

Positive transformation as a response to trauma

Janice Scott describes the origin and process of the London Underground Trauma Support Group programme

'A perfectly ordinary man, on a perfectly ordinary summer's day... He waited at the front of the platform until he could hear my train approaching, then he calmly stepped down on to the tracks and looked directly at me as he waited for the impact.'

'After the incident [train suicide] I was very upset and didn't want to be on my own, but I had to travel for two hours to get back to the depot... I decided more was needed to support train drivers.'
(Peter Redmond: train operative, Central Line)



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Until 1994, London Underground had nothing in place to support drivers immediately after a traumatic event such as a train death or 'near miss' (a failed train suicide or accidental fall where the customer is not fatally injured). It was accepted

that such events were an 'occupational hazard' for tube operatives². This type of 'occupational hazard' can mean that a driver may experience similar sensations of sight, sound and smell, to that of a soldier on the front line facing the traumatic deaths of others. Such horrific experiences have been noted as a significant factor in the later development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)³. As the trauma support group (TSG) manager for trains, I am very aware of the sensations that drivers experience through listening to them (driver or volunteer) talk about what they have seen, heard and smelt.

The only acknowledgement that the driver had experienced a train suicide ('one under') was the

requirement that she or he was taken 'off the trains' for three days and asked to remain in the depot, to facilitate any possible police investigation. Counselling was available if it was deemed necessary by the train driver and the manager.

In 1994, Peter Redmond, along with two of his colleagues, Steve Shelton and Andy Bamber, with the help of their manager Vince Dardis, set up a support group for Central Line drivers. Fifteen years later, the trauma support group for train drivers is made up of nearly 90 experienced train operatives, spread right across the entire network of London Underground. The volunteers provide 24-hour cover, every single day of the year, for their driver colleagues. Following the success of the support group for drivers and the events of 7 July 2005, a TSG programme for station staff was funded and Val Hughes was employed as the TSG manager for stations. This move set in place a support network for staff who have experienced work-related trauma, such as verbal and physical assault, spitting etc. This specific need for support was highlighted in 1998 by the Institute for Employment Studies for Health and Safety Executive, which state: 'Employers need to consider that not only major events, but in some instances ongoing situations (eg bullying) or 'everyday' aspects of the job (eg violence) can give rise to PTSD.'⁴

Since May 2006, Val Hughes (TSG manager, stations) has selected and trained over 120 volunteer station staff, who meet colleagues dealing with the immediate impact of incidents such as physical or verbal assault, spitting and witness to train suicide.



DAVID PEARSON/GETTY

In this article I focus on the TSG (trains) volunteers, marking 15 years of the TSG programme and highlighting the process of positive transformation. For the reality is that the men and women who come forward and apply for the role of volunteer have, more often than not, experienced one or more work-based traumatic incidents themselves. And as a direct response to their experience, they decide to do something to help others in similar situations. In becoming an agent of help and support in the face of trauma, they move from a position of helplessness to an empowered place, where their humanity and wish to ease the pain and distress of others goes some way to alleviating their own emotional and psychological damage following train suicides and deaths. I believe this is a significant manifestation of the phenomenon of positive transformation as a response to trauma.

How does the TSG programme work?

The first TSG manager was employed through the counselling and trauma service six years after the volunteers began their work. This move was highly significant for two main reasons:

- The need for collegial support after a traumatic event was perceived as important, and funding was allocated for the TSG manager (trains). This was a massive shift away from the time when no support was deemed necessary and that dealing with a train suicide was just part of the job of a London Underground train driver.
- Funding and resources were made available to train and supervise the volunteers. It had become

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clear that volunteers needed to be prepared, supervised and supported in their work. The sights, sounds and smells so often associated with a train fatality or near fatality are at times very close to events experienced by fire fighters and other groups facing traumatic injury and death.

