Coping with the effects of a traumatic incident

You may have been involved in a traumatic incident and you could possibly have some form of reaction to it. The reaction may happen immediately or not occur for several days, weeks, or months after the incident. Not everyone suffers reactions - but some do. The reactions are likely to be worse if:

What follows has been compiled from the experiences of others who have been involved in similar incidents.

**Emotional Reactions**

Your emotions or feelings may be strong after the event or you may feel nothing. Some of the more common emotional reactions are listed below:

**Psychological Reactions**

You may find that you cannot stop thinking about an incident or an image, dream about it or suffer loss of memory, concentration and motivation.

You may relive the event, or find you can’t stop going over it. You may hate to be reminded of the event and be annoyed with others talking about it.

You could feel always on your guard or easily startled.

**Physical Reactions**

People sometimes experience one or more of the following symptoms: tiredness, sleeplessness, nightmares, dizziness, palpitations, shakes, difficulty in breathing, tightness in the throat and chest, sickness, diarrhoea, menstrual problems, changes in sexual interest or eating habits. Often people experience these symptoms without making a connection with the incident.

- Guilt - for not having done more; for being there.
- Anger - at what has happened. At whoever caused it or allowed it to happen. At the injustice or senselessness of it. At not being understood by others. At those in charge of the incident.
- Fear - of breaking down or losing control. Of a similar event happening again and not being able to cope.
- Shame - for not having reacted as you might have wanted to.
- For feeling helpless, emotional and wanting others to be with you.
- Sadness - about the whole situation. You may feel depressed without knowing why.

The incident was sudden and violent or happened in scary circumstances. You had a feeling of helplessness or wanting to have done more. People died or were injured. You do not have enough support from family, friends or colleagues. This stress came on top of other stresses in your life.
Other difficulties

You may feel hurt and your relationships with others, particularly close friends/family or your partner, may be under additional strain. You may find yourself taking your frustration out on others. You may not be aware that you are doing this and others will probably not understand that it is part of your reaction to the incident. You may find yourself emotionally withdrawing from your close relationships – you may reject the support of those closest to you just when you need it the most.

You may find that the incident has reminded you of some past trauma at work or in your personal life, and the feelings about that could come back with all the original force.

What can be done to help?

People usually recover from these experiences with time, support and talking. Talking about the incident and your feelings about it with your partner, with others who were involved or any sympathetic listener can help. It may probably help those closest to you to understand and support you more effectively if you show them this leaflet.

Talking to a professional can sometimes feel easier – because they are not connected to the rest of your life, and are trained to work with these events.

Trying to avoid your feelings or trying to avoid thinking or talking about the incident can lead to storing up problems which will come out sooner or later in the form of increased symptoms. You may also want to talk to your GP especially if things feel too much and your diet, sleep and lifestyle are seriously affected.

When to look for professional help

- If you feel that you cannot handle intense feelings or physical sensations or if you feel that your emotions are not settling over a period of time and you feel tension, emptiness or exhaustion.
- If after a short time, you continue to feel numb and empty and not have any feelings.
- If you have to keep active in an attempt to suppress or avoid your feelings.
- If you continue to have nightmares or are sleeping badly.
- If you have no one to share your emotions with and you feel the need to do so.
- If your relationships seem to be suffering or sexual problems develop.
- If you start to have accidents or your work performance suffers.
- If your appetite is seriously affected and you smoke, drink or take drugs to excess.
- If you are suffering from exhaustion or depression.
- If you cannot control your memories of the experience and they are affecting your personal wellbeing.
- If you are experiencing flashbacks, that is, suddenly reliving the incident or part of it.

Do remember that:

- You are basically the same person you were before the incident but your feelings about life may have changed.
- Talking about your experience and your feelings can help.
Helping a friend who has had a trauma or crisis

You may want to be supportive to a friend who has suffered a traumatic incident but be unsure how to go about it. The most important thing you can do is offer to ‘be’ there with them. Immediately after a trauma, people are likely to be in shock and may not be able to talk about the incident or their feelings.

Be gentle. Comfort them in non-verbal ways – warm sweet drinks are good, holding hands or touch if appropriate – letting them know it’s OK to cry or rage or be silent if they need to.

You don’t have to ‘do’ anything other than be present or to listen if they want to talk.

Do not attempt to ‘debrief’ them with endless questions, as there is some evidence that this can reinforce the trauma and make it harder to deal with later.

Be specific about the amount of time you have (e.g. I want to spend the next hour with you, but then I need to go and write an essay/go to the Library/phone my parents etc.). This allows your friend to relax, know it’s OK to share for that hour and that they are not ‘burdening’ you (an understandable worry between friends).

Sometimes, it may be quite harrowing to hear what they have to say. If so, it might be helpful for your friend to see a Counsellor, GP or Chaplain. You can still continue to show support in other ways: eg. going along with them to make an appointment, meeting them for coffee, cooking their supper, continuing to socialise, etc.

Do:

- Be there for them
- Ask them if they want to talk about it
- Respect their decision if they are not ready to
- Offer comfort in practical ways (shopping, note taking etc.)
- Encourage them to be gentle with themselves – they will need time
- Encourage others to be patient

Do Not:

- Tell them to stop crying/raging/feeling whatever they are feeling
- Try to make them cheer up
- Tell them someone else is worse off
- Be afraid to mention the trauma for fear of upsetting them
- Pretend that nothing has happened
- Ask them lots of questions about the trauma directly after the event

If you are worried that your friend needs help from someone else but they are reluctant to go along with this idea, you can contact the Counselling service for advice. We will do our best to support you.

© Counselling and Wellbeing: Email: counselling@reading.ac.uk or telephone: 0118 378 4216
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