

Coping with Trauma

A Support Pamphlet for Staff Involved in Critical Incidents



Working together with your company to provide professional and confidential support to employees

What to expect

Trauma is a sudden event that dramatically impacts our ordinary life, and changes the way we see the world. This might include the illness of a close family member, a car accident, an assault or other threatening events.

It can be usual to feel shocked and somewhat distressed following any event that is not in the 'normal' range of human experience, such as a robbery or an assault.

The primary goal of this leaflet is to assist staff who might be affected in some of the ways described. It also explains some of the possible reactions to trauma and identifies the support that is available to you.

If you experience a traumatic event in your life, it is important to realise that it is 'normal' to suffer a reaction to severe stress. Remember, it is the situation or circumstances that are 'abnormal', not you.

Typically, you may experience the following feelings and symptoms after such an event:

Helplessness

You may feel you are no longer in control of your life or your feelings. You may experience repeated memories of the event and feel that you cannot control your thoughts.

Sadness

You may frequently feel like bursting into tears.

Anger

- At what has happened, at whatever caused it, or allowed it to happen.
- At the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- At the lack of proper understanding by others.

Guilt

You may experience this as a result of things that you did or did not do, or through feeling better off than those who were more personally involved in the incident.

After the event, you may experience the following physical reactions:

- Constant tension, headaches and muscle pain.
- Restlessness – being unable to sit still or focus on one thing at a time.
- Poor concentration, both at work and at home; for example, making more mistakes, taking longer to do everyday tasks, or more frequent daydreaming.
- Thinking might become 'foggy and numb.'
- Sleeplessness – you may notice changes in the pattern of your normal sleep routine; for example, difficulty in getting to sleep, early morning waking or nightmares.
- Flashbacks to the incident – these may be visual images of the incident and can be triggered by other senses; for example, smells and noises.
- Excessive jumpiness – you may find yourself becoming sensitive to loud noises or sudden movements, particularly if they remind you of the incident itself.
- You may lose your appetite.

You might also notice changes in behaviour such as the following:

- You may fear returning to the area where the traumatic event took place.
- You may want to isolate yourself and avoid talking to other people.
- You may be very sensitive to reminders of the incident and avoid media coverage or other things which make you think of the incident.
- You may lose interest in things you previously enjoyed doing, or in socialising.
- You may experience a change in libido.
- You may have no interest in your daily routine.
- You may lose confidence in yourself and belief in your ability to cope.
- You may notice increased levels of irritability.
- You might find yourself drinking more alcohol.

What can you do?

- Remind yourself that, after any traumatic event, it is normal to feel the way you do.
- Talk about the incident to other people who were involved and who have shared similar experiences.
- Talk over the facts and emotions concerning the incident with close friends and relatives.
- Be aware not to use excessive alcohol to cope – this can easily get out of control.
- Be aware of over-activity as sometimes it can be detrimental when it diverts attention from the help you need for yourself.
- Be aware that sometimes it helps to talk to someone outside the family who knows how to help in crisis situations; for example, your GP, a member of your church or faith community, or a local Victim Support Scheme.



If after a month or longer your reactions are getting worse rather than improving you may need to seek assistance.

For example:

- If you are feeling that you cannot experience happiness, joy or love and other positive emotions.
- If you are taking less interest in things you used to enjoy.
- If you are having difficulty imagining the future.
- If you continue to avoid places and people that remind you of the incident.
- You continue to have nightmares, poor sleep and/or other forms of stress and anxiety.
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.
- If you continue to smoke or drink to excess following the event.
- If your work performance suffers.
- If, as a helper, you are suffering "exhaustion".

Some symptoms may not seem so important, but may well be related.

For example:

- If you find yourself getting more angry or having outbursts and you do not normally do this.
- If you find you cannot concentrate so well and have to work harder to get things done.
- If you find you are becoming forgetful and absent minded.
- If you are experiencing unaccustomed physical pains, aches or clumsiness.
- If you find it harder and harder to be with people and want to stay in places that feel "safe".
- If after the event, you find you lack confidence or self esteem.

General advice

- Focus on your need for rest and relaxation – soothing activities allow both mental and physical recovery.
- Stay in contact with those closest to you. Contact can help you avoid the loneliness many people experience after trauma.
- Try to get back to a normal routine as much as possible.
- Try not to avoid the memories completely, complete avoidance of the experience and the memories may harm the process of recovery.
- Share your feelings with others.
- Be careful doing things which involve concentration, such as driving and household tasks.
- Remember this is a passing phase; with time, the majority of people make a full recovery.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms seek advice from your GP or from this scheme