

A Psychologists Report on the Post-Traumatic effects of Police Violence on Protestors at the World Economic Forum.

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Report submitted to the Victorian Ombudsman
December 2000

pt'chang nonviolent community safety group inc.



This report details Post-Event Debriefing and Ongoing Support Needs since the S11 Protest.

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I am providing this report as a summary of my involvement with activist debriefing sessions run after the World Economic Forum protest, and ongoing support needs of victims.

The day after the protest ended, on September 14th, a Clinical Psychologist, Rodney Vlace from Western Australia, ran two debriefing sessions at Trades Hall in Melbourne's inner north, one in the early afternoon and another in the early evening. It became apparent to me that these two debriefings would be insufficient to service the needs of the protesters who had been at World Economic Forum protests particularly as the extremely short notice only allowed for a small fraction of the protestors to be notified. I felt that as a Psychologist and longstanding member of Pt'chang Nonviolent Community Safety Group. I was in an ideal position to offer further critical incident debriefing in Melbourne. In response to this, I left my details for people to call me if they wished to discuss their options in relation to further debriefing and support.

Over the following few days I was contacted by several people who were traumatised themselves, or who were seriously concerned for people they knew who were deeply affected by the events at S11. This was particularly in relation to the violence of the police, as well as their sense of betrayal at Premier Steve Brack's comments that the protesters were "fascists" and that "deserved what they got", as well as their distress at the depiction of the protest in the mainstream media that they felt was biased and unfair.

There were also grave concerns expressed at the number of injuries sustained by so many people, and a strong need to know what had happened to those who had been hurt.

My analysis of the situation as a Psychologist was that events at the World Economic Forum protest constituted classical 'Critical Incidents' from which it was certain that many people would be experiencing acute 'critical incident stress' and trauma.

My concerns were also that some people may well go on to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), particularly if they did not receive adequate debriefing and support following S11.

Two evening group debriefing sessions were held. The first on Monday September 18th and the second on Thursday September 21st at Trades Hall.

The first debriefing session was attended by approximately 35 people. The process was that people introduce themselves and talk briefly of their role or involvement at S11 and what had most affected them whilst there and what was affecting them most since then. Written information on the effects of trauma on activists and a description of the debriefing process was given to all that attended, and a copy of the latest legal information was also available for people who were interested. Information as to further support avenues for those who needed it was given, including the Victims Referral and Assistance Service (VRAS). I also left my details for people to contact me if they wished to. Those that attended appeared to be very pleased with the session and were glad that it was run as a closed group.

The Thursday 21st evening debrief was also well attended with approximately 38 people participating. A similar format was followed as the previous session. This debrief was particularly valuable and arguably more intense than the previous ones I had attended or run, as there were several people who had been quite severely injured, and some people displaying some very obvious symptoms of trauma, such as shaking uncontrollably, hyper-vigilance, highly exaggerated startle response, and overt expressions of anger, fear, and sadness (with many people weeping throughout).

This is not to diminish the trauma and experiences shared at the previous debriefs, it was rather a more extreme reflection of those that had taken place earlier.

Of those in attendance one person had been run over by an unmarked police car, another had his head run over by a police motorbike, another young man (18 years) had been arrested, dragged into the Casino, badly beaten, intimidated and threatened, then released back into the crowd. Another young man of 23 years had been taken into the Casino and handcuffed and kicked and punched by several men in suits who it eventuated were police detectives. He was detained in a police divvy van for 45 minutes and also threatened verbally, before being released to the streets outside the Casino without having been charged with any crimes.

A woman reported having a Senior Sergeant masturbate in front of her when she was in an isolated area, as a form of sexual harassment and intimidation. Another young woman reported being sexually harassed by a male police officer who whispered suggestively into her ear and breathed on her neck, causing her to feel frightened and repulsed. Additionally this had the effect of re-awakening the past trauma of having been raped at an earlier time in her life. She was deeply distressed and disturbed by this and was receiving individual counselling to help her cope with the trauma she was experiencing. It was a common theme that many people either were already receiving counselling or were seeking it to help them deal with the after-effects of their experience of the protest.