Any train driver who expresses an interest in becoming a volunteer is called for interview and completes the Impact of Events Scale (IES) and the Penn Inventory for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder prior to meeting the TSG manager. The completed forms are taken into account alongside the interview process. Having said that many of the volunteers have experienced a traumatic experience (and if not at work then very often they are familiar with the impact of trauma as a result of events in

What the volunteers say about their experience of offering support to colleagues

Why did you become a volunteer?

'I wanted to help colleagues in situations where they may not understand what is happening to them.'

'I believe in helping people.'

'To learn the art of listening.'

What do you gain from your role as a TSG volunteer?

'It has made me more confident in all I do at work and in my home life and gives me a sense of achievement knowing that I can help my colleagues.'

'A deeper understanding of my managers' roles and attitudes relating to incidents involving trauma at work ... developing patience, compassion and understanding for them in their striving to do the right thing.'

'I know my role mainly consists of emotional first aid but I think I can make a difference. I feel a bit like a stepping stone to some greater help available in the company.'

What would you say is the most difficult aspect of your role?

'Remembering everyone does react differently to situations and trying not to tell them how they should be feeling but letting them get there for themselves.'

'Saying "no" when you are not really available.'

'The most difficult part is when to draw the line, when to stop and not get too involved.'



A small group of TSG volunteers. Top row, left to right: Alan Bailey and Andy Harris (Metropolitan Line). Bottom row, left to right: Cormac Harrington (District Line) Sara Ffrench and Mohammed Mujahid (Central Line).

their personal lives), it is a priority that vulnerable applicants are identified. If, through the application process, it becomes clear that the train driver is still experiencing some effects from an earlier trauma, they will be supported, offered counselling if necessary and their application will be delayed for at least a year. They may then reapply if they still feel they would like to work with the programme.

*'We are born with the capacity ... to experience what others experience and participate in their experience by virtue of the way we are grabbed by their nervous system. How do we stop this from happening so that we are not the prisoner of someone else's nervous system all the time?'*¹⁵

It is essential that all the volunteers are protected as much as possible from re-traumatisation through the work. Consequently, the application process is quite searching, and once trained and entered onto the TSG volunteer register, regular attendance at the quarterly supervision group is essential. If attendance is not possible (perhaps through difficulties in obtaining release from shift duties), I provide individual telephone or face-to-face supervision. Above all other aspects of my role, providing an environment of support and supervision for every volunteer is paramount.

The training

Once accepted for the programme, drivers attend a four-day course, which they must complete before they can be registered and available to work with traumatised colleagues. The course content addresses their experiences of trauma and how they have been affected, moving on to an introduction to the world of trauma, signs of PTSD, and how trauma can impact on the mind, body and spirit. The discussions can often offer revelations to participants, where they suddenly understand why they, or people around them, behave in particular ways, eg change in mood, diminished concentration (one volunteer suggested that he could now tell his wife – when she was complaining he never listened to her – that he was, in fact, dissociating).

An important aspect of the course is the development of interpersonal skills of volunteers, while all the time recognising that they are not becoming counsellors. At times participants may feel anxious and raise concerns about 'getting it right'. Their confidence is often built through an enhanced understanding that it is their humanity and willingness to 'be with' and support their colleagues after a very difficult, often horrifying experience, which is the essential factor. Yes, they

may make mistakes, and if they do, then they can always request help and support from the TSG manager. Above all, the fact that they are prepared to give up their time to reassure and normalise what their colleague is experiencing, is where the healing can begin and continue.

Other essential course content includes:

- social support and information-giving skills (in accordance with NICE guideline 26)⁶
- how to use the supervision process
- role of the volunteer in a critical incident
- attending a coroner's court as observers
- meeting with a senior, experienced volunteer to discuss the role of volunteer
- recognition of stress, personal signals of stress and how to reduce stress through a variety of strategies eg emotional freedom technique.

