

Trauma-Informed Emergency Exercises

Guidance on Integrating Wellbeing and Human Aspects into Exercise Design and Delivery

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Introduction

“It is [vital] that everyone involved in the response to a terrorist attack is fully prepared so that... we [can] provide the best possible response.”¹

Planning is fundamental to good emergency management, especially when it comes to addressing the impact of terrorist attacks and other major incidents. It is a core piece of the disaster cycle which extends from preparedness through to response, recovery, and review. Preparedness, in particular, ensures the readiness of both procedural and psychosocial aspects of dealing with collective trauma events.

Experience has shown that responding to major emergencies can be stressful, distressing, and traumatic for all people involved. The same is true for mock settings, such as emergency exercises, which test responses and processes. However, these often fail to test the crucial element of humanitarian assistance preparedness within the full context of the exercise, instead treating it as a separate element or forgetting it completely. This oversight risks marginalising or siloing – effectively *dis-integrating* – the human aspects of response from other elements of emergency training and exercising.

One way to address this gap is through a trauma-informed approach (which also embraces a victim-focussed or victim-centric approach). It incorporates best practice principles for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and psychosocial support (HAPSS) into exercise aims, objectives, and evaluations. These address psychological first aid, welfare, and follow-up support and can help test organisations’ preparedness to address individual and community needs over the short- and long-term.

Leading international experts in counter terrorism and victim support have highlighted the importance of victim-centric responses in achieving public trust, community engagement, and staff wellbeing.² Indeed, exercises designed around HAPSS principles are more likely to result in the promotion of ethical standards of care and support for bereaved families, survivors, emergency responders, and the wider public during real incidents. They also reduce the risk of retraumatising participants during the exercise itself.

The Counter Terrorism Preparedness Network’s (CTPN) HAPSS Expert Working Group – which consists of professionals spanning the fields of emergency preparedness, emergency response, and major incident management – developed this resource in response to the gap identified above. It aims to provide practical guidance on a trauma-informed approach and show how it can be applied to the design and execution of emergency exercises. At the end of the document is an annotated resource list focused on HAPSS principles and how they can be incorporated into exercises and the emergency management cycle. This includes CTPN’s handbook on “Supporting People after Terrorism: A Compendium of Learning, Practices and Resources”³ as well as other international good practice guidance.

¹ Counter Terrorism Policing’s Senior National Coordinator for Protect and Prepare, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Laurence Taylor, commenting after Exercise Spring Resolve - A large-scale 2-day exercise which tested the response of the UK emergency services and government to a major terrorist incident (2023).

² [Testing Counter Terrorism Responses from a Victim and Members Wellbeing Perspective](#), Victim Support Europe/Invictm/National Wellbeing Service (2022), pp. 11.

³ [Supporting People after Terrorism: A Compendium of Learning, Practices and Resources](#), CTPN HAPSS (2023).

Trauma-Informed Emergency Exercises: A Checklist Approach

The Meaning of a “Trauma-Informed” Approach to Exercises

The idea of a “trauma-informed” approach has become increasingly attractive in contemporary working practices. Although its meaning varies across organisational settings, generally, being trauma-informed means recognising the presence of psychological trauma and seeking to respond to it. A trauma-informed approach thus identifies the many personal and societal consequences related to trauma, considers how individuals exposed to potentially traumatic events may respond to words, images, and actions, and seeks to create environments that do not initiate or further engender harm.

In the realm of emergency management, exposure to trauma most obviously relates to experiencing, witnessing, or confronting real or imagined scenes of serious injury, death, or the threat thereof. This is especially true within the context of traumatic death, mass fatality, or mass casualty scenarios. When testing preparedness and response to such scenarios, the emergency management community must balance the need for effective and realistic exercises with the responsibility to safeguard exercise participants from harm. This requires an appreciation that emergency exercises may cause, impact, or re-trigger experiences of distress or trauma among participants and an active commitment to mitigate psychosocial risk during exercise design and delivery.

