

Common reactions to trauma

Information Leaflet



This leaflet tells you about common traumatic reactions to traumatic events and explains ways to cope with them.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is any incident we experience which results in significant physical and/or emotional injury. The incident may be sudden and unexpected, or we may have been aware it was going to happen.

Having an emotional response, or feeling numb, is a normal reaction.

Everyone reacts differently, there is no right or wrong way. Often people can feel that they are not able to cope and may struggle to let others know as a result of stigma or embarrassment.

Here are some common reactions that you may experience when you have been involved in a traumatic incident.

Shock:

- Disbelief and numbness
- Sense of fight or flight
- Feeling disconnected
- A sense of unreality

Fear:

- The incident happening again
- Not being safe
- Being alone
- Losing control
- Others being at risk

Sadness:

- About the potential or actual loss of life or injury
- Loss of belief that the world is a safe place
- Helplessness
- Impact on personal identity
- Grief

Anger:

- Towards those who were responsible or may have caused it to happen
- At oneself eg. feeling responsible, or that you allowed it to happen
- At the injustice and/or senselessness
- At the lack of understanding of others
- Struggling to manage general anger and irritability

Confusion about:

- New or unexpected thoughts and emotions
- Past traumas that are troubling you again
- How your perspective on life has changed
- Why am I responding in this way?

These feelings are normal and common, and you may feel all or some of them. Talking about them can be a relief. They usually only last for a short period of time and will gradually reduce over time.

How might this affect me?

You might have some of the following physical and/or emotional symptoms:

Anxiety and worry – you may find that you are easily startled and agitated, and more concerned about looking for signs of danger.

Problems with sleep – your sleep may be disrupted by disturbing thoughts, and you may experience vivid dreams or nightmares.

Mood swings – you might experience a change in mood for no reason or feel irritable.

Flashbacks – of what happened may occur without warning, and be triggered by a smell, a sound or something you see.

Fears and anxieties – of the place where the incident happened or other reminders of the incident, being in the dark or in crowded areas.

Physical symptoms – lump in your throat, a tight chest, feeling light-headed, heart racing, upset stomach.

Do

- Talk about your feelings and let yourself cry.
- Give yourself time to think about and process what has happened.
- Self care – eat and drink regularly, sleep, shower, exercise, take your medication.
- Seek help if these difficulties persist.

Don't

- Take on too much to avoid thinking about what has happened.
- Increase your drink or drug use.
- Get drawn into social media relating to the incident or similar incidents.

Do I need professional help?

Many people find these feelings they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce over time. However, if you find that the thoughts and feelings are persisting and are having a negative impact on you and your mental health and wellbeing, please contact your GP to discuss further.

Useful contacts and resources

- Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust - mental health self help guides, 23 mental health guides available in a range of formats - www.selfhelp.cntw.nhs.uk
- Samaritans Tel: 116 123, phone anytime, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year
- NHS 111, can help if you have an urgent medical problem and you're not sure what to do, it is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- www.nhs.uk - provides information about conditions, symptoms and treatments, including what to do and when to get help
- Disaster Action - www.disasteraction.org.uk
- Recovery colleges in Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear - www.cntw.nhs.uk/recovery
- Mind - Effect of Trauma - www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/trauma/effects-of-trauma/
- NHS talking therapies for anxiety and depression - www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies/





Further information about the content, reference sources or production of this leaflet can be obtained from the Patient Information Centre. If you would like to tell us what you think about this leaflet please get in touch.

This information can be made available in a range of formats on request (eg Braille, audio, larger print, easy read, BSL or other languages). Please contact the Patient Information Centre
Tel: 0191 246 7288

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