

POLICE BRUTALITY & ACTIVIST TRAUMA SUPPORT AND RECOVERY



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Copies of this resource and information about our work can be obtained
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Acknowledgements

To begin, we must acknowledge the ongoing violence and brutality that police have inflicted and are still inflicting on Māori; this racist violence and brutality is the foundation of the colonial state of New Zealand.

It is always a privilege to be able to choose to engage in social struggle. We aim to stand shoulder-to-shoulder as accomplices with Māori and acknowledge that our own freedom is inextricably bound up with yours.

We acknowledge and honour all of the thousands of people in this land who have struggled for justice, some of whom have been murdered, imprisoned, and violently and sexually assaulted by security forces.

May this resource serve as a tool to build resilience in our social movements that we can carry the struggle forward.



Context

One of the amazing things about activists is that we are willing to deliberately expose ourselves to the possibility of intensely stressful situations or even police violence when we believe it necessary for political purposes. By the same token, sometimes we engage in political actions in which we underestimate the possibility of violence by police. What is sometimes equally surprising is how little we know about the physiological and psychological effects of this violence. We need to prepare ourselves and learn how to support each other through the physical and emotional consequences of police violence, and the overwhelming responses which we can have as a result of both experiencing and witnessing violence.

Trauma is not something we talk a lot about in activist communities. Sometimes it is because we have been relatively insulated from violence and brutality so it is unfamiliar terrain for us; conversely, sometimes it is because we valorise being “staunch” in actions and there can be a perception of shame associated with feeling traumatised after being brutalised by police. Equally, for some the experience of police brutality is nothing new or notable, and the resulting effects are often not recognised.

A group of us have come together to produce this resource because of the increasing police violence we have witnessed at non-violent blockades in Wellington and Auckland over the past several years, and the resulting effects we have experienced ourselves as organisers and participants in those actions.

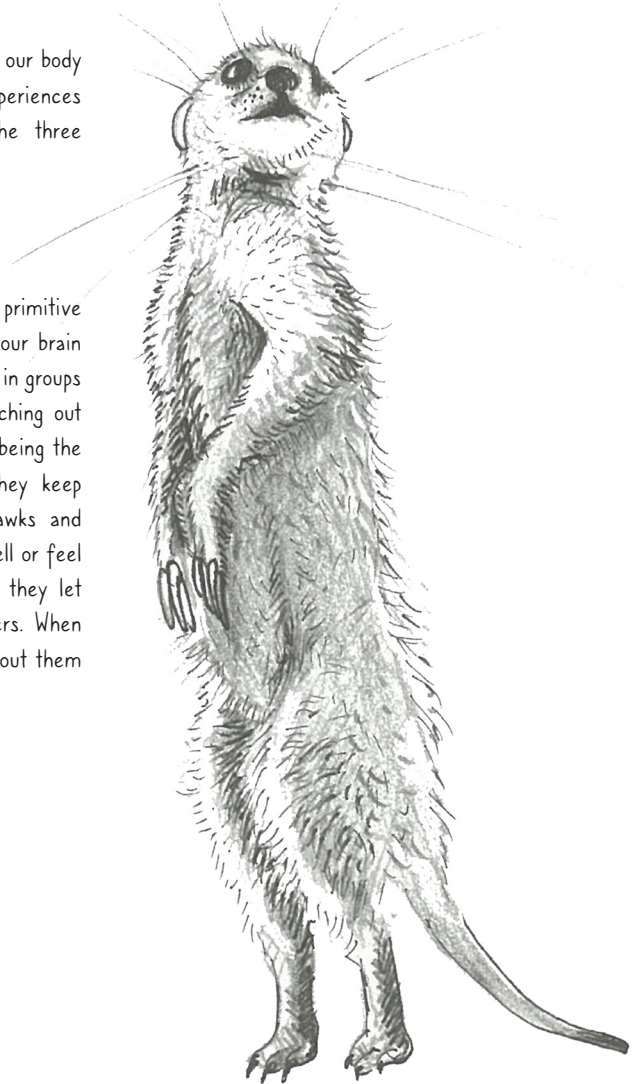
How Trauma Works

The Body's Threat Response System –
the simple version...

