

Helping a friend or family member after a traumatic event

After a traumatic event, such as a transport accident, an assault or a natural disaster, people 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.

After a traumatic experience, it is common for people to feel a wide range of emotions. They can feel frightened, shocked, numb, sad, guilty, frustrated, angry and helpless. These reactions are normal and, in most cases, will gradually become less intense after a few weeks. The support of family and friends is particularly crucial during this time and this fact sheet outlines several things you can do to help.

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

Provide practical support and encouragement

- Recognise that they have been through an extremely stressful event. They may need time and space to acknowledge what they have been through. You can help by offering practical support with things like housework or caring for children.
- It is important for people to keep informed of the facts, but it is not good to focus too much on television, radio or written accounts of the event. Encourage the person to limit the amount of media they listen to, read or watch. Offer to keep track of the news and to inform them of new information so that they do not feel the need to monitor it continuously.
- Gently encourage people to look after themselves. Encourage them to get plenty of rest, even if sleeping is hard; to eat regular well-balanced meals; to do some gentle exercise if they can manage it; and to cut back or cut out coffee, cigarettes, drugs or alcohol. Help them to make time for relaxation.
- Encourage them to re-establish normal routines as quickly as possible; this helps to restore a sense of order and control in their life. Help them to start with small daily goals and to recognise each success. Equally, don't allow them to

throw themselves back into activity as a way of avoiding unpleasant feelings or memories: encourage them to slow down.

- Join them in doing enjoyable things; it is important to gradually go back to activities that are enjoyable and relaxing. Encourage them to plan at least one thing each day which they enjoy doing.
- Help people to think through decisions, but don't make decisions for them. Advise them to avoid making any major life decisions, such as moving house or changing jobs, in the period following the trauma.
- Encourage people to think constructively about their lives. Help them to plan things that they want to do and to acknowledge their successes in coping so far. For example, ask questions like *'Are there any things that you think would help you to feel better, anything that I can get for you or do for you? Do you have any concerns or problems that we could sort out together? What have you done in the past to make yourself feel better when things got difficult?'*

Provide emotional support

Your friend or family member might want to talk to you about the experience or their feelings. Try to listen. If possible, choose a time to talk when you won't be interrupted and when neither of you are rushed nor tired. You might want to reassure the person that emotional pain is to be expected after such events. Even when coping well, things can be hard.

Talking itself may be painful and the person may get upset. This is a natural part of coming to terms with trauma – don't feel that you have to make the distress go away. If it seems like the person has had enough, you could offer to continue another time: *'We can talk more tomorrow if you would like.'*

Listening is very important, but sometimes it is hard to know how to respond. Don't feel that you have to say 'the right thing'; there is no right thing to say but here are a few pointers:

- If they talk to you about their experience, listen intently. Try to work out why they wanted to tell you each particular piece of information. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Don't interrupt, offer examples from your own life, or talk about yourself. Try to avoid offering simple reassurances like *'I know how you feel'* or *'It's all going to be OK.'*
- Gently encourage people to talk, or to continue talking, by asking leading questions like: *'Would it be helpful to talk about (the event)? What are the main things worrying you at the moment? You've had a rough time, how are you going? How is (Fred) going?'*
- You can respond to them with statements like: *'It's really tough to go through something like this; This is such a difficult time for you; Sometimes situations like these can be overwhelming and it's hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel.'*

- After listening to what the person has told you, you can show them that you understand by reflecting what they said or re-phrasing the information they gave you. You might start your response with something like: *'You seem really.....; It sounds like.....; Did I understand right that you.....; No wonder you feel.....'*

If the person doesn't want to talk about the experience or their feelings, don't force it. Just try to be with them and focus on practical help, and other topics of conversation. Let them be alone for a while if that's what they want. However, it is a good idea for them not to get too isolated and to have some company for some part of each day.

When to get help

You may wish to find out about support services or specialist help. If your friend or family member feels very distressed, frightened or hopeless; or if they are unable to carry out their normal role at home, work or school, gently encourage and support them to get professional help. If they continue to experience serious problems or distress two weeks following the event, talk to a doctor or a mental health professional.

Where to get help

A doctor is a good first port of call. They can determine if there is a problem and what the best approach might be. They can also refer onto health services and mental health professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. They can get immediate assistance and support by calling Lifeline on 13 11 14 for confidential 24-hour counselling and referrals.