

Coping with trauma

Some practical advice



The Cardiff and Vale
Traumatic Stress Initiative



This leaflet is based on a leaflet developed by a working group from the liaison Psychiatry Section of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

Introduction

It is very common for someone who has been through a traumatic experience to have a strong emotional reaction. This is normal and is the mind's way of dealing with what has happened. Most reactions settle after a few months.

If you have been through a traumatic experience, this leaflet is designed to help you understand your emotional response. It also suggests ways of coping with your feelings and coming to terms with what has happened to you.

If you know someone who has been through a traumatic experience, this leaflet may help you to understand what they are going through, and what you can do to help.

What happens immediately after a trauma?

Shock is common straight after a trauma. Shock may affect people in different ways. A person may feel stunned or dazed or numb. Some people feel cut off from their own feelings, or from what is going on around them.

Another common reaction is denial when someone is not able to take on board the enormity of what has happened but others may mistakenly feel that the person is being strong or doesn't care about what has happened.

Shock and denial are the body's way of protecting itself immediately after a trauma. Over hours or days the feelings of shock gradually decrease and other thoughts and feelings take their place.

What are common thoughts and feelings after a trauma?

Each person's response to a trauma is different. Feelings vary from person to person and last for different amounts of time.

These are some of the common things that people experience:

Fear and Anxiety

Following a trauma some people have a fear that the same thing will happen again. They may also be afraid of losing control of their feelings and breaking down.

Helplessness

Some experiences leave people feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Many of us don't think about tragedies that might happen to us, but a trauma can leave us feeling very vulnerable.

Anger

It is common to feel angry about what has happened and with whoever caused the trauma, or allowed it to happen.

Guilt

A trauma may leave someone feeling guilty that they have survived when someone else may have suffered or died. They may also feel guilty that they could have done more to prevent the trauma.

Sadness

There may be sadness about the results of the trauma, especially if it led to death, injury or a loss. Crying can bring a sense of relief.

Shame and embarrassment

The strong feelings after a crisis can be unexpected. Some people feel ashamed about the way they feel, especially if they feel helplessness and need others to support them.

Hope

It is common for people to hope that things will improve in the future and that their life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after the trauma.

Relief

It is common to feel relieved following a trauma. That is over and that the danger has gone.

What physical problems might I experience?

Strong emotions are accompanied by changes in the body. In the time after a trauma a person may experience many different physical and psychological sensations. **These include:** Sleeplessness; Tiredness; Dreams and nightmares; Poor concentration; Memory problems; Difficulty thinking clearly; Headaches; Changes in appetite; Changes in sex-drive; Aches and pains; Heart beating faster.

What can I do to help myself?

Give yourself time

This will be difficult time for you. Give yourself time to accept what has happened and to learn to live with the consequences of the trauma. You may need time to grieve for what you have lost.

Find out what happened

Make sure you know what actually happened. It is better to face the reality of the trauma rather than relying on what you think may have happened. It can help to attend events associated with the trauma, such as funerals or memorial services, which may help you to come to terms with what has happened.

Ask for support

It is often a relief to have support from those close to you and to share your experiences of the trauma with them. Do not be afraid to ask them for support. They may need you to ask them for help, because they are not sure how to respond. A times you may want to be alone or just to be with those close to you.

Talk it over

Gradually allow yourself to think about the trauma and to talk about it with others. Take things at a pace that you are comfortable with.

Establish 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 don't over do it.

Take more care

After a trauma people are more prone to accidents. Take care around the home and when you are driving.

What other difficulties might I experience?

In the time after trauma a person may also experience other difficulties. These might include relationship difficulties (e.g. feeling cut off from other people, feeling others don't understand, feeling angry with others for no obvious reason) and problems in going back to work, loss of motivation and loss of interest in things.

Is there anything I shouldn't do?

Don't bottle up your feelings

Strong feelings are a natural response to a trauma. Don't feeling embarrassed about this. Bottling up your feelings can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Allow yourself to talk about what has happened and how you feel. Sometimes you will want to be around other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the normal healing process. It is important to remember that different people have different ways of dealing with a trauma.

Don't take on too much

Being active can distract you from what has happened, but allow yourself time to think about what has happened and gradually return to your old activities.

Avoid alcohol and drugs

Although it is tempting to use alcohol or drugs to blot out difficult feelings these can prevent you from coping with the trauma in a healthy way. Excess use of alcohol or drugs can worsen feelings of depression or cause other health problems.

Don't make any major life changes

Avoid making major decisions or life changes if you can. These decisions are often stressful and can make problems worse. You may later regret having made some decisions. Take advice from people you can trust.

When should I seek professional help?

You may receive a lot of help from family and friends, but professional help is available if difficult feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long.

Your GP will usually be the first person to contact. It is common to ask for help if you experience any of the following:

- You have no-one to share your feelings with.
- You cannot handle your feelings and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety or nervousness.
- You feel that you are not returning to normal after six weeks.
- You are isolating yourself from other people more and more.
- Those around you suggest you seek help.
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep.
- You are experiencing distressing, intrusive memories or flashbacks.
- Relationships with those close to you are suffering.
- Your work is suffering.
- You are having accidents.
- You are drinking or smoking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings.

What professional help is available?

Effective treatments are available for someone who is suffering after a trauma. Your GP might suggest that you meet with someone who is experienced in helping people cope with the emotional impact of a trauma. They will usually use a talking treatment, such as counselling or psychotherapy. For example taking treatment called cognitive-behavioural therapy and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing have been shown to be helpful.

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

Can my doctor prescribe any medication to help me cope?

Sometimes medication can be helpful following a trauma. If you are prescribed medication it is important to see your doctor regularly to discuss how you are doing.

Antidepressants

Antidepressants are widely used for symptoms of depression, anxiety and traumatic stress. They can also help with sleeping difficulties. Clinical depression is different from normal sadness. It is more severe and goes on for longer. Clinical depression can be treated with either antidepressant medication, with talking treatment such as counselling or psychotherapy or a combination of them both.

Tranquillisers

These are drugs that are sometimes used to reduce the physical and psychological feelings of anxiety and to help someone off to sleep. In short term they can be useful but if used for long periods people can become dependent upon them and therefore doctors are not keen to prescribe them on a regular basis.

Other sources of information

More information on stress following a trauma is available on the following websites.

UK Trauma group
www.uktrauma.org.uk

European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
www.estss.org

More information on anxiety and depression and their treatment is available on the Royal College of Psychiatrists website
www.rcpsych.ac.uk

More information on psychological treatment is available on the website of the British Association of Behavioural and cognitive Psychotherapists
www.babcp.com

Useful publications include:

Understanding your reactions to trauma by Claudia Herbert which can be obtained from the Psychology Department, Warneford Hospital, Headington, Oxford OX 7JX.

Overcoming traumatic stress by Claudia Herbert and Ann Wetmore published in 1999 by Robinson Publishing Limited.

Living with fear: Understanding and coping with anxiety by Isaac Marks published in 2001 by McGraw - Hill Publishing Company.

Overcoming depression: A five areas approach by Chris Williams published in 2002 by Arnold Publishers.