



# A GUIDE

to Emotional Stabilisation

## Imprint

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## This booklet is here to support you during a challenging time.

Our Guide to Emotional Stabilisation is aimed at people affected by crime, including victims, witnesses and their families.

Those who come to our advice centre or to our witness support service are often dealing with distressing events they have experienced. The impact can sometimes feel overwhelming – too big, too heavy or too overwhelming to cope with on your own.

In our counseling sessions, we explain how a traumatic or stressful experience can affect the body. Understanding why our bodies and minds react in certain ways can help you make better sense of your own reactions. For many of our clients, this is a great relief. This booklet provides some information the topic. If you have been affected by a crime yourself or were witness to a crime, this booklet may help you a little.

The time after experiencing a crime can be very distressing. Being interviewed by the police or giving testimony in court as a witness can also be upsetting. The stabilisation exercises in this booklet may be a small help to you during this time. We encourage you to give them a try.

It is important for us to emphasise that this booklet is only a brief introduction to the stabilisation work we do. It cannot replace individual support. If you would like to speak to someone, please feel free to call us and we will arrange an appointment.

The team at Opferhilfe Berlin



## What do we mean by the term “trauma”?

The word trauma (from the Greek for “wound”) can be understood as an emotional injury. Trauma may develop when distressing experiences cannot be properly processed. As a result, what happened may remain burdensome in many different ways and continue to affect everyday life.

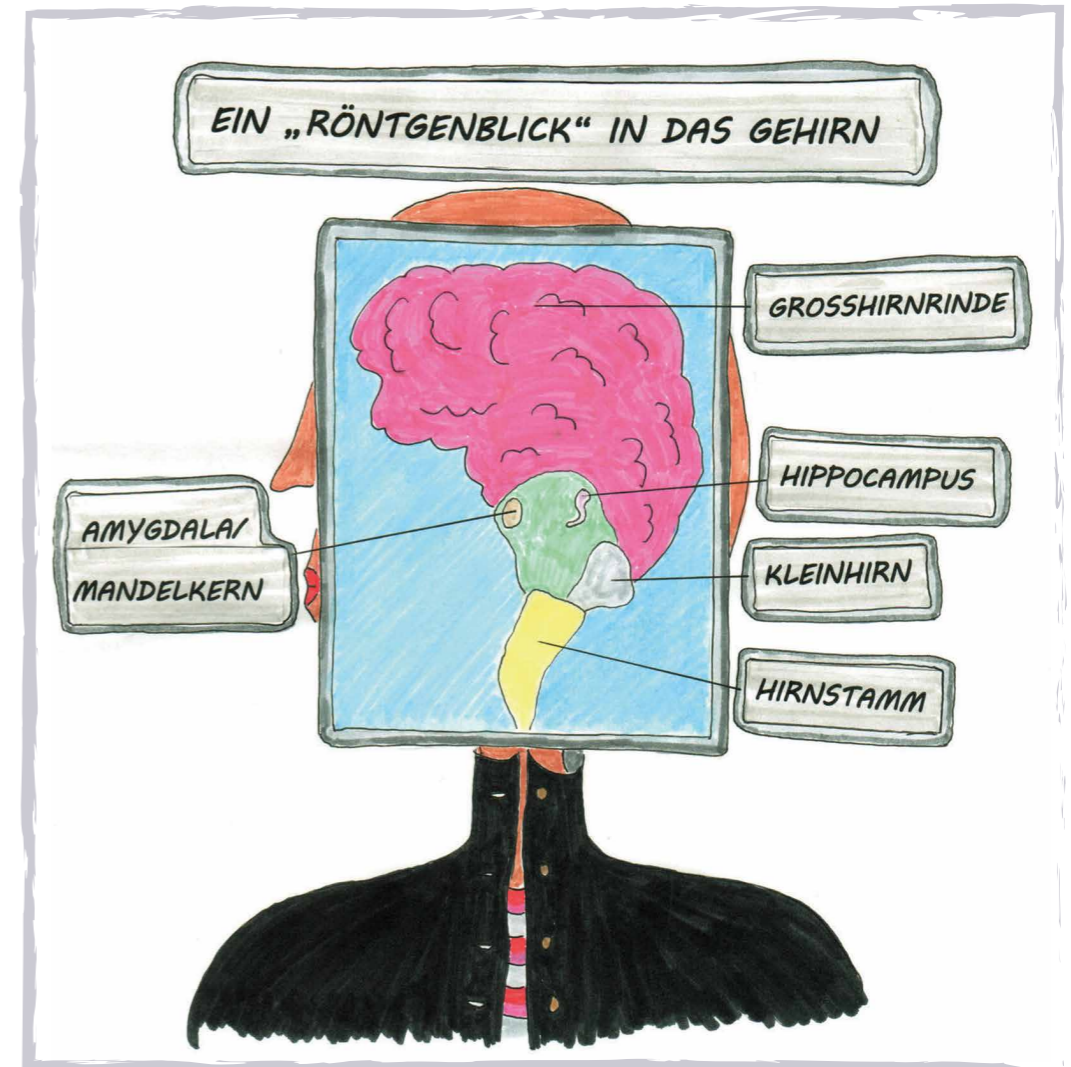
If you are reading this booklet, you have probably gone through a distressing event yourself. Or perhaps you know someone who has had such an experience and is now looking for support coping with it.

