

TRAUMATIC EVENTS AND LOSSES: their short- and long-term consequences as possible sources of

**AGGRESSION /
VIOLENCE**

Prof. Lidija Arambašić, Ph.D.

University of Zagreb
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Psychology
Chair of Health and Clinical Psychology

The lecture's plan:

5. Better support after traumatic events / losses

3. Recovery
process

2. Short- + long-
term reactions /
consequences

4. Traumatic events /
losses →

aggression /
violence

1. What are:
a) traumatic
events
b) losses?



1. a) What is a TRAUMATIC EVENT?

TRAUMATIC EVENTS





Robbers blew up everything except the ATM they wanted to rob!



TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Death, injury or threat to life / physical integrity to:

- 1. somebody personally,**
- 2. somebody is witnessing that (un)known person is exposed to such an event.**

CAUSES and TYPES of traumatic events:

1. **nature** (flood, earthquake, volcan, hurricane...)
2. **human:**
 - **involuntarily / accidentally** (fire, explosion, traffic accident...)
 - **voluntarily / on purpose** (murder, suicide, rape, robbery, kidnapping, fight...)

TRAUMATIC EVENTS are **RARE** in the life of an individual:

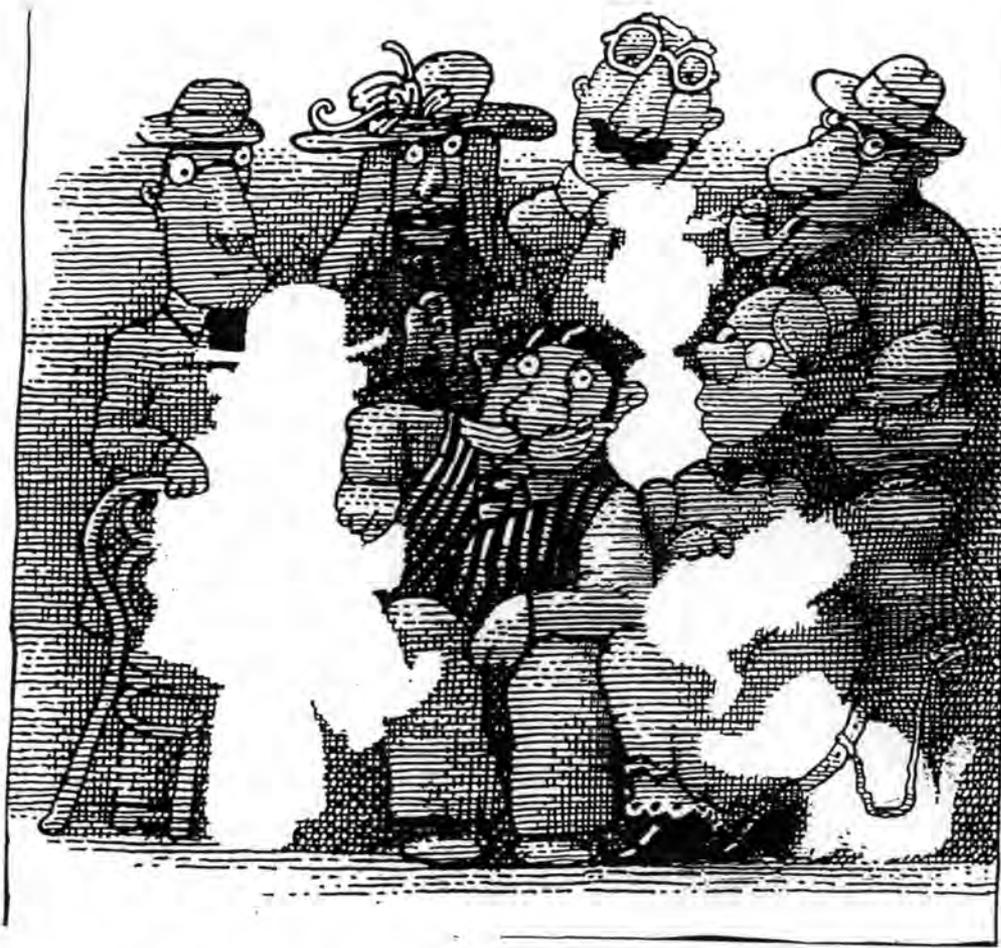
Ernest Hemingway (1899 -1961) survived:

- **injury** (bombshell)
- **3 traffic accidents**
- **anthrax** (dangerous bacterial infection)
- **wood fire**
- **2 plane crashes** (in 2 days)

In the period of 6 years, due to 4 traffic accidents,
 **lost his:**

- **eldest son** (16 years)
- **brother**
- **mother**
- **wife**

1. b) What is a LOSS?