One way to help understand how our body responds to various stressful experiences is this simple story about "the three animals of our brain":

MEERKAT

The brainstem is the more primitive part of our brain. We can liken our brain stem to a meerkat. Meerkats live in groups and one of them is always watching out for the others. They take turns being the watch guard for their pack. They keep a lookout for predators like hawks and eagles. When they see, hear, smell or feel something suspicious suspicious they let out a big bark to alert the others. When you think of a meerkat, think about them as watch guards.





TIGER

We might imagine the mid-brain, our limbic system, like a tiger. Tigers love to eat, sleep and play. They are excellent hunters and can be ferocious when they feel threatened. They are always ready to run or fight. If the threat is more powerful than them and they can't run or fight, they will freeze momentarily to assess the situation and look for escape, or submit if there is no escape.

OWL

We can think of the neocortex of our brain like an owl. Owls are wise and able to see things from a long distance. They are good problem solvers and decision makers.



To summarise: The meerkat is a watch guard, tiger is always ready to run or fight, but really loves to play, and the owl is a good decision maker.

All three are present all the time. The meerkat is quiet but is always on the lookout and is responsible for alerting the tiger and owl if they sense danger, worry or hurt. The meerkat will let out a loud sound to let the tiger and owl know when something looks, smells, or sounds suspicious.

If the meerkat is quiet and not sounding an alarm, the tiger is also calm and eat, plays with friends, and gets a good night's sleep. The owl will be busy reading books, learning new things, making good decisions.

What we need to remember though is if we are experiencing stress, the lower, more primitive and automatic parts of our brain kick in to help us survive, and the higher,

cognitive part of our brain goes offline. To use our "three animals" analogy, if the meerkat sounds an alarm, then the owl will immediately fly away and hide, and the tiger gets ready to run and fight.

This is what we call the 'fight or flight' response.

It is important to note that this stress response is a very normal reaction to a difficult, often terrifying and overwhelming experience which is out of our control. In order to protect ourselves in the moment of the experience, our brains will enter this 'fight or flight' mode.

Some more detail on our brains in 'fight or flight' mode

Once our stress response is activated, hormones like cortisol and adrenaline flood our system and systems that are not crucial to survival are switched off. We might have various physical responses including increased heart rate and sweating, which are designed to prepare us to either flee or fight a threat. On the other hand, people may experience "constriction" - essentially "freezing" in the face of trauma. In this situation, the self-defence system shuts down entirely, and a person escapes from the situation not by action in the real world but by alteration in consciousness - the feeling of leaving your own body or watching the trauma detached from the sidelines - as a mechanism for reducing the perception of pain during acute trauma.

It is important to note that just because you have experienced a stressful event and entered fight or flight mode and have some symptoms as a result of this, does not necessarily mean you are traumatised. Your nervous system becoming activated into its stress response does not necessarily indicate trauma. There are differing definitions on what trauma is, but it could be described as when this traumatic or stressful event or events begin to impact your everyday life negatively in the long term.

While we are in fight or flight mode, the hippocampus, which normally files and sorts our memories, doesn't work properly, which is why we may find it hard to make sense of our memories or sometimes even not remember all or parts of a traumatic event.

This state causes the traumatic memories to be stored and filed away abnormally, and as a result the memories can often return with the same emotional force of the original trauma.

This can cause various symptoms, and mean that things can trigger us more easily back into a survival state, causing us to feel terrified, confused or angry about irrational things that may not even be related to the original traumatic event.

Often, people will resolve their troubling symptoms after a stressful or traumatic event within 4-6 weeks. Sometimes, they will persist and it's possible to develop PTSD

(Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). This is one way of describing these symptoms and not everyone identifies with this diagnosis. Because of the overwhelming nature of the symptoms of trauma, people often turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms like alcohol, disordered eating and drugs to numb these feelings.