A trauma-informed approach to exercises should be forward-looking and encourage strategies that foster individual and organisational resilience and recovery. Often models emphasise the importance of this through a strength-based, trauma-informed approach. This method actively challenges the stigmatising concepts of trauma and victimisation, and it creates positive opportunities for agency, support, vicarious resilience, and post-traumatic growth.

The checklist approach adopted below presents five guiding principles as a framework for implementing a trauma-informed approach to exercises. The five principles are:

- Safety, welfare, and wellbeing;
- Trustworthiness and transparency;
- Choice and control;
- Respect and collaboration;
- Empowerment and support.

Within the checklist approach, brief explanations of the key principles are followed by a series of illustrative questions to help shape conversations around exercise planning, delivery, and review.

Safety, Welfare, and Wellbeing

Individuals participating in emergency exercises should feel safe throughout every stage of the exercise. This is achieved when planners take active steps to mitigate the risk of exposure to hazard and harm across exercise delivery. In live exercises, physical safety is the most obvious factor; however, psychological safety must also be considered.

Consider the following questions:

- 1) What safety risks may arise in the exercise? How will they be recorded? What measures need to be put in place to ensure participants' physical and emotional safety? Consider the following table.

Physical Safety ⁴	Psychological Safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Has a risk management plan been established?• Has everyone been properly trained to perform their task?• Have safety briefings been prepared and reviewed with participants?• Will safety officers be available?• What contingency plans have been prepared (e.g. "No Duff" announcements to indicate a real incident)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will graphic images or details of death or injury be included in the exercise?• If so, has the extent to which participants will be exposed to these been examined? What is the rationale?• How will exercise objectives be balanced against reducing the risk of distress or trauma through exposure?• What arrangements will be in place if participants choose not to participate?

- 2) What welfare and support measures will be implemented before, during, and after the exercise (including the kinds of "support" measures referred to below)?
- 3) How will selection processes consider participants' pre-existing experiences and avoid increasing their risk? To what extent must participants be exposed to graphic scenes, images, or details during the exercise? How can agency be given to role players through, for example, choice and control around their role playing and what they feel comfortable with in portrayals?

⁴ [Managing Exercises, Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection](#) (2012), Handbook 3, pp. 14 and 23.

Selecting Role Players as Disaster Victims in Live Exercises⁵

Using people to “role play” disaster victims or other roles adds realism to a live exercise. However, it also creates an extra element of risk that must be managed. When selecting role players, the following should be considered:

- Exercise planners should consider the exercise location, occupational health and safety legislation, and insurance coverage when involving role players.
- Exercise planners should consider the legal ramifications of using minors for role play, as well as the likelihood of them acting outside their role.
- Role players should consider existing conditions that may affect their role (e.g. pregnancy, asthma, cardiac conditions, back problems, claustrophobia).
- Role players should not be on medication that may adversely affect their role.
- Role players should discuss their participation if previous experiences of major incidents were or still are personally significant.
- Role players should be fully briefed on the nature of the role before starting.
- Exercise managers should ensure debriefing and psychological first aid are available. Some individuals may react adversely to receiving moulage (make-up which simulates injuries) or to acting in the scenario, which should be actively addressed.

- 4) How will exercise participants receive physical and emotional breaks, time out spaces, and support opportunities throughout the exercise?
- 5) Do post-exercise debriefing and learning activities include opportunities for defusing, psychological reflection, and welfare check-ins?

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Trust is the foundation of effective leadership, strong teamwork, and collaboration and is crucial in emergency management. Within exercises, trust is created when participants know exactly what is expected of them and when boundaries – including but not limited to the scope and limits of the exercise – are consistently maintained. Being trustworthy also means that promises are kept, people are reliable, and all participating organisations are working to meet the same level of standards.

Transparency is equally important. It promotes understanding between people and their priorities and motivations, especially in regard to interactions amongst each other and with multiagency partners, and

⁵ Adapted from AIDR's [Managing Exercises](#), pp. 17.

encourages the setting of clear expectations and ground rules. This builds trust and good working relationships among participants and, in turn, promotes positive multiagency working.

