

Helping yourself after a traumatic event

After a traumatic event, such as a transport accident, an assault or a natural disaster, you may find it hard to cope and may take a while to come to terms with what has happened. There will be many challenges in dealing with the experience, both in the immediate aftermath and in the weeks ahead.

Immediately following a traumatic event, you are likely to experience strong reactions. You may experience feelings such as fear, sadness, guilt and anger, and question some of your long-held beliefs — about your safety, how much control you have over your life and how predictable the world really is. These reactions are normal and, in most cases, will gradually become less intense after a few weeks. This fact sheet will provide you with several strategies you can use to help you manage your reactions.

For some people, problems may last longer than a few weeks. While the information below can still be helpful, it is important to talk to a health practitioner if problems last for longer than two weeks.

People cope with trauma in many different ways and the following ideas may help you during your recovery. Even if you feel unmotivated and apathetic, try to do some of the things below. They will help you begin to come to terms with the traumatic event and to reduce some of the emotional pain associated with it.

- Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event. Give yourself time and space to acknowledge what you have been through and that you will have an emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to feel rotten but don't over-react — it is unpleasant but you can cope with it.
- Be more careful than usual, for example when cooking, driving or using machinery. Following a trauma, we are more vulnerable to accidents and physical illness.
- Look after yourself: get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep, and try to eat regular, well-balanced meals. Regular exercise, like walking, cycling or jogging, is very good at reducing the physical effects of stress and trauma; try to do a little everyday.
- Cut back or cut out tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes. Your body is already 'hyped up' and these substances only add to this. Do not try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol; this will lead to more problems in the long term.

- Make time for relaxation. Listen to relaxing music, take a hot bath – whatever works for you. You may wish to learn a technique such as deep muscle relaxation, meditation and yoga, or breathing exercises.
- Structure your days: try planning a timetable for each day, including some exercise, some work and some relaxation. Do things you enjoy: try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day.
- Try to resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but take it easy; do not throw yourself into activities or work in an attempt to avoid the unpleasant feelings and memories. Tackle the things that need to be done a bit at a time and count each success.
- Avoid making any major life decisions, such as moving house or changing jobs, in the period following the trauma. On the other hand, make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible, like what you want to eat or what film you'd like to see. This helps to re-establish feelings of control over your life.
- Seek out other people's support. If you feel able, talk about your feelings to other people who will understand; it is part of the natural healing process and will, in time, help you to accept what has happened.
- Spend time with people you care about, even if you do not want to talk about the event. Contact friends and, if necessary, have someone stay with you for a few hours each day. Sometimes you will want to be alone; that's OK, but try not to become too isolated.
- You may wish to provide support to others who have been through similar situations, especially as you start to feel better.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease in time. Try not to block them out or bottle up your feelings. Confronting the reality, bit by bit, will help you to come to terms with the experience.
- Keep informed of the facts through media and other information sources, but don't overdo it. Try to avoid repeated viewing of disaster or trauma scenes. This may be re-traumatising and make it harder for you to recover.
- Some people find that keeping a journal or diary is very helpful. Especially when you can't talk to others about how you feel, writing it down is almost as good.
- A traumatic event can have an impact on how you see the world, your life, your goals and your relationships. Giving yourself time to re-evaluate what you think and talking to others about it may help.

When to get help

Sometimes distressing events can be difficult to overcome and you may benefit from some professional help. This is not a sign of weakness; it is simply that the event was too much for you to deal with at this point in your life. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need to. You should consider seeking extra help if you:

- Continue to experience distress two weeks after a traumatic event
- Feel very distressed, frightened, irritable or on edge much of the time

- Are unable to carry out your normal role at home, work, or school.
- Feel hopeless, despairing and think that you can't go on
- Are thinking of harming yourself or someone else

Where to get help

Talking to a doctor is a good start. They can determine if there is a problem and what the best approach might be. They can also refer you to health services and mental health professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. If you need immediate assistance or support, you can call Lifeline on 13 11 14 for confidential 24-hour counselling and referrals.