We would like to explain the processes in the brain and body that can occur during and after a stressful or threatening event, to help make the physical and psychological reactions that can follow easier to understand.

Clients often ask us why experiencing a crime can lead to certain thoughts, feelings and responses. Understanding your own reactions can bring relief. Here, it is important to remember: **what you feel and think are normal reactions to an abnormal event.**

Whether trauma develops depends greatly on what happens after the distressing event. In the first few weeks, symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, nervousness or problems sleeping are completely normal and even have a protective function. The body may remain in “survival mode” for some time, trying to prevent you from experiencing another threatening situation.

However, there can be aggravating factors that make this process more difficult. So the key is: **do whatever helps you feel safer and whatever supports your wellbeing.**



## Our brain has a built-in protection system for emergencies

In an emergency, our internal alarm system, the amygdala, switches on. Its job is to trigger a fight-or-flight reaction. If neither fighting nor fleeing is possible or successful, our body may respond by freezing. In such situations, a process called dissociation can occur, meaning that information is no longer passed on from the hippocampus – our brain's librarian – to the cerebral cortex. As a result, verbal processing is also impaired. This is why people often struggle to place the experience in time and space or to find the right words for what happened.

**Cerebral cortex:** responsible for perceiving and interpreting visual information; processing sensory impressions; spatial awareness and movement perception; speech production; (self-)awareness; emotional experience; problem-solving and self-control; attunement to others (mirror neurons).

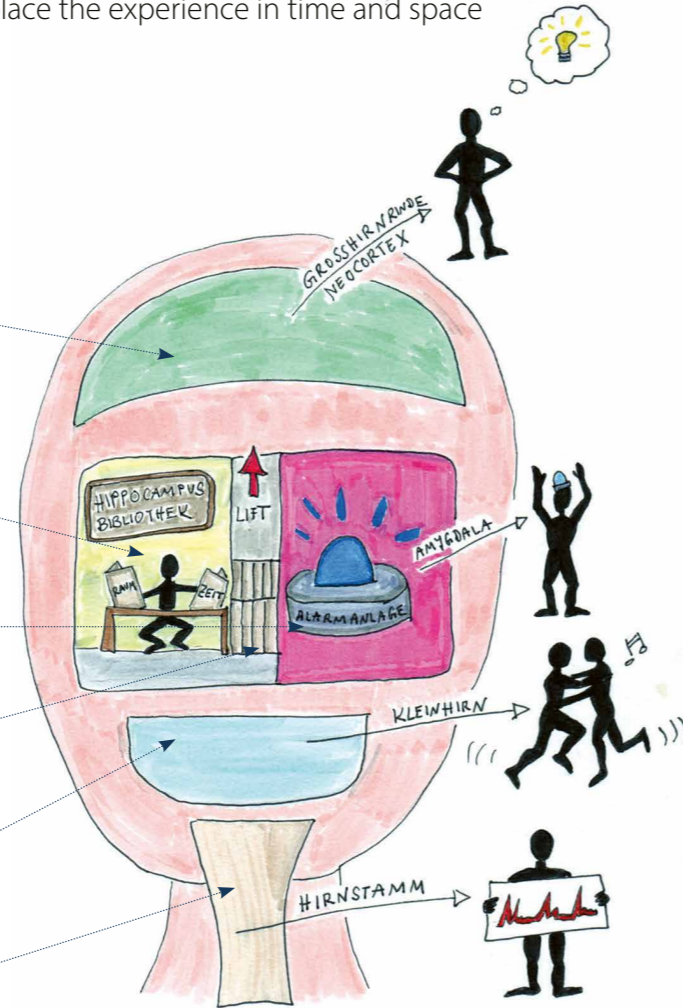
**Hippocampus ("the librarian"):** transfers information from short-term to long-term memory, helps with temporal and spatial orientation