Consider the following questions:

- 1) How will exercise aims and objectives be delivered to ensure they are understood by all participants at every stage of the exercise? How will these be recorded?
- 2) What boundaries will be put in place surrounding the scope, focus, and content of the exercise? How will participants' understanding be compared before and during the exercise?⁶



It is important to clearly identify boundaries surrounding the use of social media and image sharing prior to the exercise start.

- 3) What steps will be taken during the exercise to promote trust and transparency? For example, it may be beneficial to define terminology and clarify assumptions around crucial topics.
- 4) Consider how the exercise may impact participants' sense of trust, confidence, and relationship-building, either positively or negatively. How will risks generated by the exercise be addressed?
- 5) In what ways will the exercise encourage and enhance wider stakeholder trust in emergency management, including in the public eye? For example, what details will be shared with non-participating organisations, the media, the local community, and the wider public?

Choice and Control

Promoting safety, welfare, and wellbeing as well as trust and transparency creates environments where stakeholders are consulted in the decision-making processes surrounding exercise planning, delivery, and outcomes. It additionally ensures that participants have individual choice and control over their exposure to scenario details and exercise environments within the scope of the exercise's objectives.

Building choice and control into exercises is also about acknowledging the existence of power relationships (both formal and informal). This is important in establishing, amongst other things, an appropriate balance between different communication modes when planning scenarios, setting tasks, facilitating discussions, and identifying learning. In practice, this helps with identifying when, for example, it is appropriate to use a command-and-control form of communication as opposed to one based on consultation and engagement.

⁶ See the Appendices in the AIDR's [Managing Exercises](#) Handbook for good sample templates.

Consider the following questions:

- 1) Who will have a say in the initial planning and early scoping of the exercise? Would it be beneficial to include additional stakeholders (including non-traditional ones) to enhance engagement and bring new perspectives to the planning process?
- 2) What would extending participants' choice and control mean in terms of the design of the exercise and its objectives? How can the principle of informed choice and control be maximised to safeguard participants' psychological safety and wellbeing?
- 3) How will the exercise's format and content be shaped to balance challenging, realistic circumstances with individual choice and control?
- 4) To what extent are the command-and-control or consultation and engagement modes of communication appropriate within the exercise? What does this mean for how the principle of choice and control is implemented at different stages of the exercise?
- 5) Might it be beneficial to refer to the experiences of previous victims when considering exercise assumptions, design, and delivery? Who can help address this question?

Practical and Ethical Guidance on Engaging Survivors

The following resources offer guidance on engaging ethically and responsibly with various types of trauma survivors. Applying the focus of these principles and practices to those with lived experience of terrorism and other disasters will help exercise planners reflect on their own organisational policies and approaches for including survivors in training and exercises.

[Disaster Action's](#) Codes of Practice. See especially:

- Working with Disaster Survivors and the Bereaved: Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality
- Using Information, Images and Other Audio-Visual Material in Training and Presentations

[A Guide to Meaningful Survivor Engagement](#). This guide includes a checklist for meaningful engagement with survivors before and after events, remuneration, and intersectionality issues to consider.

[Toolkit for Building Survivor-Informed Organisations](#). These guiding principles for survivor engagement have relevance beyond their trafficking focus. The statements, strategies and tips in Chapter 8 in particular offer helpful food for thought and discussion among exercise planners in relation to their engagement with disaster survivors.

Inspiring Practices for the Meaningful Inclusion of Victims/Survivors of Terrorism

Bjorn Ihler is an internationally renowned expert on counter terrorism and a survivor of the 22 July 2011 terrorist attack in Norway. She has written about the meaningful inclusion of victims and survivors of terrorism in activities associated with preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). These include valuable observations and recommendations for organisers of emergency exercises.

