

# Supporting the Survivors of Genoa

**By Starhawk**

Genoa was an atrocity. Our friends and comrades have been brutally beaten, tortured, and wrongfully imprisoned. Some of them are so badly injured they will never be quite the same again. None of us will ever be the same emotionally or politically.

We need to support the people who went through the worst. And even those of us who escaped the worst need to know how to deal with trauma and how to recognize post traumatic stress syndrome.

Some of the symptoms follow. All of these are part of our normal human response to trauma, it's their duration and intensity that can turn them into the life-threatening condition of PTSD. If you are still having strong symptoms three months after the action, you may need experienced help. Our level of trauma will vary according to our personal histories and the level of violence we were exposed to: watching the stretchers being carried out is traumatic in a different way than being in one. People who come from violent homes in childhood, who are already survivors of rape, assault or abuse may be especially vulnerable.

## **Some symptoms:**

- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns. Some people may be unable to eat or sleep. Others may not be able to stop.
- Not being able to put aside the terrible images and memories.
- Not being able to feel.
- Depression, inability to take joy in life.
- Rage (well, rage is the sane response to what happened, but crippling or self destructive rage, or anger directed at the wrong targets, can be a symptom.)
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol for self-medication.
- Fear, anxiety, panic attacks and phobias.
- Guilt, regret, and self blame. Witnesses who escaped suffering the worst may be especially prone to 'survivor's guilt'.

- Overwhelming grief.
- Inability to function normally, to plan or make decisions, or to carry out normal life activities.
- Shame.
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings.

### **What you can do for yourself:**

- Reach out to your friends and allies for help and contact. Don't isolate yourself.
- Remember-what happened is not your fault. You don't need to feel ashamed or guilty, although you may find yourself having these normal responses to trauma. The guilt belongs to the men who beat, tortured and murdered people, and to those who gave the orders, not to you. You coped the best you could with an utterly brutal situation.
- Being there in Genoa is a mark of your courage, commitment and integrity. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. Be proud.
- Friends and family members, in their own distress, may behave in ways that make it worse. You have the absolute right to stop them, to leave a destructive situation, and to find real help.
- Remember that people do survive even these terrible things, and can come back stronger. But you may need time to focus on your own healing. Don't worry right now about whether or not you will go back to an action again. Know that healing yourself from this one is a political act.

### **What you can do to support your friends:**

- Find them. Contact them. Don't let them disappear into isolation. I'm especially worried about those who might have come to the action alone, or without friends in their own home city. They need to have contact with people who have been there, who understand at least something of what they went through.
- Keep in contact. Call them, ask them how they're doing, if they're sleeping. Remember that people may think they're fine at first, but later begin to suffer the effects of the trauma. Commit to remain in contact over a period of months, not just the first few days.

- Help them to talk. We need to tell our stories, sometimes over and over and over again: ideally to someone who has been through it and understands, but if that's not possible, to someone who can simply listen, accept the full range of our feelings, without trying to make us feel better.
- Feed them, shop, cook and clean for them, take care of some of their creature comforts.
- Accompany them. Help them get where they need to go.
- Be an advocate for them in medical, legal or mental health measures. Help them make and get to appointments. Go with them. Help them fill out forms, write statements. Find appropriate help and resources for them.
- Be an advocate for them with their school or job.
- Help support their family and friends who may also be in grief, shock and rage.
- Be a advocate, or a buffer, between them and family members, lovers or friends whose own level of stress and fear may cause them to react in ways that are not helpful. Be willing to let them get mad at you. Try to gently explain the reality of what has happened.
- Help them bear witness, but take their lead. Some people may find their greatest relief comes from speaking out and telling their story publicly. You can help interest the media, or set up venues for them to talk to groups. For others, however, this might be too overwhelming or restimulating. Help them find other ways to witness: writing their story, writing statements that can be read by others for them, making tapes or videos at home.
- Carry on the struggle. Find ways that they can stay connected and be a part of it even if they are not able to go to actions.
- In all these things, remember that your friend is in charge of her or his own healing. Don't patronize or infantilize them, but support them to make their own choices.

## **Resources:**

Some people may need experienced, trained help to get through this. A group of us have been in the process of setting up a database of care

providers who are committed to working with activists, if necessary on a no-fee or low cost basis. (This may not be such an issue for those of you with national health services, but some activists may be unwilling to trust those services and need private help.) The website can be found at this URL:

[www.walterzeichner.com/aftercare/html](http://www.walterzeichner.com/aftercare/html)

(Note: all external web pages will open in a new window)

It will include contact information, experience, training and background. We are unable to provide quality control or monitoring, but the database will include a place where people can post their own experiences with the care provider.

I'll post a link on my own website at [www.starhawk.org/](http://www.starhawk.org/) as a backup.

If you know care providers with an understanding of activism, and experience in dealing with trauma who might be willing to be listed, please have them contact us. If they need more information, ask them to email Walter Zeichner at: [<mtnmanvt@sover.net>](mailto:mtnmanvt@sover.net)

Another good resource on trauma, with links to other sites and book recommendations, can be found at:

[healingtrauma.protest.net](http://healingtrauma.protest.net)

We need to take care of each other. If we do, we can strengthen our movement, and grow stronger.

Love and solidarity, -- *Starhawk*

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Some additional resources:

David Baldwin's Trauma Page has a lot of resources: This includes the resources that the Red Cross publishes and it's easier to reach than through the Red Cross web site.

It also includes a number of international sites and provides translations into 5 languages of its pages. Here are a few links:

[The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#)

[The American Psychiatric Association trauma page](#)

[Amnesty International](#)

I found links to a number of international branches of amnesty as well as some torture info.

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