

# Coping with trauma

If you have been involved with or have come to learn of a traumatic incident, you may experience emotional, physical or psychological reaction to this. This may happen immediately or not occur for several days, weeks, or months after the incident.

The reactions are likely to be worse if:

- The incident was sudden, violent, or happened in scary circumstances
- You had a feeling of helplessness or wanting to have done more
- Someone died or was injured
- You feel you do not have support from family and friends
- This stress is on top of other stresses in your life.

## 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:

- **Guilt** - for not having done more, or for being/not 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.
- **Sadness** - about the whole situation - you may feel depressed without knowing why.

You may feel some or all of these emotions, as well as many others.

## 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 re-live the event, or find you can't stop going over it in your head. You might 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.

## 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.

Remember that:

- You are the same person you were before the incident but your feelings about life may have changed.
- Talking about your experience and feelings can really 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 ask them endless questions as this can reinforce the trauma and make it harder to deal with later.

You can show support in many different ways:

### 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

### **Don't**

- 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

### **Other useful contacts**

[Student Welfare Team](#) - (0118) 378 4777

[The University Medical Practice](#) - (0118) 987 4551

[RUSU Advice Service](#) - (0118) 378 4110

[Chaplaincy Centre](#) - (0118) 378 8797

[Counselling and Wellbeing Service](#) - (0118) 378 4216

[Samaritans](#) - 116 123