**Amygdala ("the alarm system"):** recognises and evaluates emotionally charged situations.

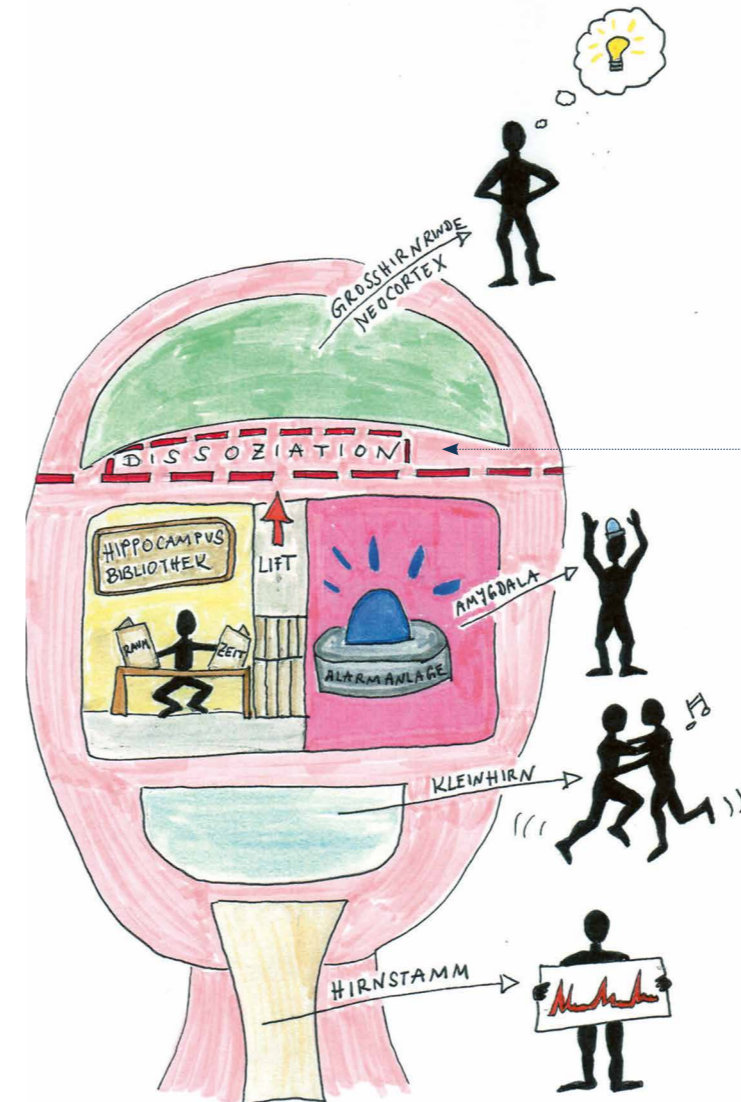
**Limbic system:** the amygdala and hippocampus are part of the limbic system; this is where emotions are generated.