We all have someone
we no longer have.

DEVELOPMENTAL LOSSES

(**nobody** can **escape** them):

- **favorite teddy bear, doll, ...**
- **kindergarten teacher; friends from kindergarten**
- **teacher(s) from primary, secondary school**
 -
 -
 -
- **friends /colleagues** (the end of schooling / university, changes in the work place, retirement ...)
- **one's own life**

LOSSES DUE TO STRESSFUL AND TRAUMATIC EVENTS:

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS:

- family member, friend, colleague, intimate partner (death, quarrel, change of residence, ...)
- **dog, cat...**(pet)

"ABSTRACT THINGS":

- self-respect
- identity
- feeling of security
- faith in the future

MATERIAL VALUES:

- valet
- bracelet
- money
- house/apartment (and everything that was there)

BE CAUTIOUS:
not visible at
the first glance!

BE CAUTIOUS:
possible valuable
memory!

CASES FROM MY PRACTICE :

- 16-yrs  ...

TOO MUCH losses "at once"
(even for somebody much older!)

- suicides of 3 very
... friends

...d's

REMEMBER:

It is **NOT** possible to **FORGET** traumatic events and losses!

It **IS** possible to **LEARN TO LIVE** with those difficult experiences.

2. Common short- and long-term reactions to traumatic events and losses

REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS AND LOSSES:

In regard to the **TIME** onset:

1. **TRAUMATIC STRESS REACTIONS** (during and immediately after traumatic event / loss)
2. **POSTTRAUMATIS STRESS REACTIONS** (due to the remembrance of the event and its immediate consequences)
 - **several weeks / months after the event**

~~PTSD~~

COMMON REACTIONS AFTER TRAUMATIC EVENTS AND LOSSES:

EMOTIONAL:

- sadness, **anger, rage, frustration, feelings of injustice**, guilt, helplessness, emptiness...



PHYSICAL:

- "cramps" in a stomach, difficult breathing, "tightening" in a chest / throat, ...



COGNITIVE:

- difficulties in: concentration, remembering, **reasoning**, constant thinking about deceased...



BEHAVIORAL:

- regression, withdrawal from people, crying, **aggression, search for guilty person / revenge**...

GENERAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EVENT / LOSS:

- mostly universal
- partly depend on age, gender, individual characteristics, living conditions, culture, support...
- immediately after traumatic event / loss →
neither reaction is "abnormal"

POSSIBLE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

Changes in the **worldview**:

1. Feeling of insecurity:

- "The world is a (very) dangerous place."
- "Life is (completely) unsafe."

2. Feeling of the loss of control over one's life:

- "Nothing is under my control (life, people, events...)."

3. Changes in the value system:

- "There is no justice, no good people...– anywhere."
- "It's better to be thief and violent than..."

4. Pesimism towards the future:

- "The future is (completely) black."
- "This terrible event will happen again."

What we **KNOW** and what we
DO NOT KNOW about traumatic
events and losses?

WE KNOW:

MOST DIFFICULT LOSSES / TRAUMATIC EVENTS

(in regard to whom have we lost):

1. death of the one's own child
2. death of the parent in childhood and adolescence

(in regard to how the loss / traumatic event happened:

- | | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| 1. <u>suicide</u> | } | <u>violence</u> +
human <u>voluntary</u> action |
| 2. <u>murder</u> | | |

We **KNOW** / **DO NOT** know?

