
Trauma - after effects

Distressing events such as car accidents, bushfires, floods, sudden illness, sudden death in the family or violence may all be traumatic. Responding to such events requires great physical and mental energy. Once the worst is over, people involved usually feel exhausted and emotional. Distress reactions after such events can occur hours, days, weeks or even months after the event.

Physical and emotional reactions are a normal response to distress and trauma. How long these reactions last depends on many factors such as the person's personality, the nature of the event, the intensity of the person's involvement and the support they receive afterwards.

Common reactions to trauma

People may react in a number of ways including physically, mentally, emotionally and behaviourally.

Physical reactions

Some common physical reactions include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Excessive sweating
- Increased heart rate
- Aches and pains.

Mental reactions

Some common mental reactions include:

- Confusion and disorientation
- Unwanted and upsetting mental images of the distressing event
- Nightmares
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty making decisions or plans
- Feeling overly suspicious
- Forgetfulness
- Short attention span.

Emotional reactions

Some common emotional reactions include:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling detached, numb or apathetic

- Outbursts and inability to control emotions.

Behavioural reactions

Some common behavioural reactions include:

- Blaming others
- Changed appetite, such as eating a lot more or a lot less
- Turning to substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and coffee
- Sleeping problems.

Making sense of the event

Once the distressing event is over, you may find yourself trying to make sense of the event. This can include thinking about:

- How and why it happened
- How and why you were involved
- Why you feel the way you do
- Whether feelings you now have reflect on what kind of person you are
- Whether the experience has changed your view on life, and how.

Coping strategies

Suggestions to help sort things out include:

- Talk over your thoughts and feelings with trusted loved ones.
- If you don't feel like talking, consider keeping a journal of your thoughts and feelings.
- Try to keep to your normal routine.
- Keep yourself occupied with social events, hobbies or going to the movies.
- Set aside time every day to relax.

Prolonged distress reaction

The distress reaction is a normal response to trauma. Most people recover and feel normal again in time with adequate support. However, some people may find themselves 'stuck'. A prolonged distress reaction can cause other problems, such as relationship difficulties. Without help to move on, the reaction may become a way of life.

Suggestions include:

- Think about how your distress is expressed and try to come up with ways of helping it. For example, if your body feels tense and stiff, try exercise, relaxation therapy and massage.
- Make time for fun and relaxation. Laughter is an antidote to distress.
- Ask family, relatives and friends to help.
- Give yourself time. Don't get frustrated if it seems to take longer than you'd hoped to reduce your level of distress. It always feels longer than we want.

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
- 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 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- Powerful physical and emotional reactions are a normal response to distressing or frightening events.
- How long these reactions last depends on many factors such as your personality, the event, the intensity of your involvement and the support you receive afterwards.
- If you find it difficult to reduce your level of distress or you're concerned about your reaction in any way, seek professional advice.

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

Department of Health and Department of Human Services - Emergency Management

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