
Introduction

This leaflet provides information on how you may feel in the days and months after a traumatic event, and how to cope.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is any sudden or unexpected event that is emotionally distressing.

People directly involved or their loved ones may be most affected. However, witnesses to these events and their friends and relatives may also be affected.

Whether you are directly involved or not, it is natural to experience a range of responses, including **fear, shock, anger, panic, sadness and guilt**.

Understanding the normal range of responses to an abnormal and traumatic event helps you to begin recovering.

How do people react to a traumatic event?

When we feel threatened, our body automatically produces a complicated biochemical response to help us deal with the situation. This biochemical response can be experienced emotionally as well as physically.

It may take anything from a few moments to several days to recover from this.

Reactions to a traumatic event vary from person to person but may include feeling:

- **shocked and numb:** you may be unable to believe or accept what has happened; you may feel empty and unreal
- **hyped-up and manic:** you may rush around and keep busy with a variety of practical tasks
- **shaky, nauseous and tearful:** you may mourn the loss of someone or something; you may also mourn the loss of your own sense of safety in the world or the future you saw yourself having
- **angry and irritable:** you may think a lot about what has happened, blaming various people and circumstances, either for causing the event or allowing it to happen
- **anxious and panicky:** you may worry about breaking down, 'losing control' or going mad
- **guilty:** you may think about what you did or didn't do, worry that you should have done more, or feel guilty that someone else was more badly affected than you

In the following days and weeks

In addition to the immediate reactions you may have, you might experience other feelings, thoughts and responses days, weeks or even months later. These could include physical and emotional symptoms such as:

- feeling unsafe or vulnerable; feeling tearful and/or emotional
- inability to relax; feeling on edge; difficulty concentrating
- intrusive thoughts or flashbacks
- avoiding people or activities which you previously enjoyed
- loss of appetite; nausea; stomach cramps or diarrhoea; 'comfort eating'
- difficulty falling asleep; nightmares; or waking early and being unable to go back to sleep
- headaches, migraines or muscular tension

Avoid drugs and alcohol – this can help numb your feelings, but can stop you from coming to terms with what has happened.

Do not make any major life changes – your judgement may not be at its best and you may make decisions that you later regret.

What can I do to help myself?

While each one of us is unique and will deal with things in our own way, there are certain things which many people find helpful. These include:

- **talking about what has happened:** strong feelings are normal after a traumatic event. You are less likely to experience lasting effects if you express your feelings and thoughts about what has happened
- **spend time with people you trust:** avoid isolating yourself and allow others to support you
- **being gentle with yourself:** give yourself time; don't expect to 'return to normal' immediately
- **taking care of yourself:** get enough sleep and eat well; take extra time and care with daily activities, such as driving or operating machinery/ equipment. Accidents are more common after severe stress
- **re-establishing your usual routines,** such as going to work or school

When should I seek help?

Generally, people are resilient and most will begin to feel they are getting back to normal within a few weeks.

If your symptoms do not improve after four to six weeks and continue to concern you (e.g. because they are causing difficulties in your relationships or work), it may be helpful to seek professional support.

Where do I find help?

Speak to your GP to find out more about the help available to you.

After Trauma – A website that connects and supports survivors and families of traumatic events.

www.aftertrauma.org

Victim Support – Provides support, guidance and advice.

Tel: 0808168911

www.victimsupport.org.uk

Assist Trauma Care – Offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma.

Tel: 01788 551919

www.assisttraumacare.org.uk

Samaritans – Offers a 24-hour helpline for those in crisis throughout the UK.

Tel: 0808 808 1677

www.samaritans.org.uk

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages: Please email: imperial.communications@nhs.net

Coping with stress after a traumatic event

Information for patients, relatives and carers