TRAUMATIC EVENTS

LOSSES

know

- **painful to everybody**
(life + health = irrecoverable)

- **the most difficult losses**

do not know

intensity and duration of suffering

3. Characteristics of the recovery process (grieving, bereavement)

PROCESS OF ACCEPTING TWO OPPOSITE THINGS:

Everybody goes through this process
(adults as well as children)



more or less visible on the outside

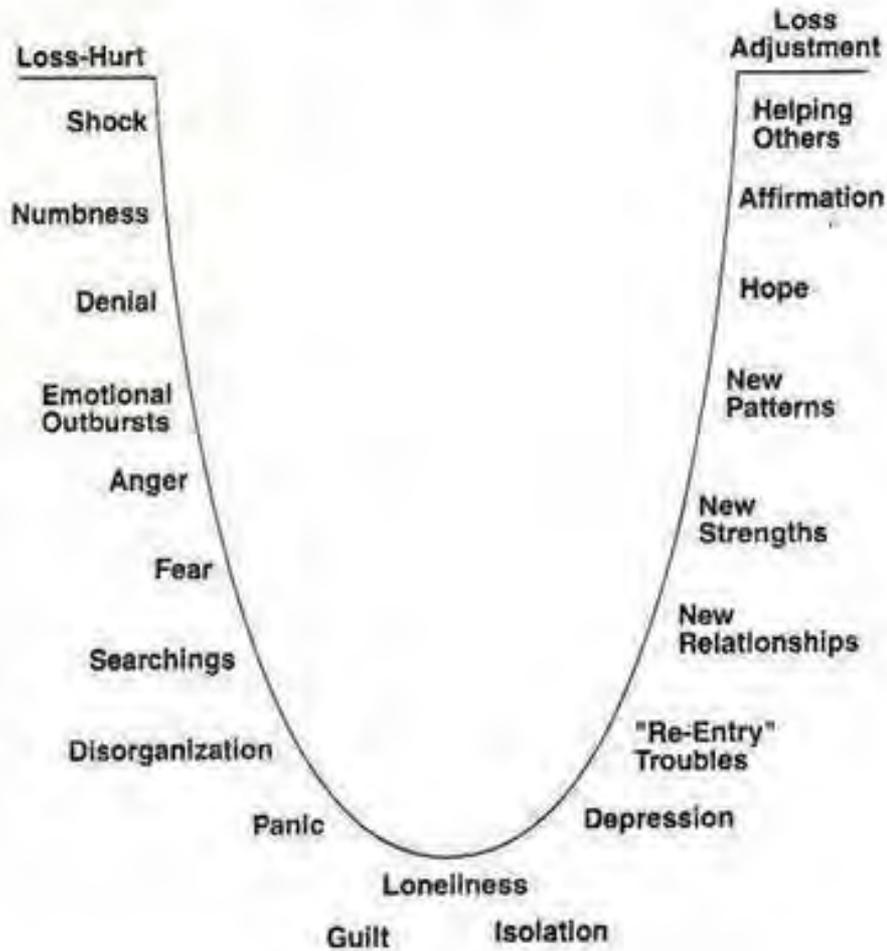
what we feel in our **soul and heart**

("I will not / I can not believe it – it's
too painful, meaningless, unfair, unbearable...")

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF RECOVERY :

Theory vs. **life / practice:**

STAGES OF GRIEF



GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF RECOVERY (contin.) :

1. **Grieving = nonlinear process** (periods of improvement + worsening)
2. **NO prescribed time about how long it should last**
3. **Always lasts longer than we would like to**
(it is painful → we would like it to ends NOW!)

individual differences!

4. Inadequate / unhelpful ways of supporting traumatized and bereaved people

➤ Link between them and

**aggression /
violence**

TRAUMATIC EVENTS / LOSSES



AGGRESSION, VIOLENCE

An ambiguous relation between loss / grieving / trauma



**aggression /
violence**

Some bereaved people react to loss/trauma with visible:

- sadness
- apathy
- depression
- withdrawal from people
- helplessness
- lowered energy level
- ...

In others, sadness (natural reaction to loss) is masked. It is displayed as:

- **anger**
- **rage**
- **irritability**
- **quarrelsome temper**
- **aggression**
- need for revenge / for finding who is guilty → **revengeful behavior**
- ...

Factors connected to traumatic event / loss → possible motives/causes of aggression / violence



aggression /
violence

1. Traumatic event / loss itself
2. Grieving process
3. Cultural rules
4. Family rules
5. Reactions of others

1. TRAUMA / LOSS ITSELF:

SUICIDE:

Wife after husband's suicide (full of **rage**):

- "Damn you! If you didn't kill yourself, I would kill you with my own hands for all the troubles I'm going through now!"