People react differently and in different intensities to a stressful or traumatic experience. They also have different needs in terms of support. You can become traumatised by your personal experience, by witnessing, but also outside the action by knowing the victim or by just hearing about it. There is also now more acknowledgement of the effects of intergenerational trauma, such as effects from abuse our parents may have experienced, and structural oppressions like colonisation and heteronormative patriarchy.

The first step is to understand what you are experiencing and know that it is a normal response, even if you feel out of control. While we acknowledge that we live in a society where mental health stigma exists and resources are limited for those without much money, there is help available if you need it.



Potential Signs and Symptoms That May Indicate Trauma

- Pictures and memories of what happened keep coming back
- Flashbacks (the impression of reliving the situation), nightmares while asleep
- Depression, not being able to enjoy life, feeling lonely and abandoned
- Feeling numb, switched off
- Becoming withdrawn, avoiding social interaction, self-isolation
- Changes in eating, sleeping or sexual habits
- Stomach pain, nausea, muscle tension, fatigue
- Fear, anxiety, hyper-vigilance, panic attacks, phobias
- Restlessness
- Guilt, shame, self-blame, regret
- Inability to function as normal, make plans or decisions
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Irritability, rage, emotional outbursts, uncontrollable crying, inner pain
- Suicidal thoughts, feeling that there is no point in living
- Doubting political activism and relationships with friends
- Reliving previous, other traumatic experiences
- Hopelessness, belief that this phase will never end

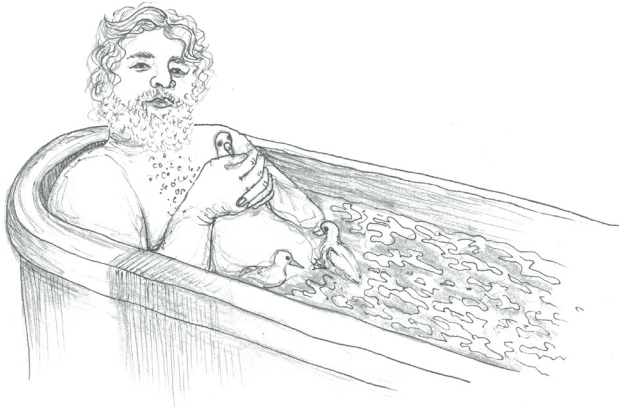
What you can do for yourself

- Remind yourself: your reactions are normal and there is help available; this is a difficult phase but you will get better.
- Immediately after the experience: get to a place where you feel safe and take care of yourself. This may mean allowing other people to take care of you.
- Don't isolate yourself. Turn to your friends and tell them what you need.



- See a professional if that is what you need.
- Take your own time to heal, be patient with yourself and don't condemn yourself for your feelings and reactions. Inner wounds take time and patience to heal, just like physical ones.
- You might feel bad if you think that others are dealing with an experience better than you are. Remind yourself that people are different and react in different ways. There is no "right" way to react. (If you have had a previous experience of trauma, including childhood abuse, you may have more intense reactions.) Also, more sensitive people often experience stronger reactions. It's not a sign of weakness to feel pain after being attacked.

- You may feel guilty about what happened and blame yourself. Remind yourself: It was not your fault! The aggressors carry the guilt.
- Family and friends often don't know how to help. Tell them what you need and don't need.
- If you think: "I don't have the right to feel this bad - what happened to me is nothing compared to X," remind yourself that you have experienced something terrible and that you have the right to feel as you do. If you feel bad, that's because the experience was bad for you. There is no point in comparing and contrasting brutality. If you accept your condition, you will get better faster.
- Avoidance and denial have damaging effects in the long run and will restrict your life. Self-medication with alcohol and drugs may seem to help for the moment but has negative effects in the long run.
- Bach Flower Remedies and acupuncture can help you deal with the emotions. Valerian is good for sleeplessness. Hot baths and massages can be helpful, just be mindful of whether touch can be a trigger for you.
- Find out more about post-traumatic stress. The more you know, the easier it is to see your reactions as normal reactions to "abnormal" events.





Practices such as sparring with a boxing/martial arts partner, yoga, qigong or Tai chi, can be helpful because they are mind/body practices. To perform these well we need a level of mindfulness; that is, we need to be present, aware of our body and its movements. We discussed earlier that when we are traumatised, we are stuck in the threat response parts in the lower parts of our brain; in other words, our body feels as though it is still under threat. Our body needs help to realise that the threat has passed, and we are safe in the present. To do this we need activities that integrate the lower, middle and upper parts of our brain, to bring back that "owl" who may have flown off in fright.

Practices such as these mentioned, along with other activities which are soothing for our nervous system (such as walking in the bush, horse riding, playing with/ petting our cats and dogs, swimming, gardening, trampolining, rocking in a rocking chair, dancing, massage, playing musical instruments, singing, creating art etc.) are great ways to soothe and re-connect our body and mind after we have experienced threat. Many, such as music and art, are also a form of language, and can be ways of communicating the experience in a way that doesn't keep us stuck in it. There is much research to show that all these activities in various ways integrate the parts of our brain which may have become disconnected during a traumatic experience.

Finding safety is the key to health. Brains love a secure base from which they can explore. A resource is anything that helps us feel safe. Make some lists of the things that support you in life. Be expansive.



How to support a friend

- Don't wait for them to ask for help. Be there for them
- Telling the story in the order in which it happened, chronologically, helps the brain process the experience. Carefully encourage your friend to talk about what happened, what they saw, heard, felt and thought. But don't push if they don't want to.
- Lack of support can worsen the reaction. This is called "secondary traumatisation" and is to be taken very seriously. It involves "shattered assumptions" - aggressors are known to be brutal, but if you feel that your friends don't support you afterwards, you feel as though the whole world is breaking down.
- The days immediately after the experience are crucial. This is when all the emotions are easily accessible. It's good to talk then. Later on, people often close up. However, there is also no deadline on the effects of trauma. Some people may need to access support long after a traumatic event when they are ready to talk. It is important to know there is no time when someone should be 'over it'.
- Often traumatised people withdraw from social activities and isolate themselves. You may not see your friend around anymore. Go and find them.
- Sometimes you might feel you're up against a brick wall or rejected. See it as a symptom, don't take it personally and hang on in there.
- You might feel insecure about how to help. Find out more about post-traumatic stress so you understand it better. Ask what they need, don't impose your solutions.
- Behave normally. Pity or self-indulgent "overcare" do not help. The most important thing is that your friend feels safe and warm in your presence.

- Bear in mind that many people seem all right after traumatic experiences and that reactions may come later.

- Listen. Avoid talking too soon, too long and too much. We often long to give good advice rather than be a good listener. Put yourself in their shoes. Try and understand how they feel, not how you might have felt

- Traumatized people often find it hard to ask for help. Be proactive but not pushy

- Traumatized people often struggle with the smallest tasks. Cooking, shopping, handling the chores for them can be invaluable help, as long as you don't patronise them or undermine their independence.

- Irritability, ungratefulness and being distant are common reactions. Don't take it personally, keep the support going. At the same time trauma is not an excuse to treat people badly and it can be important to let people know when their behavior is hurting others. Having clear boundaries is important.

- Saying "You really should have got over this by now, get on with life", is obviously completely unhelpful and will just distance your friend.



- Important: helping and caring can be very hard for you, too. Take care of yourself, do things that make you happy. Talk to someone else about how you feel. Getting support for yourself will help you support others.
- Good therapists can help. Help to find one. The therapist should have some experience of trauma work, otherwise it can be pointless or counter-productive. It also helps if they are politically sympathetic or at least neutral. You'd see a doctor if you had a broken leg. Trauma is a very real emotional wound.

What you can do as a group

It can be really hard to know what to do as a group and as a community to support each other as activists after a stressful or traumatic experience. We want to be there for each other, but we often feel we don't have the knowledge or experience to hold the space needed.

Some people do need to talk about the experience. Get creative in how you facilitate this. It's possible that a "talking circle", where everyone takes turns recounting their fear and terror, might not be helpful and at worst may be harmful for some who are feeling overwhelmed by the experience. Dramatic emotional outpouring, in particular, is not useful in working with trauma.

If you want to support each other through stress or trauma post action, make the goal of your gathering or meeting clear. There is definitely a time and a place for detailed reflection and sharing of how the action went and what went well and didn't go well, but it might not be immediately after the experience. What people may initially need is help with regulating their nervous systems, and grounding them. Below is one idea for a creative activity you could facilitate for a group.

You may also decide that the time is right to talk collectively about how you experienced the action or the feelings people are holding in the group. If you choose to do this, make sure you make attendance voluntary, and invite people to look after themselves in the space and leave if they are finding the experience too much. Think about the facilitation of this in advance and you might even want to work collectively with a therapist.

Remember: a supporter needs support, too. Supporting a supporter is essential. You could talk collectively about how to do this and acknowledge those doing this work.

Sensations/Feelings Visual Diary: Group or Solo Activity

Have lots of paper and crayons, felt pens etc. available on the tables. Invite the group members to each take a piece of paper, and using the art supplies, convey the sensory and emotional experiences they had during the action using only colour, line and shape. For example, "Using only colour, line and shape, draw how your body felt through some of the experiences you went through today" This helps people tune in to their body, which is where trauma lives. Sensory experiences might be, for example: feeling hot, cold, electric, energised, spacey, sweaty, breathless, tight, numb, nauseous, suffocating, etc. Emotional experiences might be: angry, afraid, excited, embarrassed, scared, confused, terrified.

Take some time to be with this image. Review your images on the paper and note what happens in your body as you tune in to your feeling states in this way. Do you gain any insights?

Then take another piece of paper, and draw a second image which contradicts the first. I.e., this image will be the opposite of the first image. So if you recalled intense feelings of fear, you may choose to convey "calm" or "safety" on the paper. Its colours and shapes, rhythm and feeling will be as different as possible to the first image of "fear". Sit with this new image and breathe it in.

Prevention

Feeling bad after experiencing or witnessing brutality is never your fault. But there are some things you can try and do when going into protests and actions or confrontational situations that might help you.

Where possible, go with a trusted friend or group of friends

As groups, do a go-round beforehand about where you are at and how you are feeling so you can look out for each other

Know your limits, boundaries and triggers as much as you can. If it is possible to remove yourself from the situation if you think you need to, do so.

Know about the cops, their strategies and use of violence in advance. If you haven't been to many actions or protests, attend any non-violent direct action trainings that you may be able to.

As groups, try to offer these trainings so that people can learn about police strategies, action strategies and start to think about their own boundaries.

Further resources

Activist Trauma Support

This is an amazing web resource of information on all aspects of activist trauma, and includes downloadable leaflets for use at actions. It covers issues like police infiltration, burnout and PTSD. <https://www.activist-trauma.net/>

Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence - from domestic abuse to political terror. By Judith Herman. (Basic Books; 2015). This is an excellent and really accessible book on trauma for anyone who wants to understand the causes and manifestations of trauma. It is available in larger NZ libraries & can be ordered off the web.

If anyone has traumatised people, it is the US government. Its Department of Veteran's Affairs is home to the National PTSD centre & has lots of info about specific treatments for PTSD. <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>



Māori activism & police violence

Some reflections from Te Ao Pritchard

Māori are more likely to be targeted by police at political actions. There is a different response, a different reaction. If we're in a non-brown environment—there is a completely different approach. A pack of police come up to you, not just one. Then the approach that they have is really quite heavy-handed, even if they are brown, because they are protecting a community that has been made afraid of you.

If you are in a brown community, you still get responded to differently, because of your approach and your message. What they do is differentiate you—brown you, and your action & your stance—to the brown community. They separate you; they automatically divide you, as if you are not one and the same, even if you are from that community. They watch you more than non-brown people, non-Māori. That is some of the conditions we have to operate in: that white is still clean, healthy and good, and brown is still dangerous and risky. All this teaching builds us up to be the target of police violence. So even when we stand up, and we are peaceful, there is no peaceful embrace of that. It's not like, "Great, you've come with a message." You have to dress a certain way; you have to act a certain way, which means you have to continue to assimilate to what is acceptable so that you can even just have dialogue.

Karanga Tangaroa: Our practices as a "threat"

We did Karanga Tangaroa in 2016 at Mission Bay as part of the Pacific Panthers network. That was our response to the Weapons Expo and the New Zealand Navy war practice that they called "Operation Tangaroa" in the Waitematā Harbour. Our group decided that we would make it really obvious that we are Pacific nations; Aotearoa is included in that. We are indigenous peoples; we are Pacific peoples. So we decided that we would look Pacifica,

and we would respond to any events or situations that were refusing to allow the health of tangata whenua or Pacific nations to thrive, and anything that is violating Papatūānuku or Ranginui or the other atua, like Tangaroa.

We went to Mission Bay, a predominantly white, middle-class area. A whole pack of us went there to have kai, have karakia, speak to Tangaroa—the moana, the ocean—because during that time the Navy were having their training and claiming the name Tangaroa as the name for their operation. So we were there to claim our atua name back. And not have them use our atua name Tangaroa to destroy Tangaroa.

We took flags and Māori and Pacific Islands decorations; we dressed in our indigenous clothing, and we took kai. It was an everyday activity. It's what people do there every day.

Then as we were doing the karakia, the police helicopter arrived and began hovering above us. It just sat there. We were doing karanga to atua, talking to Ranginui, Sky Father, and there's this helicopter hovering. We had no weapons—we had our hands and maybe some flags stuck in the sand. We were just using our voice, using karakia.

On the ground, there were a dozen cops and a paddy wagon to take people away. They tracked one of our comrades. They picked the person who was flying the kotahitanga flag, a significant flag for Māori that goes everywhere. They picked him and tried to have a conversation with him about his behavior. They kept harassing that person for a couple of hours. It's evidence that they know who to pick in the crowd. I was at the same activities he was, but no one came up to charge me or attempt to arrest me. And yet, we were all doing the same thing. So they are picking; they pick individuals and isolate them. Then they try and surround them, so we can't get to our own people to support them.

Symptoms of Trauma

There are similarities across cultures, but for Māori because we are in Aotearoa with the impacts of colonisation what happens is that the manifestations of trauma are often not verbal. That is one of the differences. For other people even though they have trauma, they can often still verbalise it: they can articulate it. For Māori, the ability to articulate it to non-Māori is actually harder. They don't articulate it, they don't have those conversations—they just go about their lives.

They will go do something physically like do some work. On the surface they appear to be all good, but they don't know how to communicate. This is the thing about trauma for different cultures—most of the healing processes and models for dealing with trauma involve conversation and dialogue. That's great if a person doesn't have any instinctive fear. But when a person is raised in fear and anxiety because they don't understand how colonisation has impacted them severely, they don't have anything to place it against. Their

wairua & mauri can feel it but they can't pinpoint it. Their hinengaro can't process it, and can't give a rational explanation. So when that happens, and they try to engage someone with that, and try to have a conversation, they are speaking two completely different languages. They have no reference to put the content in. There is no context for them.