Victims and survivors play valuable roles in P/CVE. In addition to highlighting the role, challenges, and opportunities for engaging victims and survivors in activities such as emergency exercises, Ihler emphasises the responsibility of the P/CVE sector in developing safe and meaningful paths for their participation. These include providing informed consent, knowledge of the potential harms, and access to psychological support at events. Options, such as designated spaces for self-care and the ability to remove oneself from a situation, should be clearly communicated.

“The most meaningful role victims/survivors play in the P/CVE sector by virtue of their status as victims/survivors is not necessarily a preventive one, nor one as a credible voice in counter-narratives. Instead, it may be as the voice of humanity, reminding the public, the policymakers, and those who have an impersonal, academic or professional relationship to terrorism of the human impact of the issue we spend every day tackling.”⁷

Addressing the ethical dimensions of such inclusion, Ihler also recommends that victims and survivors receive appropriate remuneration for their labour, contributions, and participation in events. Event organisers should take on these responsibilities.

Respect and Collaboration

Individuals that have been affected, either directly or indirectly, by emergencies can be especially helpful in exercises, whether as role players or as contributors based on their real, lived experience. A collaborative approach recognises their value, as well as the value of all participants, and actively promotes an environment of respect, mutual support, and joint learning. Additionally, a collaborative approach ensures that feedback, individual perspectives, and lessons learned are gathered from the exercise and shared with a wide range of stakeholders.

⁷ Ihler, B. Inspiring Practices for the Meaningful Inclusion of Victims/Survivors of Terrorism in P/CVE Work, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (2023).

Consider the following questions:

- 1) How will the exercise encourage collaborative working in the identification of its objectives, the way it is run, the discussions it generates, and the outcomes it achieves?

Good Public Relations and Community Involvement in Live Exercises⁸

The following suggestions include those offered by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience as part of a suite of resources aimed at assisting in the design, planning, conduction, and evaluation of exercises.

- Set clear parameters for community involvement, letting community members know what they can have influence over, what is fixed, and how they will be kept updated afterwards.
- Exercise planners should involve community stakeholders when designing a live exercise if it is expected to disrupt normal community activities. This ensures the local community is aware of the disruption and any impacts it may cause.
- As a matter of courtesy and good public relations, as well as to identify unforeseen stakeholder issues, residents and businesses close to an exercise site should be alerted ahead of the event. This is especially important if the exercise will interrupt day-to-day activities.
- Exercises benefit from community involvement. Local involvement in a community evacuation exercise, for example, promotes resilience in the community by raising awareness of local plans and encouraging preparedness.
- Community members or representatives should be involved throughout the exercise management process. They can provide invaluable perspectives about potential exercise needs or plans that the community would like to practise or test.

- 2) What steps are being taken to ensure the exercise is as broad and inclusive as possible? What diverse views, opinions, and experiences – beyond a multiagency approach – are being gathered?
- 3) Has the opportunity, appropriateness, and impact of community involvement in the exercise been considered? How could this help strengthen the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from hazards?

⁸ Adapted from AIDR [Managing Exercises](#), Handbook 3, pp. 16.

- 4) If the exercise includes participation or contributions from bereaved people and survivors, what measures will be in place to avoid retraumatisation? How will their particular needs around safety, welfare, and support be met?
- 5) How will feedback on the exercise outcomes be collected and shared with wider stakeholders to ensure a collaborative and responsive approach?

Manchester Inquiry Assurance Process: Engaging Wider Stakeholders in Learning

In May 2017, a suicide bomber killed 22 people following a concert at England's Manchester Arena. In response, the UK Government established a public inquiry to investigate the deaths and make recommendations. It resulted in three reports focussing on security, emergency response and radicalisation, and preventability.

Following the conclusion of the inquiry and production of its reports, the UK Home Office rolled out a **Manchester Arena Inquiry Assurance Programme** to oversee the continued implementation of the public inquiry's recommendations. Its work involved overseeing a series of engagement meetings where victims and survivors of the attack served as key stakeholders in future emergency planning. The Chair of the Public Inquiry, Sir John Saunders, praised this as a process that enhanced transparency, public accountability, and commitment to implementing learning over the longer term. He recommended it as a good practice model for the future.