Additionally many others at this debrief had been involved in the Tuesday morning and evening baton charges, and had sustained varying levels of injury, including one man who had been hospitalised with suspected spinal damage, and others who'd had to be taken from the scene by ambulance due to injuries. There were also numerous other people who had been verbally abused and/or physically assaulted by police with batons, or having being punched or kicked by police or police horses.

The level of trauma and distress that was evident from these experiences was quite profound, however there was also a great deal of empathy and support experienced by having the group share in the telling and listening together, and a sense of bonding occurred that was obviously healing. The session ended up being quite long and concluding at about 10.00pm.

A third group debriefing session was held on Sunday 5 November and only attended by two people. One person came quite late and essentially wanted some general information and didn't need to stay long, despite feeling somewhat traumatised still and struggling with her feelings of anger and betrayal at the police after her experience of being beaten by police during the protest. However the other person, a young woman 20 years of age, exhibited acute symptoms of PTSD. I have been able to provide her with advocacy and support since that session, as she had not been able to access the type of care and treatment that she will need in her quest to recover from the effects that S11 has had on her and her life. At the time of writing she had contacted me through the VRAS scheme and is to commence counselling this week. Her symptoms have persisted and I have grave professional concerns for her health and well-being.

I also saw one woman for a private session of Counselling due to trauma she had experienced. She is a mother of two young children and is originally from a country with a history of police violence and oppression. She left that country to come to Australia to raise her children in a safe place. She discussed how her parents had escaped from their country of origin and how both of them are still suffering trauma from their own past. She has been unable to get support from them as it is too painful for them to discuss such issues. She spoke to me of her horror that her children saw her image on national Television after she had been beaten during one of the most severe baton and horse charges. It was very painful for her that her children, and indeed some relatives and friends, had seen her in that state. She was also very upset at the idea that she had believed Australia to be a safe country without the constant threat of violence from the police, however that sense of safety was now removed. She told me that she had been taken to hospital by ambulance and had treated for her injuries, but said she had been determined to attend the rally on the final day. However she could not get out of bed due to severe bruising and pain, which persisted for two weeks after the incident. She was also suffering from nightmares and memories of traumatic experiences from her original country.

I am additionally aware of the fact that there are numerous people who are still experiencing post-traumatic effects such as night-mares, adverse reactions to seeing police or police vehicles, still feeling angry and emotionally volatile, or who are still encountering fear and sadness related to their experience of the protest.

As recently as Monday 18th December 2000 the mother of one of the young men who attended one of the debriefings contacted me. She rang me due to her concerns about her son and to get some advice as to how she can assist him or arrange for him to get some support where he is. This young man (18 years) lives interstate and has been quite isolated and, from his mothers description, experiencing post-traumatic symptoms. He also has had to attend physiotherapy regularly due to the injuries he sustained at the protest. As a result his ability to work has been affected and he has been withdrawn and possibly suffering depression given his mothers description. This young man is suffering

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financially also due to his limited ability to work and the cost of physiotherapy, added to the emotional and psychological trauma he has suffered, and the ongoing physical complaints since police at the protest beat him. I spoke to his mother and suggested he contact VRAS to find a Psychologist who can assist him with the post-traumatic effects in his region. I can only hope that he can be assisted in the area that he resides.

I am also offering Counselling services under the VRAS scheme to another woman who participated as a Legal Observer, once again to help counteract the negative traumatic effects of her participation at the protest.

On a final point I wish to add that there has been an additional burden on some of those who were most severely injured, and that has been regarding medical expenses. I am aware of at least two people who had to be taken to hospital by ambulance having to pay an ambulance bill of \$600.00, and of the woman who was run over having to pay for orthotics for her shoes since she was injured. These are just the medical costs that I am aware of personally. I am convinced that there are others who have incurred medical expenses, including for physiotherapy, X-rays, private counselling and other such costs. It is thus not only the physical injuries and psychological trauma that they have had to contend with but financial hardship as well. This surely adds to the impact of a person's recovery from such an event as S11 was for so many people.

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All names and identifying features have been withheld to protect people's confidentiality.

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