**Cerebellum:** coordinates muscles with our spatial perception, movement and balance on an unconscious level.

**Brainstem:** regulates heart rate/blood pressure, digestion, breathing, and the sleep-wake cycle



If an event cannot be placed in time and space in the way it normally would, this affects how we remember it ("I know it's over, but it doesn't feel like it."). This is not your fault; it is a natural reaction.



**Dissociation:** whether there is over- or under-tension, the connection between the cerebral cortex and the lower brain regions is cut off during an emergency response, meaning action and thinking no longer work together.

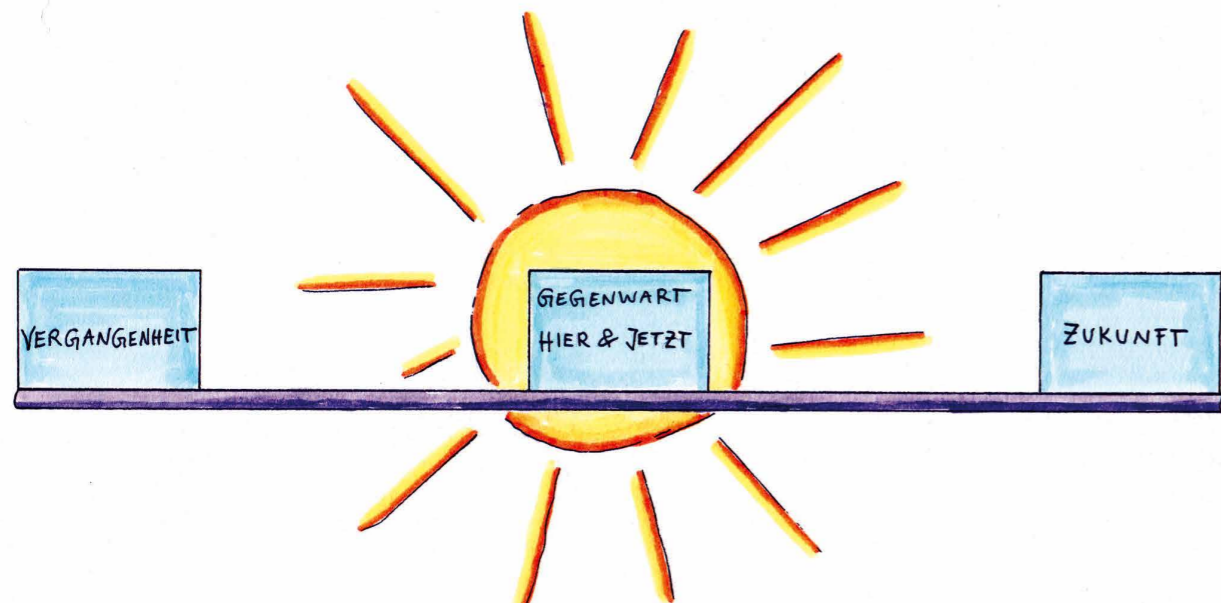
## Perception of time

In everyday life, certain sights, sounds or sensations can trigger a reaction very similar to the one you had during the traumatic event. This can make the threat feel very real in the here and now, even though it is no longer present.

Sometimes the feelings that arise in these moments can also influence the thoughts we have about our future.

To regain a sense of stability and safety, it is important to keep bringing yourself back into the here and now. Try to distinguish whether you are emotionally in the past, in the future, or in the present moment.

From page 15, you will find some exercises that can help you with this.



