

Coping after a traumatic event

Introduction



A sudden illness, an accident or an assault, or a natural disaster - these are all traumatic experiences which can upset and distress us. They arouse powerful and disturbing feelings in us which usually settle in time, without any professional help.

This leaflet may be useful if:

- you have been through a traumatic experience and want to understand more about how you are feeling
- you know someone who has been through a traumatic experience and want to get a better idea of how they might be feeling.
- It describes the kind of feelings that people have after a trauma, what to expect as time goes on, and mentions some ways of coping and coming to terms with what has happened.

A traumatic event occurs when a person is in a situation where there is a risk of harm or danger to themselves or other people. Situations like this are usually frightening or cause a lot of stress. In such situations, people feel helpless.

What is a traumatic event?

Examples of traumatic events include:

- serious accidents
- being told you have a life-threatening illness
- bereavement
- violent personal assault, such as a physical attack, sexual assault, robbery, or mugging
- military combat
- natural or man-made disasters
- terrorist attack
- being taken hostage
- being a prisoner of war.

What happens immediately after a trauma?

Immediately after a traumatic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, or numb, or unable to accept what has happened.

Shock - when in shock you feel:

- stunned or dazed or numb
- cut off from your feelings, or from what is going on around you.

Denial - when in denial, you can't accept that it has happened, so you behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think that you are being strong or that you don't care about what has happened.

Over several hours or days, the feelings of shock and denial gradually fade, and other thoughts and feelings take their place.

What happens next?

People react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of your feelings. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings. You may feel:

- **Frightened** ... that the same thing will happen again, or that you might lose control of your feelings and break down.
- **Helpless** ... that something really bad happened and you could do nothing about it. You feel helpless, vulnerable and overwhelmed.
- **Angry** ... about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.
- **Guilty** ... that you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it.
- **Sad** ... particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
- **Ashamed or embarrassed** ... that you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you.
- **Relieved** ... that the danger is over and that the danger has gone.
- **Hopeful** ... that your life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.

What else might I notice?

Strong feelings affect your physical health. In the weeks after a trauma, you may find that you:

- Cannot sleep
- feel very tired
- dream a lot and have nightmares
- have poor concentration
- have memory problems
- have difficulty thinking clearly
- suffer from headaches
- experience changes in appetite
- experience changes in sex-drive or libido
- have aches and pains
- feel that your heart is beating faster.

What should I do?

- **Give yourself time**
It takes time - weeks or months - to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or who) you have lost.
- **Find out what happened**
It is better to face the reality of what happened rather than wondering about what might have happened.
- **Be involved with other survivors**
If you go to funerals or memorial services, this may help you to come to terms with what has happened. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.
- **Ask for support**
It can be a relief to talk about what happened. You may need to ask your friends and family for the time to do this - at first they will probably not know what to say or do.
- **Take some time for yourself**
At times you may want to be alone or just with those close to you.
- **Talk it over**
Bit by bit, let yourself think about the trauma and talk about it with others. Don't worry if you cry when you talk, it's natural and usually helpful. Take things at a pace that you feel comfortable with.
- **Get into a routine**
Even if you don't feel much like eating, try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help - but start gently.

- **Do some 'normal' things with other people**
Sometimes you will want to be with other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the healing process.
- **Take care**
After a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful around the home and when you are driving.

What should I NOT do?

- **Don't bottle up your feelings**
Strong feelings are natural. Don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel, and don't worry if you cry.
- **Don't take on too much**
Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think to go over what happened so you can come to terms with it. Take some time to get back to your old routine.
- **Don't drink or use drugs**
Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.
- **Don't make any major life changes**
Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from people you trust.

When should I get professional help?

Family and friends will probably be able to see you through this difficult time. Many people find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce after about a month. However, you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long.

You should probably ask your GP for help if:

- you have no one to share your feelings with
- you can't handle your feelings and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, or nervousness
- you feel that you are not returning to normal after six weeks
- you have nightmares and cannot sleep
- you are getting on badly with those close to you
- you stay away from other people more and more
- your work is suffering
- those around you suggest you seek help
- you have accidents
- you are drinking or smoking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Following a traumatic event, some people experience a particular condition called **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. Symptoms that are most commonly experienced by people with PTSD include:

- re-experiencing the trauma through vivid and distressing memories or dreams
- avoiding situations that remind them of the traumatic event
- feeling numb, as though they don't have the same range of feelings as normal
- being in a state of 'alertness' - watching out for danger.

If you are experiencing problems that might be PTSD, you should seek professional help.

What professional help is available?

Your GP might suggest that you talk with someone who specialises in helping people cope with traumas. They will usually use a talking treatment, such as counselling or **psychotherapy**. For example, a talking treatment called **cognitive behavioural therapy** has been shown to be helpful.

You may find that there is a support group for people who have been through a similar trauma to yourself. It can be helpful to hear that others have had similar feelings and experiences.

Can my doctor prescribe any medication to help me cope?

Medication can sometimes be helpful following a trauma, but it is still important to see your doctor regularly to check how you are doing.

Tranquillisers

There are drugs that can help to reduce the anxiety that can follow a trauma. They can also help you to get off to sleep. They are often called 'tranquillisers'. Common ones include diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan) and temazepam.

In the short term, tranquillisers can help you to feel less anxious and to sleep. However, if they are used for longer than a couple of weeks:

- your body gets used to their effect and they stop working
- you have to take more and more to get the same effect
- you may get addicted to them.

Antidepressants

You can become ill with **depression** following a trauma. Depression is different from normal sadness - it is worse as it affects your physical health and it goes on for longer. Depression can be treated with either **antidepressant** medication, or with talking treatments such as counselling or psychotherapy.

How can I help after a traumatic event?

▪ Be there

It can be helpful just to spend time with someone, even if they don't want to talk about what happened. Let them know you are available to listen and offer to visit again.

▪ Listen

They may find it helpful to talk about what happened. Don't pressure them - let them take things at their own pace.

▪ Offer practical help

They may find it more of a struggle to look after themselves and keep to a daily routine. Offer some help, such as cleaning or preparing a meal.

Useful web links

- **[UK Trauma Group \(http://www.ukpts.co.uk/trauma\)](http://www.ukpts.co.uk/trauma)** has links to a selection of materials which helpful information for the general public and for health professionals about Post Traumatic Stress Reactions.
- **[David Baldwin's Trauma Pages \(http://www.trauma-pages.com/trauma.php\)](http://www.trauma-pages.com/trauma.php)**

Further reading

Overcoming Traumatic Stress by Claudia Herbert and Ann Westmore is a self-help book. It is based on cognitive behavioural therapy and demonstrates, with practical advice and exercises, how to find new and effective ways of coping with and overcoming traumatic stress. Published by Constable & Robinson.

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