



Information to Help you Cope with a Traumatic Event

C O N T E N T S

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COPING WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

A traumatic event is any event that has a stressful impact sufficient to overwhelm your usual coping strategies. Traumatic events are usually sudden and shocking and outside the range of ordinary human experience.

There is a range of strong emotional effects associated with traumatic events which are common. Learning to recognise these reactions and emotions that occur following an abnormal event can help you to understand and feel more at ease with these feelings. This in turn can help you adjust to what has happened.

COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Each person's experience is unique, however there are some common reactions among people caught up in a traumatic event. It can be reassuring to know that these reactions are not unusual. Expressing your feelings and talking about your reactions helps. Some common reactions and feelings are:

Shock

- Disbelief at what has happened.
- Numbness – the event may seem unreal, like a dream.
- You may be slow to comprehend what has happened.

Fears

- Of death or damage to yourself.
- Recurrence of the event.
- Personal vulnerability – it may be difficult to admit that you are vulnerable.
- You may experience panic and anxious feelings.
- Other apparently unrelated fears may appear.

Anger

- Outrage at what has happened or at who “caused it, or allowed it to happen”.
- Anger at the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- Anger at medical personnel, police or others for not acting properly or quickly enough.

Helplessness

- Feeling of helplessness because of powerlessness to prevent some things from happening.

Shame or Guilt

- For having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needing others.
- For perhaps not having reacted as you would have wished.

Sadness

- About personal loss.
- About human destruction.
- For the loss of the belief that the world is safe and predictable.

Different reactions to trauma may occur as time goes by. They usually only last for a short period of time and gradually diminish over the first few weeks. Occasionally reactions may not appear until some time after the event.

EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOUR

Tension – you may be easily startled or agitated.

Sleep Disturbances – you may find it difficult to sleep or you may have thoughts that prevent sleep, for example, replay of the incident.

Dreams and Nightmares – you may be dreaming about the incident or other frightening events.

Depression – you may feel depressed about the event or past events, or guilty about how you behaved.

Intrusive memories and feelings – Concentration may be affected by memories, flashbacks and feelings about the event. You may be trying to shut these out. This may lead to numbing of feelings and thoughts.

You may also experience episodes of reliving the trauma, known as flashbacks. These can be characterised by visual images and other sensations associated with the event such as smell, taste or pain.

Social Withdrawal – you may have a strong desire to be alone (or you may fear being alone).

Physical Sensations – you may be experiencing a range of physical sensations including tiredness, heart palpitations, tremors, breathing difficulties, headaches, muscle tension, aches, pains, loss of appetite, loss of interest in sex, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation.

Delayed Effects – any of these effects may occur months or even years after satisfactory adjustment to the event when something triggers them. While these symptoms are not unusual, they can be very distressing for you and your family.

WHAT CAN HELP?

- Rest more.
- Have contact with friends.
- Try not to fight recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks.
- Arrange your day to include time alone, or in company as needed.
- Maintain your usual schedule as much as possible.
- Eat balanced meals regularly.
- Eating a little often may help.
- Get some physical exercise.
- Express your feelings as they arise.
- Talk to people who care about you.
- Talk to a professional counsellor if your feelings are very intense or are prolonged.
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine and other drugs.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

- if you feel you cannot handle the intense feelings or physical sensations;
- if after a period of time you continue to feel numb and empty and are concerned about these feelings;
- if you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep;
- if you have no person or group with whom to share your emotions and you feel the need to do so;
- if your relationships seem to be suffering badly or sexual problems develop;
- if you have accidents, you continue to smoke, drink or take drugs to excess since the event, or your work performance suffers;
- if as a helper you are suffering 'burn-out'.

WHERE TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

There is assistance available for both staff and students through the Trauma Recovery Team and the University Counselling Service.

CONTACT DETAILS

Hobart – 6226 2697

Launceston – 6324 3787

Cradle Coast Campus – 6430 4949

If you need urgent assistance after hours we suggest you call Lifeline, 13 11 14, otherwise contact us on the above numbers during office hours.