DEATH OF THE CHILD:

- completely unnatural, incomprehensible, unfair...

frustration → **anger, rage** → **AGGRESSION**

2. GRIEVING PROCESS

Expectations:

- slow
- stop-and-go

"I should (very) fast come back to normal."

Anger and jealousy
at others



"Their life is not
(so) difficult."

"I'm not revealing how I am."



Others do not know how I am.



Others do not offer support.

frustration → anger, rage → **AGGRESSION**

3. CULTURAL RULES

1. "You have to wear black clothes for XY time"
2. "You must be strong at the funeral"
3. "Males do not cry"

For some individuals those rules are unacceptable, but they "have to" obey them:

frustration → anger, rage → **AGGRESSION**

2. "We do not display family's dirty laundry." (e.g. suicide of a family member, rape)

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (good intentions!)

Not accepting the fact that this is (very) hard
for ME:

- "Common, you are exaggerating (a little bit). Your grandmother was 83 years old! How longer should she live?"

"So, is she less dead because she was 83?
And then I must not be sad??!!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

Forcing me to take general truth as MY present truth (very soon after loss):

➤ "People must die of something."

"Of course that everybody must die – I know that, I'm not stupid!!! But, why he was the one to die / why at this moment, why...???"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

People do not see ME:

- "HE is not suffering anymore."
- "It's better for HER. If she lived longer, SHE would suffer terribly."

"Yes, he/she is not suffering anymore. But I AM!!!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

Giving direct advices (impossible to carry through):

"OK. And HOW do I do that?!"

- "It would be better if you stop thinking about that."
- "You have to busy yourself with something."

"I work a lot, I'm constantly occupied with something, and I feel the same or worse – not better!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

"Rational" explanations of death are rarely helpful (even when they are "correct", "reasonable"):

- **"Well, your father was 94 years old. He was very old and it is normal that he died."**

"Don't say this to me!!! So what if he was old? He was my father, I loved him very much, and I miss him terribly. Why did he have to die?!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

Comparison of different losses:

- **"I know how you feel. My father died 5 months ago."** (a colleague to the mother whose child died)

"Is she crazy?! Stupid?! Or what!?"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

Inappropriate questions (e.g. on a funeral day and/or later):

- **e.g. car accident: was a safety belt put on, was he drunk, drugged ...?**

"What's the matter with them?!

Do they think that I'd feel better if he had a safety belt on and he wasn't drunk – so, he was not guilty for his death?!

Or do they think I'd feel better if he was drunk – guilty for his death?!

I don't understand what they want!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

➤ **"I know how you feel."**

"How, dammit, you could know how I feel? You are not in my skin! It is not you going to bed each night thinking about her being dead and it is not you getting up each morning aware that she is not with me anymore!"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

To mothers after:

- spontaneous abortion in 7th month of pregnancy
- after child died during delivery:
- "It's good that you didn't have time to become attached to the baby."

"Are they crazy?! Stupid?! Or what!?"

5. REACTIONS FROM OTHERS (contin.):

To the parents after one of their children died:

- "Imagine how would you feel if you had only one child. You have a son, so it is going to be at least a little bit easier."

"Are they crazy?! Stupid?! Or what!?"

HOW DID YOU / WOULD YOU FEEL AFTER SUCH REACTIONS FROM OTHERS?

Possibly / probably:

frustration → **anger, rage** → **AGGRESSION**



**5. Better ways of supporting
traumatized / bereaved
people.**



- **Most traumatized / bereaved people → do not need an expert** (they do need support from their social network)
- **Small number of them → need professional support** (easier and faster going through grieving process; NOT hurrying up)
- **smallest number → psychotherapy** (complicated bereavement) → (it is NOT mental disorder; loss is usually a "last drop", and not the cause of psychological difficulties)

GENERAL PRINCIPLES:

REMEMBER:

- **LETTING OUT** (intensive) traumatic stress reactions, **showing** (intensive) emotions...



will not lead to the loss of control / loss of mind
("nervous breakdown")

but

- **BLOCKING, BOTTLING-UP** these reactions



can lead to mental and physical problems

REMEMBER:

