

Trauma - reacting and recovering

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing or frightening event. In fact, these feelings are part of the healing process. Reactions may last for days, weeks or even longer. There are many things you can do to cope with and recover from these experiences.

Understanding common reactions

The way a person reacts to trauma will depend on many things, such as the type and severity of the event, the support the person has, other stresses in their lives, their personality and their ability to cope. Common reactions include a range of physical, cognitive (thinking) and emotional factors. These reactions are normal and show how the event has affected the person. Understanding this is the first step in coming to terms with what has happened.

Physical reactions

The following physical reactions may indicate traumatic stress:

- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Disturbed sleep
- Nausea
- Nightmares
- Restlessness
- Headaches
- Excessive alertness and being easily startled.

Mental reactions

The following thinking reactions are common after distressing events:

- Poor concentration
- Poor attention and memory
- Visual images of the event
- Intrusive thoughts
- Disorientation
- Confusion.

Emotional reactions

Common emotional reactions to trauma include:

- Fear
- Numbness and detachment
- Avoidance
- Depression
- Guilt
- Oversensitivity
- Anxiety and panic
- Withdrawal and tearfulness.

Behavioural reactions

Common behavioural reactions to trauma include:

- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Inability to stop focusing on it
- Getting immersed in working for recovery
- Losing touch with normal routines
- Losing time – the person doesn't know where the time went
- Difficulty doing anything except familiar routines.

Posttraumatic stress disorder

After a distressing event, some people find their reactions are serious and do not gradually subside after a month. Severe, prolonged reactions can be disabling and affect a person's relationships and work. Such reactions indicate posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this condition, the impact of the event continues to cause high levels of stress.

Persistent severe reactions indicate something is interfering with normal recovery processes. PTSD requires professional attention to help understand what is preventing recovery and get the process going again.

Recovering from trauma

The following general tips may help your recovery from trauma:

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing or frightening experience and that you will have a reaction to it.
- Accept that you will feel bad for a time but that it will also eventually pass.
- Remind yourself daily that you are coping – don't be angry when you get upset.
- Don't overuse alcohol or drugs to help you cope.
- Avoid making major decisions or big life changes until you feel better.
- Gradually confront what has happened – don't try to block it out.
- Don't bottle up your feelings – talk to someone who can support and understand you.
- Try to keep your normal routine and stay busy.
- Don't go out of your way to avoid certain places or activities. Don't let the trauma confine your life, but take your time to get back to normal.
- When you feel exhausted, make sure you set aside time to rest.
- Make time for regular exercise – it helps cleanse body and mind of tension.
- Help your family and friends to help you by telling them what you need, such as time out or someone to talk to.
- Relax – use relaxation techniques such as yoga, breathing or meditation, or do things you enjoy such as listening to music or gardening.
- Express your feelings as they arise – talk to someone about your feelings or write them down.
- When the trauma brings up memories or feelings, try to confront them. Think about them, then put them aside. If it brings up other past memories, try to keep them separate from the current problem and deal with them separately.

Seek professional help

Traumatic stress can cause very strong reactions in some people and may become chronic (ongoing). You should seek professional help if you:

- Are unable to handle the intense feelings or physical sensations
- Don't have normal feelings but continue to feel numb and empty
- Feel that you are not beginning to return to normal after three or four weeks
- Continue to have physical stress symptoms
- Continue to have disturbed sleep or nightmares
- Have no one you can share your feelings with
- Find that relationships with family and friends are suffering
- Are becoming accident-prone and using more alcohol or drugs
- Cannot return to work or manage responsibilities.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 60 60 24

Things to remember

- It is normal to have strong reactions following a distressing or frightening event, but these should begin to reduce after a few weeks.
- People can experience a range of physical, cognitive and emotional reactions.
- There are many things you can do to cope with and recover from trauma.
- Seek professional help if you don't begin to return to normal after three or four weeks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health and Department of Human Services - Emergency Management

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.