Following the terrible events of 7/7 and the potential bombings on 21/7, the role of the TSG volunteer in the event of a 'critical incident' is also discussed. Many lessons were learnt about the way in which the country⁷ and Transport for London (TfL) can manage critical incidents and the use of TSG volunteers in future incidents. Allan Gardner⁸ (a trains operations manager) worked alongside a small number of volunteers to ensure that train drivers were given the best possible support for many months after 7/7. Allan described the many ways the volunteers (who were released from all normal duties) were able to support him and their colleagues and how volunteers may play a part in the event of another critical incident. Since then, the TfL Critical Incident Plan specifically discusses the role of the TSG volunteer:

'If they are called upon to provide support in this way we need to liaise closely, sharing information on the impact of the incident, and advising them on how best to provide ongoing support. They will be expected to partake in support and supervision provided by TSG managers as they also need good support and supervision for themselves. This will normally be coordinated by the trauma support group managers'⁹

Recently, reflecting on his work in those months, Lionel Watson, one of the volunteers at Edgware Road, said;

'I was glad I was of some help to my colleagues ... we arranged for counselling, and taxis to take our colleagues to and from counselling ... our colleagues were also able to talk to us about how they were feeling. Before 7/7 if an incident occurred on a train we [the volunteers] were hardly involved; now, post 7/7, we are always involved.'

The importance of this fairly new aspect of the volunteer role has been highlighted by Mandy Rutter¹⁰. She found, in her discussions with staff groups who had experienced work-related critical incidents, that 'they wanted to talk and receive help from their friends and colleagues who they knew and who they were most comfortable with'.

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On completing the course, with the agreement of both the volunteer and the manager, the volunteer's manager is informed that s/he is a registered TSG volunteer and available to assist following a train suicide/death or other traumatic train-related incident. The volunteer will join the specific group for the line they work for, eg a volunteer who drives a tube on the Central Line will join the Central Line TSG group. The secretary for that particular group will contact the new volunteer to welcome him or her, and confirm contact details. At this point, the volunteer will establish the hours when they are happy to be contacted outside their work shifts. Of course, any volunteer at any time, when contacted for assistance, can say if they are not able to attend an incident. This can be difficult for a volunteer to do, as they can feel that they may be letting down a colleague. However, we discuss both in the course and in the supervision groups, how to say 'no' in as clear a way as possible. It is often highlighted that attending an incident, when feeling vulnerable oneself, can cause harm, both to the traumatised driver and to the volunteer (and their family). It is a difficult lesson to learn for volunteers and that is why it is so essential that they have the opportunity to discuss their concerns and fantasies about what might happen if they say 'no'.

Following a traumatic incident

A manager for the line concerned (eg if the incident involves a District Line driver, then the District Line volunteers are contacted) will release a volunteer who will go to the scene to meet and support the driver. It may also be necessary for the volunteer to liaise with the duty managers and the British Transport Police before accompanying the driver home in a taxi (funded by TfL). Depending on the emotional and physical state of the driver, the volunteer may give a little psycho-education about the normal responses to trauma, eg feeling cold, shaking, anger/shock. All volunteers have with them a leaflet, which describes very briefly possible reactions along with the details of the counselling service and the contact number of the volunteer.

After the initial meeting, the volunteer may text or phone the driver to see how they are and where appropriate offer support through meeting again in a non-work environment. They may meet for a coffee, go for a walk, or talk on the phone. At this point it is entirely up to the driver how much support they receive; at no time will a volunteer try to impose 'support'. The issue of confidentiality is always raised by the volunteer and all volunteers are aware that they must tell a driver that if s/he indicates a wish to self-harm or harm others, or is likely to drive a tube train while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, then confidentiality will be broken and the driver's manager (and the TSG manager) must be informed. This is obviously a sensitive area and we explore it at length in the training.

After the incident, all volunteers complete an incident form which is forwarded to either Val Hughes (TSG manager for stations) or me. The form has two functions.

