



Coping after a traumatic event

Most people involved in a critical or traumatic event experience some kind of emotional reaction. Although each person's experience is different, there are many common responses that you may experience. It is important to know that even though these feelings may be very unpleasant, they are normal reactions, in a normal person, to an abnormal event. **You are not losing your mind or going crazy if you have these feelings.**

It is often difficult for those who were not involved to understand what you might be going through. You may wish to show this handout to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them. Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to trauma, which people may or may not experience:

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:

Shock

- disbelief at what happened
- feeling numb, as if things are unreal
- feeling isolated from or different from other people

Fear

- of a recurrence
- for the safety of oneself or one's family
- apparently unrelated fears
- anxiety

Shame

- for having appeared helpless or emotional
- for not behaving as you would have liked

Anger

- at who caused it or "allowed it to happen"
- at the injustice and senselessness of it all
- scapegoating and frustration with bureaucracy
- generalised anger and irritability
- oversensitivity
- violent fantasies

Sadness

- about the losses, both human and material
- loss of feelings of safety and security
- feeling depressed
- helplessness
- uncontrollable crying

PHYSICAL REACTIONS:

Sleep

- change in sleep patterns
- difficulty getting to sleep because of intrusive thoughts
- restless and disturbed sleep
- dreams and/or nightmares about what happened
- unpleasant dreams of other frightening things

Appetite

- loss of appetite and subsequent weight loss
- Increased appetite and subsequent weight gain

Physical health

- fatigue / exhaustion
- general agitation and muscle tension
- headaches or general aches and pains
- nausea, diarrhoea, or constipation
- digestive problems
- other physical signs and symptoms

Anxiety

- easily startled by noises
- hyperactivity or underactivity
- panic attacks
- palpitations, trembling or sweating
- breathing difficulties



THINKING:

Memories

- frequent thoughts or images of the incident
- thoughts or images of other frightening events
- flashbacks/body memories or feelings of “reliving” the experience
- attempts to shut out the painful memories
- inability to attach importance to anything other than this incident

Confusion

- difficulty making simple decisions
- inability to concentrate and memory problems
- difficulty solving problems
- changes to your self-concept
- blaming yourself for the trauma
- lowered self-worth

BEHAVIOUR:

Social

- withdrawal from others and need to be alone
- easily irritated by other people
- feelings of detachment from others
- loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies
- not wanting to be alone

Study or work

- not wanting to study or go to work
- lack of motivation
- poor concentration and attention

Habits

- increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
- loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- loss of sexual potency/desire or increased desire for sex

The signs described above are common and normal reactions to a traumatic experience. People react differently to the experience of being involved in trauma. Some react immediately, some after a time, some intensely, some hardly at all. Usually the effects of the trauma will diminish over a period of a few weeks, although some may last for months or even years, especially if the experience was particularly frightening. You may also find that the feelings get worse when you are reminded of the event. Most reactions are part of the normal process of recovery and help the person adapt to the trauma. They can, however, be very unpleasant for those affected and for their families. Some people who develop long term effects after trauma may go on to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some people may experience more severe effects from a traumatic incident if they have previously experienced other traumatic events in their life.

COPING WITH TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS:

Adjusting to the Experience

It is important to recognise that you have been through a highly stressful experience and to acknowledge that you will have an emotional and physical reaction to it. You may find that it is hard to talk about what has happened to you. Many people find that talking about how they are feeling is the most helpful thing to do, even though it may be hard. You don't have to go through this alone and there are people who can help. Try to seek out support (practical and emotional) from other people in your life.



Some people benefit from extra help in overcoming the effects of a traumatic experience. Do not be afraid to get help if you think you need it. It is not a sign of weakness or an indication that you are losing your mind. Often, the help you receive will be short and simple, and will prevent you from having longer term problems. You might want to consider seeking further assistance if:

- the problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than a few weeks
- you are having suicidal thoughts or thoughts about harming yourself that feel out of control
- you feel that you have no friends or family to whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel
- you are worried about the coping methods you are using (such as alcohol or drugs)
- you have any other concerns about the way you or your family are coping and would like to discuss the matter

The University of Adelaide has a counselling service that is free to students. To make an appointment call 8313 5663.

HELPFUL HINTS - Things to try:

Below are some ideas to try that can help in the aftermath of a traumatic experience:

- Get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep, and eat regular, well-balanced meals.
- Regular exercise (like walking, cycling or jogging) is good for reducing the physical effects of stress and trauma.
- Try to avoid the use of stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes. Your body is already "hyped up" and these substances only increase your level of arousal.
- Try to avoid numbing the pain with drugs or alcohol; this may lead to more problems in the long term.
- Make time for relaxation. You may wish to learn a technique such as deep muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga or breathing exercises.
- Accept yourself. Recognise you have been through a highly stressful experience. You're normal and having natural reactions – you are not crazy.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Try to resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but take it easy. Do not throw yourself into activities, or work in an attempt to avoid the unpleasant feelings and memories. It is important to find a balance between giving yourself the opportunity to feel the 'hard' feelings and giving yourself a break from feeling these.
- Sometimes you will want to be alone, but try not to become too isolated. Contact friends and, if necessary, have someone stay with you for a few hours each day.
- Do things you enjoy and be nice to yourself. Schedule at least one pleasurable activity each day such as having a bath, reading a book, watching a film, going for a walk, playing with pets, going out with friends, or cooking yourself a nice meal.
- Some people find connecting with others who have been through a similar situation really helpful. There are support groups operating in the community around many issues.



- Try not to make any major life decisions (such as moving house or changing jobs) in the period following the trauma. Equally, do make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible (e.g. what you want to eat or what film you would like to see). This can help to re-establish a feeling of control over your life.
- Talk to people who care for you about the incident and how you are feeling. Even though this process is painful it is usually helpful in coming to terms with your experience.
- Some people find that keeping a journal or diary is very helpful. When you can't talk to others about how you feel, writing it down is almost as good. Keeping a journal can help you write your way through those sleepless hours.

FLASHBACKS:

Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease in time. Often people can experience flashbacks when they start to feel 'safer' and have started to get their life back on track. This does not mean you are going backwards or not healing. It more likely is a sign that your body and mind feels that you are ready to start to 'process' the memories and images of the experience. When flashbacks occur it can feel like you are re-experiencing the event all over again. Some people say that flashbacks are so real that it makes them feel like they are back in the past when it happened. This is due to the way our memory systems work during trauma which results in the brain storing the traumatic experience in images and sensations that are not processed in the same way that we would usually process a memory. Below are 5 Steps for getting through a flashback:

1. Tell yourself you are having a flashback – name it for what it is – a memory. Don't fight it – let it wash over you.
2. Tell yourself that you are in the here and now – the present - and that the flashback can't hurt you. Tell yourself that it will pass.
3. Do something to ground yourself – Touch and rub your legs and knees, feel the chair beneath your legs. Stamp your feet. Wrap yourself in a blanket or hug a pet or stuffed toy.
4. Reorient yourself to the present – look around you and notice where you are, the colours, the smells, the shape of things. Turn on the radio or the TV if you are inside. Change the scene – make some food, get a cup of tea, go to different room. Look at the clock; tell yourself what day it is. Feel the sun or the breeze on your skin if you are outside.
5. Take charge of your breathing – Take deep breaths from low down in your belly. Slow your breathing down – count as you take your breaths in and out. Focus on the rise and fall of your breathing. Tell yourself that you are safe.

If you are feeling worried, confused or concerned about how you are coping and would like professional assistance please contact the University of Adelaide Counselling Service on 8313 5663.

(Adapted from the UNE Counselling Service CICI Policy)