

Coping after a traumatic event



Adults

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Introduction

You may find this leaflet helpful if you have recently been involved in, or affected by, a traumatic event. It provides information on how you may expect to feel in the days and months ahead, and to help you to understand and have more control over your experience.

A traumatic event such as a car crash, pandemic, natural disaster or acts of violence (including assault, abuse or a terrorist attack), can arouse powerful and disturbing feelings in us which can affect people in different ways. There is no right or 'normal' response following a traumatic event; everyone will have an experience and response which will be individual to them, and the process of psychological adjustment will be unique to each individual.

Common **psychological reactions** following a traumatic event include



- **Feelings of fearfulness**, nervousness or occasional panic; especially when faced by reminders of the event.
 - **Sleep disturbance**: difficulty in getting off to sleep, restless sleep, vivid dreams, night-sweats or nightmares.
 - **Hyper-arousal**: becoming 'jumpy' or easily startled by sudden noises or movements, e.g. a door slamming, car starting, the phone or doorbell ringing.
 - **Hyper-vigilance**: constantly scanning the environment for cues of dangers or seeing threat in things that would have appeared non-threatening before. This could mean being overly protective of children or loved ones.
 - **Intrusive thoughts/images/flashbacks**: of the incident, which can appear to 'come out of the blue', without any triggers or reminders. Other thoughts, images or feelings may be prompted by something on the media, which have a resonance to your experience.
 - **Guilt**: feelings of regret, about not having acted or coped as well as one would have wished, feeling that you may have let yourself or others down.
- **Irritability and anger**: at what happened or the injustice of the event. Irritability can often be directed at loved ones, close family friends or colleagues.
 - **Feeling numb or detached** from others or being unable to experience emotions such as love or happiness. Withdrawing, avoiding social and family contact.
 - **Sadness**: feelings of low mood and tearfulness.
 - **Mental avoidance**: avoiding thoughts to do with the event. People often try to push distressing thoughts out of their head, often unsuccessfully, and in the longer term this can cause further problems.
 - **Behavioural avoidance**: avoiding thoughts, feelings, activities that are reminders of the trauma. These can often be subtle at first, such as avoiding noisy or crowded environments, taking a different route to work and so on.
- It is natural to have any or all these feelings, though they may vary in intensity according to your circumstances.**

Common **physical reactions**:



Some individuals may also have certain bodily sensations, with or without the psychological reactions described above. Many of these are signs of anxiety, tension, or stress.

For example:

- **Tension, muscular aches and pain (especially in the head, neck and back)**
- **Fatigue, tiredness and insomnia**
- **Memory loss**
- **Changes in appetite**
- **Reduced concentration, forgetfulness**
- **Dizziness**
- **Abdominal pain/tummy aches**
- **Menstrual changes**
- **Shakiness and trembling**
- **Reduced libido or changes in sexual interest**
- **Palpitations, breathing difficulties**
- **Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea**

Things you can do to **promote recovery**:



There is consensus that doing things that make you feel safe and connected, and addressing your immediate physical and social needs, can help your psychological recovery in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event.



What should I do?

DO try to keep your life as normal as possible and keep to a familiar routine; this can help give a sense of order and control.

DO be kind to yourself.

Do things that you find relaxing such as a walk in the park, listening to music, a bubble bath, and be with people that you find supportive and avoid those who you find unsupportive.

DO take time to get enough sleep (your normal amount), rest and relax, and eat regularly and healthily.

DO take care at home or when driving or riding - accidents are more common after a traumatic or stressful event.

DO try to reduce outside demands on you and don't take on extra responsibilities for the time being.

DO talk to people you trust or who have had similar experiences or understand what you have been through.

DO give yourself time.

It can take weeks or months to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or who) you have lost. At times you may want to be alone or only with those closest to you.

DO allow yourself time to think and talk about the trauma; don't worry if you cry when you talk, it's natural and usually helpful. Take things at your own pace and don't force yourself to do this if the feelings are too strong now.

DO find out what happened, to complete the jigsaw of the event. It is better to face the reality of what has happened rather than wondering about what might have happened.

DO allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care, or who have been through a similar experience. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.

DO some 'normal' things with other people; sometimes you will want to be with other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the healing process.



What shouldn't I Do?

It is important not to reject support by trying to appear strong or trying to cope completely on your own.

