

# Coping With A Recent Trauma

This leaflet is designed to help people who have suffered a recent trauma. For example, you may have survived a major disaster, have been physically or sexually assaulted, perhaps been involved in a bad car accident, had your life threatened, nearly died, or witnessed other people having those experiences. Everybody's reactions to these events are unique. This leaflet outlines the types of reactions that many people have described after suffering such trauma. It also shows how you can help the normal healing process to occur and how to avoid some pitfalls.

## Normal Feelings and Emotions Often Experienced After Trauma

### **Fear**

- Of damage to oneself and/or those we love.
- Of death, of being left alone or having to leave loved ones.
- Of breaking down or losing control.
- Of a similar event happening again.

### **Anguish and Sadness**

- For deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

### **Longing**

- For all that has gone.
- 'What if...' 'If only...'

### **Guilt**

- For being better off than others e.g. for being alive, not injured, having things.
- Regrets about things not done. 'I should have...'

### **Helplessness**

- Crises show up human powerlessness, as well as strengths.

## **Shame**

- For having been exposed as helpless, emotional or needing others.
- For not having reacted as one would have wished.
- For not having acted as a man, or woman, 'should'.
- For not having been brave enough.

## **Anger**

- At what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen.
- At the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- At the shame and indignities.
- At the lack of proper understanding by others.
- 'Why me?'

## **Hope**

- For the future, for better times, to get over this.

**Nature heals through allowing these feelings to come out. This will not lead to loss of control of the mind, but stopping these feelings may lead to nervous and physical problems. Crying can give some relief but isn't essential. Talking about these feelings - putting the feelings into words - may be of some help.**

### **Physical and Mental Sensations**

You may feel strong or disturbing bodily sensations with or without the feelings described. Sometimes they may be due to the trauma even when they develop months after the event.

Some common physical impacts of trauma are: tiredness; sleeplessness; bad dreams; re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks and nightmares; fuzziness of the mind including loss of memory and concentration; dizziness; palpitations; shakes; difficulty in breathing; choking in the throat and chest; nausea; diarrhoea; muscular tension which may lead to pain (e.g. headaches, neck and backaches); dragging in the womb and menstrual disorders; changes in sexual interest. Physical pain from injuries may take a long time to go - you may be in extreme discomfort, which can make people feel low, irritable, tired and hopeless about the future.

Accidents are more frequent after severe stresses. Alcohol and drug intake may increase due to the extra tensions and the wish to forget.

### **Family and Social Relationships**

New friendships and group bonds may come into being. On the other hand, strains in relationships may appear. For a while you may be dependent on someone during your recovery; you may not be used to this, and it may feel awkward. The good feelings in giving and receiving may be replaced by conflict. You may feel that too little or the wrong things are offered, or that you cannot give as much as is expected, or that others feel it is taking too long for you to 'get over it.'

The following may make the events and the feelings about them easier to bear:

### **Numbness**

Your mind may allow the trauma to be felt only slowly. At first you may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream, something that has not really happened. This is part of the shock reaction. Sometimes people can unhelpfully be viewed as not having been affected, or uncaring and indifferent.

### **Activity**

Keeping busy and helping others may give some relief. However, over-activity can be detrimental if it diverts attention from the help you might need for yourself, or the rest you might need in order to physically recover.

### **Reality**

Accepting the reality of what has happened may be helped by, for example, attending funerals, thinking about losses and perhaps returning to the scene. But different people have different ways of 'facing reality' and no-one should be forced to do something against their will.

### **Going over the trauma**

As you allow the trauma more into your mind, there is a need to think about it, to talk about it, and at night to dream about it over and over again. Children play and draw about the event. These phenomena may be part of the process of making sense of what has happened.

Sometimes it can be hard to accept that the trauma was part of the tragedy, violence or senselessness of life and perhaps something over which you had little or no control. You may well be asking the question 'Why me?' Getting some answers may help, but sometimes it is impossible to get all the answers. You might also need to ask: 'Why not me?'

### **Privacy and Support**

In order to deal with these feelings, you may find it necessary at times to be alone, or just with family and close friends. On the other hand, it can be a relief to receive other people's physical and emotional support. Try not to reject it. Sharing with others who have had similar experiences can feel good. Barriers can break down and closer relationships can develop.

*Sometimes the flashbacks, nightmares and other disturbing experiences can carry on for months. Activity and numbness (blocking of feelings) may be over-used and may hinder your recovery.*

**If problems persist some of the following may help:**

- Talking to people (friends, relations, professionals) about your experiences, the traumatic incident and how it has affected you.
- Giving yourself set times in the day to think (and perhaps write) about the incident, and times to try and forget about it and do some other activity.
- Thinking and talking about how your beliefs about yourself and the world in general may have changed.
- Reducing your arousal levels e.g. using relaxation techniques for nervousness and fear. Doing some physical activity (sport, exercise) can help reduce tension or anger. Meditation can help develop skills to redirect attention away from things connected with the trauma. Try and utilise old and new strategies to calm you at times of high arousal, but don't expect this to be a miracle cure.
- Try not to avoid all situations that remind you of the trauma - 'get back on the horse as quickly as possible', providing it is safe to do so. You may need to do this on a step-by-step basis.
- Try to think of any positives that have come from your experience.

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This leaflet was written by Dr Guy Holmes, Clinical Psychologist, and is based upon the experiences of people who have suffered major traumas in their lives.

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Copies can be downloaded from  
[www.psychologyintherealworld.co.uk](http://www.psychologyintherealworld.co.uk)

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