

## Trauma and mental health: frequently asked questions

### 1. What is a traumatic event?

Up to 65 per cent of Australians are likely to experience or witness an event which threatens their life or safety, or that of others around them. This can be a car or other serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war or torture, or natural disasters such as bushfires or floods.

### 2. What should we do immediately following a traumatic event?

- Initial assistance involves practical and emotional support, information and ongoing monitoring, tailored to individual needs. This is sometimes referred to as psychological first aid.
- Structured psychological debriefing should not be offered on a routine basis.
- Health practitioners should encourage people affected by traumatic events to seek the support of family, friends and community groups.

There is no standard recipe for how people cope with trauma. Each person has a unique way of recovering. They should be supported in using strategies and resources that suit them, and that are readily available.

If people seek professional support immediately following a traumatic event, it is likely that a health practitioner will take a practical approach that meets the person's immediate needs and helps them cope with their distress. For example, someone who has just been in a severe car accident might need:

- Encouragement to ask for help from, and spend time with, family and friends
- Information about the right pain relief
- Information about possible emotional reactions to traumatic events
- Gentle encouragement and support to get back into a car

### 3. Do people usually recover by themselves and, if so, how?

Most people will recover with the support of their family and friends and will not need professional help. Spending time with people that are supportive and talking about their experience with people they trust may be helpful. Looking after themselves is also important; getting plenty of rest, eating sensibly and getting some regular exercise. Doing something enjoyable each day and getting back to routine activities when

possible can also help. If someone feels very distressed or his or her reactions are interfering with work and relationships, it is important to talk to a health professional. It is also important to get professional advice if problems persist more than two weeks after the traumatic incident.

### **Self-help tips for someone who has gone through a traumatic experience:**

- | <b>Do's</b>   | <b>Don'ts</b>  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spend time with people who care</li><li>• Give yourself time</li><li>• Find out about impact of trauma and what to expect</li><li>• Try to keep a routine going – work, study</li><li>• Return to normal activities</li><li>• Talk about how you feel or what happened when ready</li><li>• What can you do right now....?</li><li>• Do things that help you relax</li><li>• Do things that you enjoy</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use alcohol or drugs to cope</li><li>• Keep yourself busy and work too much</li><li>• Engage in stressful family or work situations</li><li>• Withdraw from family and friends</li><li>• Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy</li><li>• Avoid talking about what happened at all cost</li><li>• Take risks</li></ul> |

### **4. What are posttraumatic mental health problems?**

These can be a range of reactions to a traumatic event. They can include: anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), risky alcohol and drug use; together with difficulties with relationships, work or study. The problems experienced by a person who has gone through a traumatic event can have a significant impact on their family, friends and carers.

### **5. When to get help?**

If someone:

- Doesn't feel any better after two weeks
- Feels highly anxious or distressed
- His or her reactions to the traumatic event are interfering with home, work and relationships.
- Is thinking of harming themselves or someone else

Some of the signs that a problem may be developing are:

- Being constantly on edge or irritable
- Having difficulty performing tasks at home or at work
- Being unable to respond emotionally to others
- Being unusually busy to avoid issues
- Using alcohol, drugs or gambling to cope
- Having severe sleeping difficulties

## 6. What kind of help works for people affected by traumatic events?

Effective treatments are available and doctors are a good first port of call. They can determine if there is a problem and what the best approach might be. Mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers can also help. Both psychological assistance and medication can help people affected by traumatic events recover. Psychological help is likely to involve assisting a person to confront the memories of the experience, make sense of what happened and engage in activities that they fear. This form of help is often referred to as trauma-focussed therapy. Psychological help may also involve teaching techniques to manage distress. Prescribed medicines are likely to include one of the newer antidepressants. To find out more information about treatment or resources, such as links to services and helplines, go to our website [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)

## 7. How do we know what helps people recover?

There is a large body of research evidence which shows which psychological treatments and medicines are the most effective, and in which circumstances. A few simple principles underpin the delivery of evidence-based care:

- Initial assistance involves practical and emotional support tailored to individual needs
- Structured psychological debriefing should not be offered on a routine basis
- The support of others is an important component of recovery
- People should be encouraged to return to their usual social and work routines
- Mental health interventions should only be offered where a person is not recovering
- Trauma-focussed psychological interventions that involve confronting memories, beliefs and feared situations are effective for the treatment of PTSD
- Some people will need both psychological help and medication
- It's never too late to start dealing with the psychological aftermath of trauma

## 8. Trauma checklist

- ✓ Trauma is common: most people recover
- ✓ First: practical support, information and get the support of others
- ✓ Treatment: *confront memories and beliefs*  
*medication may help*
- ✓ It's never too late to start
- ✓ If people do seek professional help, it's OK to ask the health practitioner questions about their treatment
- ✓ If something is not working, it is important to tell the health practitioner and ask them to change it if necessary
- ✓ A doctor is a good place to start

For more information visit our website, [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au), for these and other resources:

- [The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Adults with Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#)
- [PTSD Practitioner Guide](#)
- [Information for People with ASD and PTSD](#)