DON'T expect too much of yourself. Give yourself time to grieve, to acknowledge what has happened and to heal.

DON'T avoid people you trust.

DON'T bottle up feelings and avoid talking about what has happened.

DON'T be critical of your reactions e.g. crying, being irritable, they are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances.

DON'T make big life changes. Try to put off any big decisions; Your judgement and memory may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from those around you that you trust.

DON'T drink alcohol, use illicit substances or recreational drugs. Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.

When to seek professional help?



Many people find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce after about a month. However, you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you or go on for too long (for more than about 6 to 8 weeks from the time of the event). Some other examples of when it is advisable to seek professional help.

- **You are experiencing overwhelming emotions** that you feel unable to cope with or experience changes in mood for no obvious reason.
- **You are experiencing breathing difficulties** or a choking feeling in

your throat and chest.

- **You feel emotionally numb.**
- **Your relationships** seem to be suffering since the event.
- **You are worried** about your alcohol or drug use since the event.
- **Your performance at work** has suffered since the event.
- **Someone who you are close to** tells you they are concerned.
- **You have no-one to share your emotions with** and you feel the need to do so.

Where to seek professional help:



You should in the first instance approach your own GP, who will be able to advise you on options and put you in touch with someone who can help. This may be:

- **A counsellor in your GP surgery** (if available)
- **Self-referral to local mental health services e.g. IAPT**
- **Local specialist trauma and bereavement services** which can be accessed by your GP

For further information about post-trauma support options for adults:

Whilst you may find it helpful to talk to loved ones, other sources of support include your GP, a leader of your faith, occupational health or other professional mental health advice and support. Some other examples are listed below:

Age UK
ageuk.org.uk
Tel No: 0800 678 1602

Age UK is the country's largest charity dedicated to helping older people who need it most; including companionship, advice and support.

British Red Cross Helpline
redcross.org.uk
Tel No: 0808 196 3651

The support line was set up to provide support to communities and people in need. It gives people without a support network someone to talk to and can help people access things they may need like food, medicine and emotional support. It is open 10am – 6pm every day and is free and confidential.

CRUSE Bereavement
cruse.org.uk
Tel No: 0808 808 1677

CRUSE offer support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

Debt and Finance
Citizen Advice Bureau
citizensadvice.org.uk

Citizen Advice is a network of 316 independent charities throughout the United Kingdom that give free, confidential information and advice to assist people with money, legal, consumer and other problems.

Debt Advice Foundation
debtadvicefoundation.org

Debt Advice Foundation is a registered national debt advice and education charity offering free, confidential support and advice to anyone worried about loans, credit and debt.

National Debtline
nationaldebtline.org
Tel No: 0808 808 4000

National Debtline is a charity who provide free and independent advice over the phone and online.

General Practitioner
If you find that your reactions are continuing and affecting your ability to cope with daily life and your relationships with others, your GP will be able to review your wellbeing and signpost onto organisations who can help.

MIND
mind.org.uk

MIND is a charity providing information and support to people facing mental health difficulties.

NHS
The NHS have compiled a helpful list of helplines for support and expert advice relating to mental health, violence, addictions, relationships or crime.

nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines

The NHS have also created an interactive quiz where you answer 5 questions to get top tips and advice for you. Now tailored for the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, too.

nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/your-mind-plan-quiz/

NHS England
england.nhs.uk/london/our-work/help-and-support

NHS England shares information on how you may expect to feel in the days and months ahead following a traumatic event, and to help you understand and have more control over your experience.

Royal College of Psychiatrists
rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event

The Royal College of Psychiatrists describes the kind of feelings that

people have after a trauma, what to expect as time goes on, and mentions some ways of coping and coming to terms with what has happened.

Samaritans
samaritans.org
Tel No: 116 123

Whatever you may be going through, a Samaritan will listen and face it with you. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Peace Foundation: Survivors Assistance Network
peace-foundation.org.uk/support/survivors-assistance-network
Tel No: 01925 581231

The Survivors Assistance Network run by the Peace Foundation, provides free practical and emotional support to individuals and families affected by a terrorist incident.

Victim Support
victimsupport.org.uk
Tel No: 08081 689111

An independent charity for people affected by crime and traumatic events in England and Wales. Provides emotional and practical help to enable people to cope and recover from the effects of crime.

Other support available

(e.g. local and national support lines following a specific traumatic event):

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Disclaimer

This information reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing.