

EVERYDAY SHOCKS

Information sheet

In everyday life we have many situations that do not go according to plan: there are surprises, unexpected events and experiences, disappointments, and sometimes terrors. Often these happen and we don't fully register the impact, only realising later (sometimes much later) that the experience is still sitting with us and is affecting us. This can be obvious (ongoing nightmares, reactions to similar situations that are not commensurate with the current issue) or not obvious (neck pain, insomnia, a general sense of unease that we cannot identify).

In therapy these unresolved experiences often comes out when the practitioner says, "so, when did this set of symptoms/fears/behaviours start?" and we say, "Oh, well, I guess it was after I had that awful thing with my boss/partner/when I fell over/etc..."

The idea of this information sheet is to:

1. support your to recognise the indicators that you have had a shock or an experience that threw you;
2. give you some tools to experiment with and attend to an incident when it happens.

What is shock?

Shock is a physiological response to surprise, startle, and overwhelm. It often comes with sensations of being a bit 'out of it' or feeling disoriented or bewildered. It can also come with fear, confusion, panic, outrage, sadness, distress, uncertainty. These are normal responses: something has happened that we were not prepared for, that we did not anticipate, that we are not certain how to handle. What really matters is what happens next.



Shock only causes problems for us when it gets stuck: when we are not able to come out of the shock, reorient and recalibrate to what has happened, find our centre and bearings, and then process the shock and respond in ways that help us resolve the experience. Think of google maps recentre function. It has chosen a path and is asking you to follow it. When you drive past the turn-off suggested it takes a bit of time to recognise what you have done, the direction you are now heading, and to then recalibrate and eventually offer a new route to your destination. These are all important steps. If it does not do all of them adequately you will get very lost – and sometimes do.

We also have to go through a series of steps in order to deal with shocks, integrate, respond and recalibrate from a shock. We often miss quite a few of them resulting in the experience staying stuck in our systems and psyches and us remaining feeling off-centre somehow, or developing symptoms that let us know that something is 'not quite right'. It can be the small experiences, the little shocks that we dismiss as 'nothing much' that actually build up and keep us off centre. But it can also be a lack of good process with bigger shocks which means that even though we know we have had a shock we don't know that we have to go through certain steps (maybe a few times) to fully come through and process the experience.

The question becomes: How can we catch this early and support ourselves to process and move through shocks such that we can recentre, recalibrate and step forward not dragging the shock unresolved?

While no process is perfect here are a few suggestions.

1. Before you read further reflect on a time when you felt centred and grounded and good in yourself. What are the sensations? Does an image come to mind? Really take in what this constellation of sensations is like. This is your centre, and your reminder of where you are heading back to when knocked off balance. Like having "home" set in your Google maps.
2. **Identify** that you have had a shock. What lets you know that you have had an upsetting, shocking, distressing, disorienting experience? If you are not sure, perhaps consider a shock you know about and write down/reflect on what let you know that you were thrown. Consider sensations (*numb, frozen, 'out of it', dull*), emotions (*disoriented, confused, hurt, uncertain, bewildered, helpless, panicky*), thoughts (*how could this happen? what just happened? I don't know what to do?*). These indicators can be helpful to understand because they make you more aware, more able to recognise next time you receive a shock.
3. **Pause!!!** We often panic, freeze, shut down, go into survival strategies when we have had a shock. It is REALLY important to slow things down, it gives you time to...
4. **Orient**, take a moment to notice what is around you, to sense what you feel in your body, to feel your feet on the ground. Do anything that helps you tune into where you are, how you are (what is safe and helps you know that you are ok or ok enough), what feelings are present (naming is helpful, eg. *I feel disoriented, shocked, scared, bewildered*), maybe hold your arms or press on your legs to bring yourself a little back in the body.
5. **Slow down some more:** Give yourself another moment to feel what is here. We usually try and recalibrate and recentre too quickly, before we have found enough ground, before we have really reconnected with our satellite guidance system.
6. **Notice impulses:** What does your body want to do? Often you will notice a desire to flee, to shout at someone, to get really small. You may also notice an impulse to talk to someone, to reach out to a friend or loved one, a desire for comfort and support.

7. **Choose** what actually do you need to do, which impulse you most want to follow. Do you need to walk away and take time out? Do you need to reach out and get some guidance or support? Do you need to stand up for yourself?
8. **Notice when you feel better**, centred, no longer knocked about, like 'yourself' again. This is home. This lets you know that you have come through the shock, digested the experience and are back into a more whole place.

In everyday life point 7, "Choose" is often nearer the top of the response list. Sometimes we don't have time to pause and spend so much time reorienting, we have to respond quickly, we have to make some choices without being fully grounded and centred. That is ok. In such cases the invitation is to do what you need to do to get through *making the best choices you can* and *then* go away and use this process to help you identify what shock may still be in your system and then gently work it through this process. As you get more familiar with doing this process in less high-pressure situations or after a situation has settled it will become more easily accessible and quick.

I also highly recommend reaching out to someone (or more than one person) you trust when you have had a shock. Other people can help us re-regulate, rebalance, and process and make sense of our emotions and experiences in ways that we simply cannot do on our own. If you don't have someone to reach out to imagine who you would like to talk to, see/feel them with you and talk, take in comfort, imagine what they might say as guidance.

It is important to remember that as you move through this process and it may take a few rounds of the practice before you feel settled; or you may need to go back to the person or situation and say or do something more than was possible in the moment. There are many ways we need to accept what is incomplete or unfinished in life, but it is equally important that we feel in ourselves that we did what we could or what we needed to do to address a situation. Otherwise we are left with regret and a sense of something being incomplete.

Sometimes when we cannot do what we feel is needed or say what we want to say because the situation does not allow it, it can be helpful to *imagine* ourselves doing and saying these things. We need to take in what it feels like to stand up for ourselves, or to run away, or to get the support of others – whatever it is for us that would have felt satisfying and like we have completed or done what we needed to do. When you try this notice what relaxes, what releases, and where you feel empowered or relieved. Please note it is important *to not use* this option as a proxy for *actually* standing up for ourselves where that *is* possible and helpful.



Information sheet created by Chantal Jackson of Inner Strength Trauma Therapy and Counselling based on teachings from Somatic Experiencing® and was inspired by a section on shock in [How to be a help instead of a nuisance](#), by Karen Wegela.
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