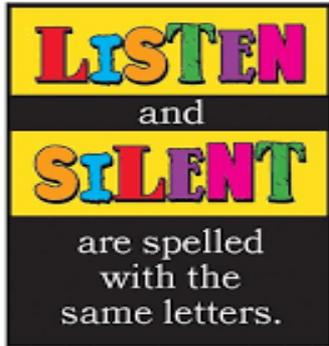
- **3 – 4 weeks after traumatic event / loss most persons "come to their senses"**



- **In this period, for most of them it is enough for somebody to:**
 - **listen to their stories**
 - **educate them (normalize their reactions)**

REMEMBER:

It is more helpful to "be here"
than to say something!



"We have two  and
one  so that we can
listen more and talk less."
(Mark Twain)

- be silent
- listen to the best person
- touching/hugging (cautiously)

To be supportive to traumatized people we need to make changes in ourselves:

1. Make peace with ourselves:

➤ helplessness:

- **the fact**: traumatic event / loss happened
- **the fact**: NOT possible to help somebody to feel better (very) fast, to forget what had happened

➤ patience (pain is inevitable, recovery is slow + "ups and downs")

2. Convince ourselves:

- **closeness**
- **empathy**
- **respect**
- **practical help**

the most
we can do



and it is a lot – indeed!

3. Accept these attitudes:

"I am here:

- so you can share your trouble and pain with me
- to walk with you as you go through this difficult recovery process."

"I am not here:

- to make your pain disappear at once – this is simply not possible.
- to judge you, to tell you what to do so you'll immediately feel better."

**What to do, what to say to
traumatized / bereaved person?**

1. Tell them that their experience was about life / physical integrity (even when "nothing" happened)

2. Normalize:

- **posttraumatic stress reactions are human, common, natural phenomena (they are not "crazy", not going to be mentally ill)**

3. A lot of "why questions":

Why he/she? Why me?, Why now? Why in such a way?...

NO:

- "Don't think about it."
- "Don't worry so much."
- "All in all, everything went OK. It could be much, much worse."

YES:

- "Unfortunately, there are no answers on many questions."
- "It's normal that you would like to know the answers. But, there are none to such questions."
- "I see how sad, angry, helpless... you are because he/she is dead / missing / wounded..."

4. Importance of:

- **rituals**
- **everyday (small) pleasures**
- **play and fun** (especially for children and adolescents)

5. **Endure sadness, crying, anger ...** (be silent, give a hug)
6. **Show your own feelings** (e.g.: if you "feel like it", cry together with the bereaved person)
7. **In everyday contacts:**
 - **mention dead person**
 - **encourage bereaved person to talk about him/her**
 - **accept conversation about deceased** (if bereaved person starts such conversation)

It is important to monitor closely:

- (constant) **isolation and withdrawal**
- **profound irritability**
- **rage and hate**
- (almost) **constant preoccupation with death and dying**
- **using a lot of alcohol, drugs, medicaments**
- (very) **poor impulse control, risk behavior**

+

several months after traumatic event / loss:
such reactions = the same / worse



probably need for some additional support
(counselling, psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy...)

6. What about

**helpers working
with traumatized/
bereaved clients?**

1. **Government**
2. **Bosses** (on different levels)
3. **Clients**
4. **Friends, family members**
5. **Those who know everything** (about everything)

+

6. **HELPERS THEMSELVES**

the same expectation for helpers:





REMEMBER:



1. Helpers are

2. They **can not** avoid human reactions to traumatic events and losses



➤ many contacts with traumatized / bereaved clients



➤ not taking care about oneself



indirect (secondary) traumatization

Important take-away question:

1. At your work, do you think that you have to be THE



???

???