Māori talk about kanohi-ki-te kanoki (face-to-face) but we actually have other places where we can express what we need to say like waiata and whakatauki. It is possible to actually engage in a conversation with an atua. In the Western world, having a conversation with a human living being is how you do it. For a lot of Māori, me included, we have a conversation with our atua or our tūpuna, because we trust them & they know all about us. They are always there for us, and trust us. Well meaning people often try to move someone out of trauma, but it can have the reverse effect. It dumps a person straight back into it: into a fearful and anxious position. Some people externalise that to physical responses; some people will lash out, some people will just withdraw inward, or turn to the familiar thing in society where they can work it out—where they can feel it—like a pub.

In terms of Māori responses to trauma, they are often forced to learn Western ways. Unfortunately, many don't have the people who can coach them through it, or the resources or even the energy and determination to get through it. We have people who are just over it—generations of people who are in an environment where they are shat upon everyday, and they are not valued or considered important.

This is why a lot of Māori move to suicide as well. We have some of the highest rates of suicide in the world because spiritually we are already gone anyway. Living in a body is felt to be a nuisance. It has become a nuisance to other people when a person is not spiritually present, when their wairua is not present in their body they endanger themselves and others.

Operation 8: Our Trauma Strategy

I use the aftermath of the 2007 terror raids as an example of how we dealt with trauma on the frontlines in our community. Our crew down in Palmerston North had all been subjected to raids in their houses. Horrible stuff. Lots of our crew just went "bang" and fled home. Everyone just naturally went to their safe places. And that's great for the people that had one. For some of the people, they didn't. For those left in Palmy, we had to figure out strategies to care for the damage left by this police violence.

What we did there was a natural response as tangata whenua: we started doing whanaungatanga. There is no education needed to do this: its just hang out, be present and eat. Don't talk about the issues, just be present. We just needed to share warmth & wairua. We enacted these whanau kai session. We took kai, invited people to kai. We just

needed to remind ourselves that we were there, we were still alive, and that we needed warmth. Food is amazing—it is the whakanoa—it neutralises a lot of things. We didn't talk about anything early on. Part of that is that we gathered & created a space where people who were traumatised could come to. It wasn't their job to bring kai. They did anyway, but it wasn't their job. It wasn't their job to create the space either.

Because I wasn't actively raided, I had the energy and the skills to do that. We all knew each other and that was important—we didn't invite strangers or people who wanted to help. Our extended friends and wider community wanted to jump in and help, but one of the ways to protect people in trauma is to shut people out, shut out the "noise"—and just have a little hub. We all trusted each other.

In a time of trauma, you need people who know you, and who won't push or piggyback on what's going on. That space is just for you to find yourself. When someone is traumatised, some basic things they just don't do, they just neglect: wellness, parents,



kids, food. So we just wanted to provide a nourishing space—no shop talk, no politics—really simple stuff about the kids and basic life admin, like "ah the grass is growing—hey you need a lawnmower!" No one has to rush into any therapy, or deal with it straightaway.

In the old days we had a village wrapped around us; a person could wander around safely. Someone who might today be diagnosed as schizophrenic, or manic depressive could at that time be who they are and be in a real safe haven. People got fed, cleaned and taken care of, there was that safety net.

Then we sat down and wānanga (discuss, deliberate, deconstruct). The great thing is

that wānanga usually happens in the dark. When it gets later in the night and the kids are put to bed, and some of the physical energy has been exhausted, you just sit and wait. We didn't force conversation. We let the wairua and the mauri take control. Just sitting with each other was a big kōrero. We would just watch each other, feel what's going on, and that wairua was pretty powerful. For us that was the tūpuna doing their job, it's not just about the humans doing the job. Our tūpuna and atua were doing their work on us then in that space.

Eventually we started having conversations. I had done some writing about how fear can immobilise you—and fear is the objective to separate and divide you. I shared that with everyone because I knew that fear would overtake people. That's why we had to do whanau kai. We needed to combat fear.

As tangata whenua, we have this whanaungatanga aspect which is so essential. In the Treaty, it talks about whanaungātanga. It is at the core of who we are as Māori. In a pōwhiri, everyone is hōhā because they do whanaungātanga and it takes forever, but it sets you up.

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