## Our window of tolerance

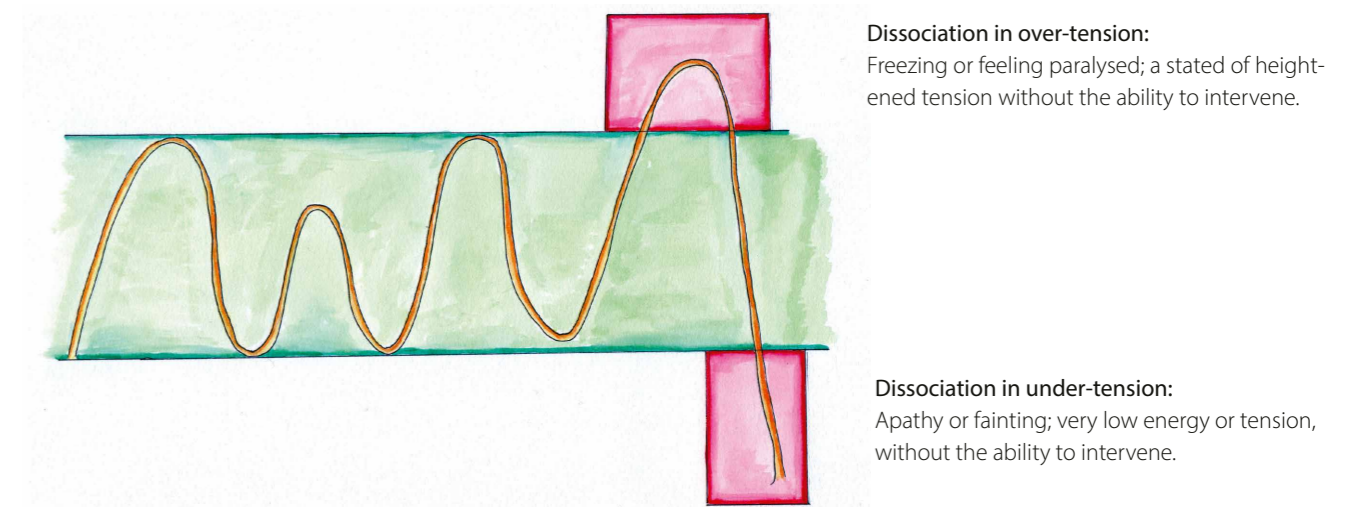
Every person has a range in which their physical tension levels naturally rise and fall. At times we feel more relaxed, at other times more tense, but within this range called "window of tolerance", the mind and body work well together.

When we are under pressure and go into an emergency response, we move outside our window of tolerance. The body and mind can no longer work together. We then react with flight, fight, or freezing. During a highly distressing event, the body may also shift into a state of collapse, leading to fainting or becoming limp and helpless. It is important to know that we cannot consciously control our reactions in such a situation. They happen automatically.

When the different parts of the body work well together, we are essentially in the green zone.

When we enter into emergency mode, the different parts of the body stop working together as they normally would, and we fall out of the green zone.

When someone dissociates (p. 7), the connection between the cerebral cortex and the lower brain functions is interrupted:



## Individual experience and individual ways of coping

Not everyone responds to a distressing event in the same way. The way people process difficult experiences varies greatly. Just as we are all unique, so are the ways we process distressing experiences.

It is important to recognise that everyone needs their own time and their own space to learn how to deal with the aftermath of such an experience.

What may feel physically and psychologically exhausting for you are completely normal reactions to an abnormal event.

**Give yourself the time and space you need. We are here to support you in doing so.**

## When our core beliefs are shaken

The core beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world ultimately say a lot about the expectations we have of ourselves and the world.

The world is a good place...

The world is fair...

I am worthy...

I cannot be harmed...

...

These core beliefs relate to our fundamental sense of trust in life. They are also partly influenced by the expectations we have of society and the environment we live in. Are we safe where we are?

After a distressing event, these beliefs can be shaken. We may begin to question our safe place in the world and our trust in society.

It is important to understand that these reactions are normal consequences of what you have been through. We can help you to find safe inner places during this time and help you focus on the things that give you strength and stability.



## Getting through a difficult time together

The effects of a distressing experience can also be felt in our social lives. Sometimes it is hard to talk about what happened. You may find that friends or family struggle to understand why you do not want to talk — perhaps because of feelings of shame or guilt. You might also notice that you feel less sure or safe around other people in general.

What matters is taking your feelings seriously, giving yourself time and not putting pressure on yourself. Talking to a professional counsellor can help.

### Support for relatives and close others

- ✖ Partners, children, family members, and friends can also be affected.
- ✖ It is important to consider the social environment and relationships between the person affected and the people close to them, in order to understand how the experience may have had an impact.
- ✖ It is especially important to support children and provide them with appropriate help when someone close to them has been a victim of a crime. Children are always affected too, and they need care and guidance during this time.