Empowerment and Support

Empowerment and support in emergency exercises are based on the understanding that no one who experiences disaster is untouched by it, though its impacts can be varied and multiple. Responding to this requires an appreciation that exposure to distress and trauma, including vicarious and imaginative exposure, may negatively impact an individual's efficacy and self-worth. This is one aspect of thinking about trauma.

At the same time, psychologists highlight another. They emphasise the importance of also recognising and adopting a strength-based approach when thinking about trauma. This approach focuses on the positive attributes of a person or a group rather than just the negative and on enhancing individuals' ability to overcome adversity. In relation to disaster exposure, adopting a strengths-based approach involves acknowledging people's ability to adapt to trauma, tragedy, or stress and giving them the resources to act. The idea of "vicarious resilience" is relevant to this concept, namely the positive effect and potential collective growth that those exposed to disaster may experience from witnessing the resilience and coping of others.

Together, these approaches balance assumptions about individual vulnerability and resilience and create a technique that empowers and supports people. This technique actively challenges the stigmatising concepts of trauma and victimisation and creates positive opportunities for agency, support, vicarious resilience, and post-traumatic growth.

Activating the principle of support also creates opportunities to access post-incident and post-exercise care and wellbeing services. Exercises can facilitate psychosocial awareness around this that extends beyond emergency plans, policies, and activities to everyday self-care and organisational support strategies for emergency responders and those they serve.

Consider the following questions:

- 1) What assumptions may exist regarding people's vulnerability, resilience, and support during and after major emergencies, both internally and externally? How will consideration and acknowledgement of these be integrated into the exercise's planning and delivery?
- 2) Have organisations which address people's needs in emergency response and recovery been included as exercise participants? If not, have they been consulted for reference and support?

Including Victim Service Providers in Exercises: Lessons from Boston

The annual planning cycle prior to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing lacked a crucial element: the integration of victim services. Key lessons from the bombing response highlighted this citing a lack of awareness regarding the specific needs of victims and a failure to invite agencies with existing plans to care for victims, families, and the community into the Incident Command System. As a result, there was no plan to integrate recovery services into the response, and agencies attempting to initiate and coordinate services worked in silos, encountering challenges with organised recovery systems.

*"Historically... exercises have been an essential component of Emergency Management preparedness. Including Victim Services (VS) providers in community preparedness allows them to shape planning, assess and validate capabilities, and address areas for improvement. The Boston Marathon shines a bright light on the effectiveness of response planning for all involved entities...as well as the critical need to include VS to develop a timely and effective whole community response."*⁹

⁹ [ICPTTA Exercise Guide](#), pp. 9.

- 3) How will capabilities for identifying and addressing victims' needs be integrated into measurable outcomes for drills and exercises? More broadly, how have good practice principles for addressing the impact of emergencies on people, in the short and long term, been incorporated into plans and processes?
- 4) Will the post-exercise debriefing processes (e.g. Wash Up, Hot Wash) provide welfare checks, trauma risk management, and additional psychological support for those who may need them?
- 5) What wider practices do organisations involved in the exercise have for staff welfare and support? Will the exercise help promote these? For example, could participants be reminded during debriefs of the everyday connections between personal, team, and organisational resilience?

Concluding Remarks

Emergency exercises are, essentially, human endeavours. They should be built around people and demonstrate the importance of valuing, managing, and supporting them. Experience has highlighted the importance of this mindset and shown why it should be at the forefront of emergency managers' thinking and focus. Unfortunately, this has not always been true in practice:

*"Procedures tend to focus too much on incidents, rather than on individuals, and on processes rather than people. Emergency plans tend to cater for the needs of the emergency and other responding services, rather than explicitly addressing the needs and priorities of the people involved... A change of mindset is needed to bring about the necessary shift in focus, from incidents to individuals, and from processes to people."*¹⁰

Applying the key principles and checklist approach offered in this guidance will help emergency planners and others embrace this mindset by developing and integrating wellbeing and human aspects into their emergency exercises.