First, when the form is received, the volunteer is always contacted by their TSG manager to discuss any concerns or issues that have been raised during or after the incident. More often than not, a volunteer will say they are fine; however, what is important is that they know that support/supervision is available when they need it. They are frequently reminded that they do not need to wait until the three-monthly supervision groups to raise any concerns. Through working in this way it is hoped that the entire volunteer network feel supported, boundaried and safe doing the work they do. The death of another human being, either through suicide, accident or criminal activity, is highly traumatic, and containing the possible reverberations from such incidents is essential. I described in an earlier article the ways in which I also attempt to manage the ripples of trauma, shock and horror that can spread through the

system of the underground¹¹.

Second, it is very important that all incidents where volunteers are involved are documented and stored for future research. We are very interested in the opportunity to research and evaluate the programme and hope that in the near future, links with a research department may make this possible.

When a train suicide or train death occurs, an inquest will be held, perhaps as much as a year or more later. The driver involved may be called to the coroner's court as a witness. For many drivers this can be an extremely difficult and painful experience. Drivers often fear that the family of the dead person will be judgmental and attacking; they also fear seeing the distress of the family and learning more about the person who died. And of course, they are again confronted with the experience they have tried to forget, knowing that they are to be questioned not only by the coroner but also possibly by a member of the family or a friend of the deceased. The very thought that as a witness the driver can be questioned about a death that they were powerless to avoid, compounds the trauma. Volunteers, who are knowledgeable and willing to 'be with' a driver through the inquest process, are invaluable in the emotional support they provide.

The TSG volunteer can be available to accompany and support the driver through the experience of the court. To prepare them for this role, the volunteers visit a coroner's court as observers, so that they become familiar with the processes of court. To observe an inquest allows them the opportunity to be there, without being personally involved.

Attending the coroner's court as a witness or volunteer can be very moving. It can be a healing experience, for example, if family members deliberately seek out the driver, to apologise for the distress and pain that their relative has caused. Drivers can also feel a sense of completion once the inquest is over and the verdict recorded. Perhaps, for some, it is the first time that they can really begin to 'let go' of their experience. This aspect of the role is so important that we have recently introduced a 'coroner's court' report form for volunteers to complete, recording another aspect of their activity. On receipt of this form, the volunteer is again contacted to see how they are and if they have any concerns.

The effectiveness of the TSG programme depends on:

- the continuing support of train drivers willing to work as volunteers
- the continuing support of managers who recognise the importance of 'emotional first aid'

in traumatic incidents and who are willing and able to release a member of their staff from normal duties to work as a volunteer.

Looking ahead

For the future we hope to:

- enhance the work of the entire programme through a bi-annual conference, bringing together train and station-side volunteers
- develop links with similar programmes working in other areas eg other underground and rail networks, the fire department, police
- implement a research study that, I believe, should extend over a period of at least three years, where driver short- and long-term sickness is monitored following train deaths. At present, evaluation is through an informal process within the counselling and trauma department. Evaluative comments are on the whole extremely positive, showing the positive impact of immediate collegial support following a trauma.

Conclusion

Becoming a TSG volunteer is a very concrete example of positive transformation as a response to trauma. Moving from a place of powerlessness and distress to a sense of empowerment and helpfulness benefits both the individuals and the industry. The programme embodies the development of resilience at a personal and company-wide level. Volunteers are committed to their work, they gain confidence in the face of distress and pain, and they are able to offer help and support to their friends and colleagues. What is so interesting is that back in the early 1700s, the philosopher Hutcheson posited the idea that people are happiest when helping others¹². The TSG programme is a fine example of Hutcheson's argument, where men and women, through service to their friends and colleagues, enhance their own sense of wellbeing.

*'Social bonds of attachment reduce stress-induced arousal.'*¹³

London Underground and TfL can be justifiably proud of the men and women who work as TSG volunteers across the underground network. ■

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**‘I was so glad you [a trauma support volunteer] came when I had my train suicide... everyone was there, the fire brigade, the police, the ambulance service. Apart from you, no one was there for me’
(London Underground train driver following a train suicide)¹⁴**



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