As relatives or close friends, we naturally want to support our loved ones as best we can and be there for them. But sometimes we simply don't know the best way to do that. Therefore, the same applies to those providing support: Do not put yourself under pressure. Pay attention to your own needs and allow yourself to rest. Only by taking care of your own wellbeing can you truly support someone else.



## How can you support yourself — and how can others support you?

### Sometimes it can be helpful to seek support from outside. We are here for you!

A distressing experience can change the way you see yourself. You may need time to regain a sense of control over your feelings and thoughts. What you have been through may also have altered the way you view the world.

- ✖ Processing a distressing experience takes its own individual amount of time.
- ✖ It may help to allow yourself periods of rest. Give yourself time to recover.
- ✖ Do not put yourself under pressure if you feel less able to cope than usual.
- ✖ Pay extra attention to your own needs.
- ✖ Give your feelings the space they require.
- ✖ Talk to people you trust, or to counsellors at an advice centre.
- ✖ Spend time on activities that usually bring you joy or help you relax.
- ✖ Use exercises that help you stay in the present moment. This booklet includes some stabilisation exercises starting on page 15.
- ✖ You may find it helpful to return to your usual daily routines as soon as you feel able to. Routine can sometimes make it easier to carry on. Although for some people this may not be the case.
- ✖ **There is no right or wrong way to work through what has happened. We are here to help you find the approach that feels right for you.**

On the following pages, we have put together a number of exercises that may help you regulate tension and bring yourself back into the here and now.

Feel free to try them out and see which ones work best for you.

## Stand strong — feel stronger

Stand up with your feet a little apart, roughly shoulder-width, so you could draw a line straight down from your shoulders to your feet. If you like, you can also imagine your feet being firmly rooted into the ground.

Standing with a wider, grounded posture sends signals of stability and safety through the nerve endings in your feet, up the spinal cord and into the brain. The change in your muscle posture is registered by your nervous system, and within seconds your brain responds by releasing chemicals that lift your mood and help you relax. This can help you feel more confident and more at ease.



## Breathe!

The importance of breathing is often underestimated. Of course, we all breathe; our brainstem takes care of that, even without us paying attention. But depending on what we are experiencing, what we are thinking about or feeling, our breathing changes. When the tension in our body drops, our breathing becomes shallow. When the tension rises, it becomes faster or more uneven. When we are startled, we hold our breath. In an emergency, the body can switch modes instantly, preparing us to flee, fight or freeze. But right now, you are not in an emergency — something has simply reminded your body of a past situation and triggered old feelings.

The **1:2 breathing technique** is very simple and has the effect of calming you and slowing your heart rate. It works by using a long, slow exhalation. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system - the system responsible for rest and digestion. It counteracts the fight-or-flight response and calms you after just a few cycles. It is a helpful exercise for controlling the duration of inhaling and exhaling.

The exercise simply consists of exhaling for twice as long as you inhale. Hence the name 1:2 breathing, for example inhale for 3 seconds and exhale for 6 seconds.

Over time, you may extend the lengths to 4:8 or 5:10. To achieve a noticeable improvement with the 1:2 technique, try practising it for 10 minutes each day over 30 days. It is an excellent breathing pattern to use in stressful moments and to help you regain a sense of control over your body and mind.

## Emergency comfort box

Pack yourself an “emergency box” – something you can turn to when things feel difficult.

Imagine you have an imaginary box into which you can place everything that brings you comfort: a favourite song, a positive memory, a pleasant scent, an encouraging phrase or a breathing exercise.

When you are out and about and start to feel unsettled, you can open this imaginary box in your mind and take out one or two things that you feel good about. We encourage you to give it a try. Things that feel soothing or uplifting can strengthen and encourage us.

Of course, you can also create a real box if you prefer. Simply fill it with everything that might help you.



This page is for you. You can use it to note down anything you have found helpful so far. You might want to write down whatever is on your mind or simply draw something.



## A place where you feel at ease

The places we spend time in during everyday life are not always pleasant, comfortable or safe. Having an imaginary place we can retreat to from time to time can help restore balance. A place to recharge, to simply feel comfortable and well cared for. That is the focus of this exercise.

