relationships with other people
- a critical attitude to others
- feeling alienated from family, friends and colleagues
- feelings of loneliness

Guilt - a common reaction

One of the most common reactions after experiencing armed conflict is a feeling of guilt, which can be difficult for people around you to understand. You may feel guilty about what has happened to you; guilty about not having looked after yourself or your relatives better; guilty about not having been aware of or not having reacted to warning signs; guilt for having survived - in short, a feeling of being responsible for what happened to you.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There is no easy formula for what is best for each individual. You have to base things on yourself, your own needs and the situation you are in. However, there are some measures which experience has shown to be useful:

Regain control over your own life

All the efforts you make to regain a sense of control over your own life are extremely important. Making your own decisions, wherever possible, can help you to restore your sense of self-respect and dignity. Even taking responsibility for small, day-to-day decisions, such as when you are going out for a walk or who you are going to drink a cup of coffee with, can be small steps in the right direction.

Establish daily routines

- Eat as regularly as possible. Reduce or gain control over alcohol consumption.
- Try to get sufficient rest, preferably at regular intervals.
- Take part in physical activities.
- Take some exercise, play with children or go for a regular walk.
- Set yourself small, realistic aims with respect to tackling difficulties, e.g. by re-establishing daily routines for you and your family.

Care about your emotional needs

- Give yourself permission and TIME to grieve.
- Accept your feelings as they are. Just because you feel rage does not mean you will hurt anyone, for example.

Feeling that you have no control does not mean that you will lose control or are going crazy. Feeling helpless does not mean that you are helpless.

- Utilize what has worked well for you in times of crisis and stress in the past.
- Contact family, friends or people you trust.
- Talking about your experiences of armed conflict and your reactions can be important. It helps to share experiences and what you have learned from them with people you trust.
- Take care when choosing people you want to talk to about your experiences. There are people who can help you by listening to you, but there are also others who can make you feel more lonely or confused than before.
- Experiencing armed conflict can affect your sexual needs. Talk with your partner about how intimate you should be for such contact to be beneficial for both of you.
- Certain situations, such as anniversaries, important dates in your life or information from sources such as television or the Internet, may awaken painful memories. Memories can be awakened in different ways - try to anticipate this and be prepared.



If problems become too serious

Even if your difficulties appear insurmountable at the moment, it may be helpful to remember that many people with similar experiences have succeeded in creating meaningful lives for themselves over time. However, if your reactions to experiencing armed conflict affect the way you function on a daily basis to a significant degree, or continue at an intense level for more than one month, you should consider seeking professional help. Talk with your doctor, who can refer you to specialists who are experienced at providing this type of help.

Forsideillustrasjon: Malin Falch



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