**FINALLY:
ONLY 3 MORE SLIDES**



TRAUMATIC EVENTS, LOSSES AND GRIEVING PROCESS CAN HAVE SOME POSITIVE ELEMENTS:

REMEMBER:

**We can realize all this only
long after traumatic event / loss
and it can not be accelerated!**

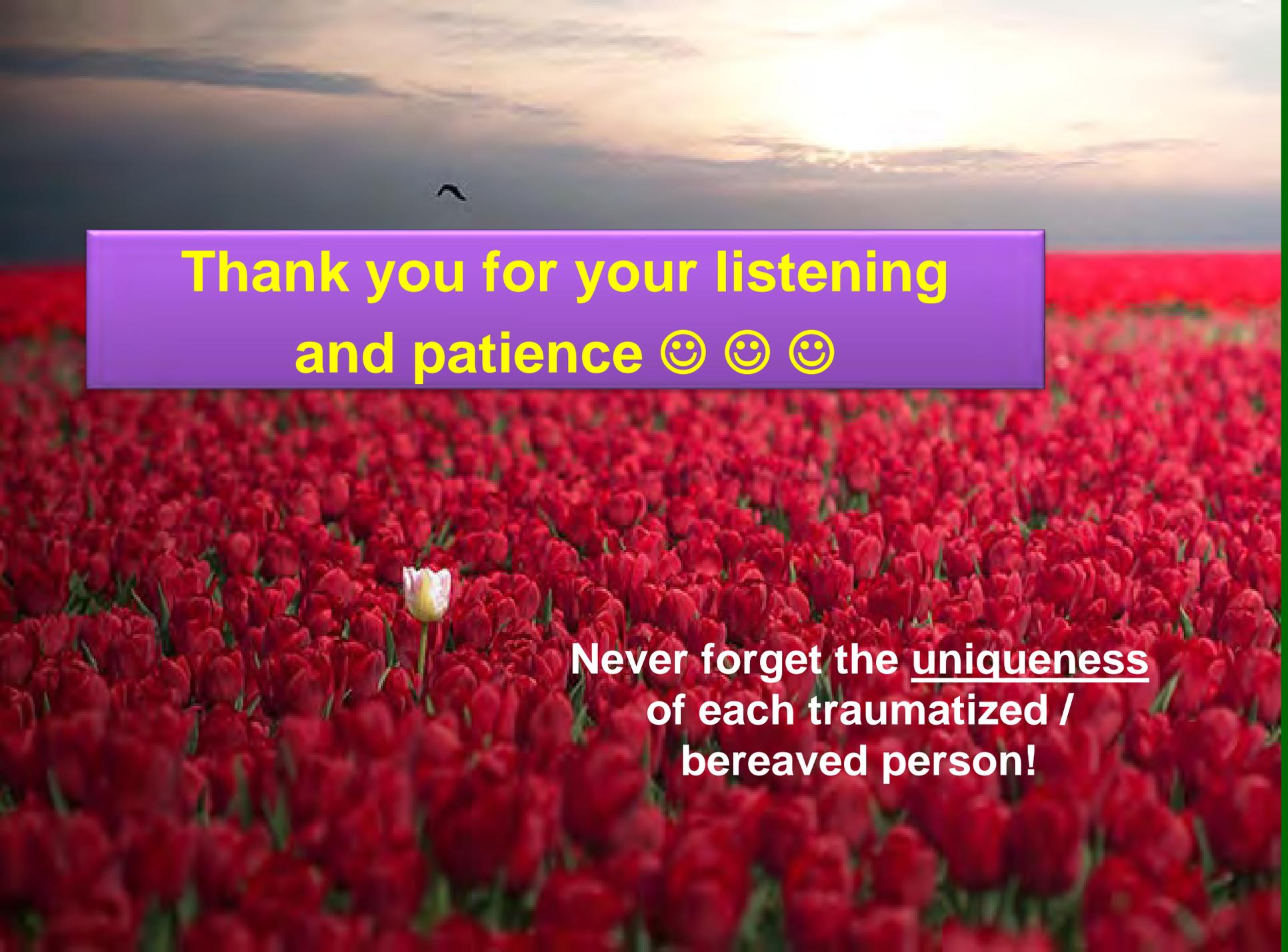
- ~~■ "There is a silver lining in everything."~~
- ~~■ "There is always sunshine above the clouds!"~~

ONCE AGAIN:

wherever people live, whatever traits they have,
whatever they had done... traumatic events are painful
(there is only one life + only one health)



and they need
some kind of
SUPPORT!



Thank you for your listening
and patience 😊 😊 😊

Never forget the uniqueness
of each traumatized /
bereaved person!