When you picture a place where you feel truly comfortable, what kind of place is it? Is it outdoors, with landscapes, water, sky? Or is it indoors, cosy with a pleasant atmosphere? Or perhaps it is a combination that is only possible in our imagination? Streams running through rooms, trees in the hallway, or a fireplace out on a meadow. Wherever your imaginary safe place is, bring it to life in as much detail as you can. You might find that elements from your past appear — if they feel good, include them.

Take a moment to consider what there is to see in your place of comfort — objects, animals, plants. Think about what you would like to have there and give everything a place. What can you hear in this safe place? Are there sounds, music, noises from nature or from the city? Are there scents or smells that deepen your sense of ease? Is there food or drink you particularly enjoy, or that you wouldn't usually treat yourself to? What do you feel on your skin when you imagine being in this place? Is it cool or warm, or somewhere in between? What are you wearing?

Would it feel right to imagine this place is protected from the outside world? You might imagine a hedge, a fence, a moat or a guarded door. Or perhaps it feels better to picture an invisible boundary around your safe place — one that only you can pass through, and those you choose to let in. Whatever feels helpful in your imagination, use it.

You have now created a place where you truly feel at ease, a place that can support your recovery, help you regain strength, or simply give you a break from the demands of everyday life. Use it whenever you wish, and adjust it to your needs at any time.

## Movement and exercise

In every stressful situation, the body releases hormones within seconds to prepare us to fight or flee. If these stress hormones are not reduced through activity, they continue to circulate in the body, placing strain on the system and potentially affecting our health in the long run.

Therefore, try to be physically active. Walking or light jogging can help build psychological resilience.

### Exercise: Mindful walking

Mindful walking is one way to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is consciously noticing and observing ourselves and what's around us.

Mindful walking helps direct your attention to the present, that is, to the current moment and your immediate experience. You do not need anything other than yourself and your body. Because you are not walking towards any destination, a space where you can take ten steps in one direction and ten steps back is enough. You can walk at any pace, though moving as slowly as feels comfortable is usually most helpful.

As you walk and breathe, pay attention to the sensations in your body and to what is happening within you. Notice precisely what takes place in your body as you walk: how the sole of your front foot touches the ground... feel how your whole body weight shifts from one foot to the other... how your weight is distributed as the back foot lifts off the ground... as it moves forward, as it sets down...

While you stay in conscious contact with the sensations of walking, you can also observe your breathing. Pay attention to the two rhythms separately, and then how they come together.

The aim of the exercise is to keep your full attention on walking and breathing from moment to moment. When thoughts arise, let them pass and gently bring your attention back to your bodily sensations.

There are people who are there for you and who can support you as you work through what has happened. On the next page, you will find a number of services you can turn to **if you need support**.

## Who you can turn to

### ✖ Opferhilfe Berlin e.V.

Oldenburger Straße 38  
10551 Berlin  
☎ 030 3952867  
www.opferhilfe-berlin.de



Please call us beforehand so that we can arrange an appointment and ensure we have enough time for a thorough conversation. Thank you.

### ✖ Gewaltschutzambulanz Charité (Violence Protection Outpatient Clinic)

free, confidential forensic documentation of injuries  
☎ 030 450570-270  
Birkenstraße 62 (left side entrance)  
10559 Berlin

### ✖ Berliner Krisendienst (Berlin Crisis Service) (4 pm to midnight)

☎ 030 39063-10

### ✖ Berliner Notdienst Kinderschutz (Berlin Child Protection Emergency Service)

Kindernotdienst (Child Emergency Service for children up to age 13)  
☎ 030 6100-61  
Jugendnotdienst  
(Youth Emergency Service for young people between the ages 14-20)  
☎ 030 6100-62  
Mädchennotdienst (Girls' Emergency Service for ages 12-21)  
☎ 030 6100-63