This is not only the morally right thing to do for the public served by counter terrorism and other emergency management activities throughout peacetime planning and exercising. It also ensures doing right by those professionals who may go on to find themselves confronting real major emergencies and collective trauma events, from whom society expects the very best at the hardest of times.

¹⁰ [Report of the 7 July Review Committee](#), London Assembly, Greater London Authority (June 2006), pp. 1.15-1.17.

Further Reading and Resources

Airport Cooperative Research Program (ARCP) (2017) [Family Assistance Guidebook, Toolkit and Exercises Materials](#), National Academies and Transportation Research Board. *An extensive set of practical resources to help test family assistance and victim support arrangements across a wide range of emergency planning and response environments.*

Altan, L and Dalby P (2022) [Testing Counter Terrorism Responses from a Victim and Member Wellbeing Perspective: Design of an international tabletop exercise for law enforcement in Canada and the UK](#), Victim Support Europe, Invictm and Oscar Kilo. *Outline of an immersive online table top exercise (e-TTX) designed to testing police services' victim response capability and officer wellbeing after a terrorist attack.*

Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub (ongoing) [Managing Exercises Handbook](#) and [Recovery Exercising Toolkit](#). *An all-hazards framework, evidence-based guidance and specialised resources guiding exercise planners in the development and facilitation of recovery exercises.*

Cabinet Office (2014) [Emergency planning and preparedness: exercises and training](#). *General introduction on how to run exercises and training for emergency planning and preparedness. In addition, see Cabinet Office (2006) [The Exercise Planners Guide](#).*

CTPN (2023) [Supporting People after Terrorism: A Compendium of Learning, Practices and Resources](#). *Overview of key principles in Humanitarian Assistance and Psycho-Social Support accompanied by guidance on supporting people after terrorism and other collective trauma events.*

ICP TTA (2020) [Victim Services Exercise Guide and Scenario Templates](#), ICP TTA programme. *Guidance and best practice to assist communities incorporate victim services into their exercises and close the gap between emergency management and victim services operations.*

Ihler, B (2023) [Opinion: Inspiring Practices for the Meaningful Inclusion of Victims/Survivors of Terrorism in P/CVE Work](#), Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), European Commission, 2023. *An outline of challenges and opportunities for including victims/survivors of terrorism in activities aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism.*

Invictm (2019) [Supporting Victims of Terrorism](#) (Third Symposium). *Report of a themed Symposium on International Cooperation – Working Together to Better Support Victims of Terrorism and Mass Violence and focused on cooperation between services across international borders.*

Invictm (2018) [Supporting Victims of Terrorism \(Second Symposium\)](#). *Overview of key concepts and challenges involved in assisting victims of terrorism and outline of core principles of supporting victims of terrorism.*

London Assembly (2006) [Report of the 7 July Review Committee](#), Greater London Authority, June 2006. *A report by the 7 July Review Committee which examines the lessons to be learned from the response to the London bombings on 7 July.*

[National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Centre](#). *A wide range of resources, trainings and toolkits aimed at helping civic leaders, policy makers, victim assistance professionals and others address the impacts and aftermath of mass violence.*

[The National Police Wellbeing Service Toolkits and Campaigns](#). *A range of toolkits and resources aimed at improving and support the wellbeing of police officers and staff.*

United on Guns (2022) [Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook: Tabletop Exercise](#). *An exercise template to assist cities thinking ahead about how to respond to a mass shooting and ways of testing basic preparedness decisions which can be adapted to meet a city's needs.*

WHO (2020) [A Framework for mental health and psychosocial support in radiological and nuclear emergencies](#). *A framework promoting integration between Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and radiation protection. It offers cross-cutting MHPSS actions and considerations across the emergency cycle: preparedness, response, and recovery.*

WHO (2017) [Simulation Exercise Manual](#). *A practical guide and tool for planning, conducting and evaluating simulation exercises aimed at public health emergency preparedness, but largely applicable to all emergency exercises.*