### ✖ Traumaambulanz für Erwachsene (Trauma Outpatient Clinic for Adults)

at the Friedrich-von-Bodelschwingh Clinic in Berlin-Schöneberg  
☎ 030 5472-7887  
at Alexianer St. Hedwig Hospital in Berlin-Mitte  
☎ 030 2311-1880

### ✖ Berliner Traumaambulanz für Kinder und Jugendliche (Berlin Trauma Outpatient Clinic for Children and Young People)

☎ 030 450616-100

### ✖ Bundesweites Hilfetelefon bei Gewalt gegen Frauen (Nationwide Helpline for Violence Against Women)

☎ 116016

### ✖ BIG Hotline bei häuslicher Gewalt (BIG Hotline for Domestic Violence)

Support for Women and Their Children  
☎ 030 61103

### ✖ Bundesweites Hilfetelefon Gewalt an Männern (Nationwide Helpline for Violence Against Men)

☎ 0800 1239900

### ✖ Police Emergency Number

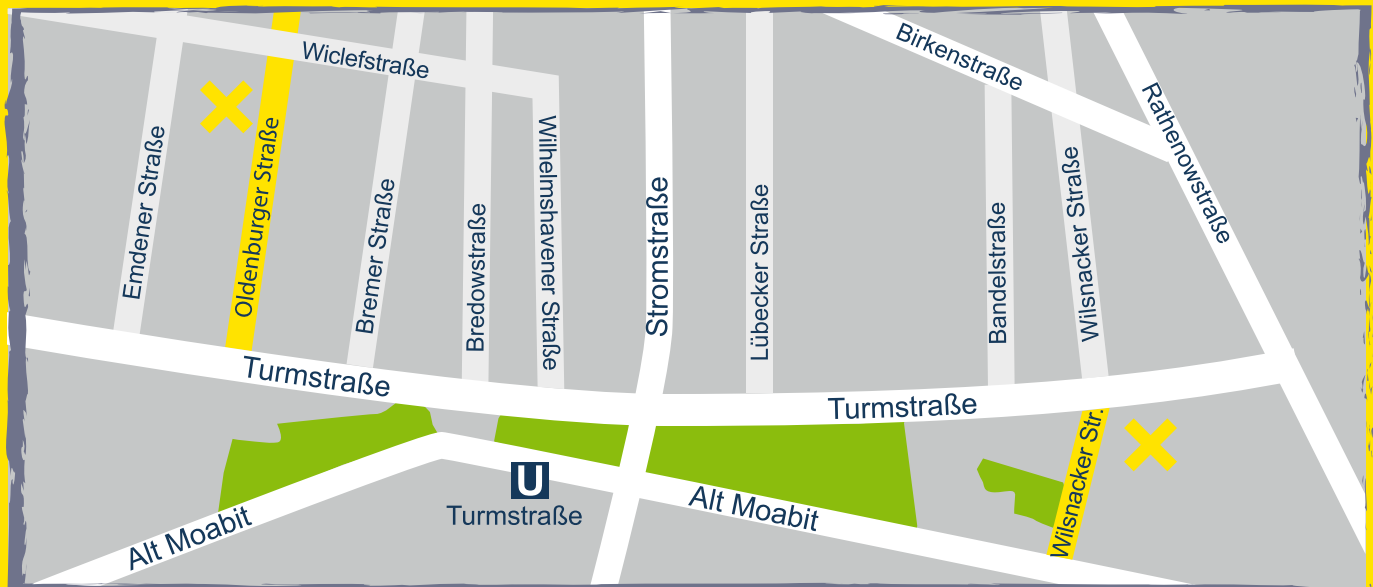
☎ 110

### ✖ Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services

☎ 112

We work with many specialist counselling services in Berlin and see ourselves as guides helping you find the most suitable support service when needed.

# Where to find us



## Counselling Centre for Victims of Crime

Oldenburger Straße 38

10551 Berlin-Moabit

☎ 030 3952867

info@opferhilfe-berlin.de

www.opferhilfe-berlin.de



## Witness Support Service at Tiergarten Local Court and Berlin Regional Court

Wilsnacker Straße 4

10551 Berlin-Moabit

☎ 030 9014-3498

zeugenbetreuung@opferhilfe-berlin.de