

## Trauma—helping loved ones

It can be difficult to know how to help someone you love when they have gone through a distressing event. This fact sheet aims to help you help your loved ones after a traumatic event.

### You can't make it better but you can offer support

It's natural to want to make someone you love feel better again, but it's important to accept what has happened. There is nothing you can say or do to make their pain disappear. That will happen with time, rest, love and support. Tell them how sorry you are about the event and that you want to help them in any way they need. Try to keep them company where they are rather than move them on before they are ready.

It's always good to ask the person what you can do to support them.

Suggestions for supporting loved ones include:

- Make time to be with them.
- Don't take their feelings to heart. They may be irritable, depressed, angry or frightened. Strong feelings and emotional outbursts are common—try not to take it personally.
- Reassure the person that their feelings are normal.
- Offer practical support. You could do the housework or the grocery shopping for them, or pick up their children from school.
- You may need to let the person have time by themselves.
- Let them know you are there for them without judging.
- Assist them to get back into their normal routine when they are able.

### Talking is important

- Allow the person to talk about what happened, even if they become upset. Just be calm and listen—getting upset doesn't help.
- Listen carefully to them.
- Don't insist on talking if the person doesn't want to. They may need time to be alone with their thoughts. Tell them you are there to listen whenever they feel ready.
- Reassure them you care and want to understand as much as possible about what happened to them. They may say you can't possibly understand what they went through and shut you out. If they take this approach, they risk becoming isolated from their support networks. Be patient and see what else you can do to help.
- Try to make sure there is someone else they can talk to if they don't want to talk to you about it at all.

## Unhelpful reactions

Some responses should be avoided:

- Don't avoid talking about the event.
- Don't think you know how the person should think, feel or behave. Everyone's response is different.
- Don't use general phrases such as 'look on the bright side' or 'look for the silver lining', but help them think about what they do have.
- Don't judge their thoughts or feelings; being accepted helps put things in context.
- Don't be impatient or expect them to 'get over it' in a certain time. It can take months or longer to recover from an event.
- Don't insist they need professional help. Not everyone who experiences a distressing event needs treatment. It will be more effective if they get it when they want it, even if that is later than is ideal.

## Help them relax and have fun

Relaxation and fun are important recovery tools.

- Try to involve the person in physical activity, such as walking or swimming. Exercise burns off stress chemicals, reduces muscle tension and encourages better sleep.
- While the person needs to spend some time alone, help them to strike a balance. Socialising—even low-key events such as sitting around with friends—can help to reduce stress levels.
- Laughter is a wonderful antidote to stress. Find ways to help them laugh. Don't be afraid to make jokes, but be sensitive.

## Things to remember

- Find out as much as you can about distress, so you can understand something about what to expect.
- Allow the person to talk about what happened, even if they become upset.
- Don't insist they need professional help—not everyone who experiences a traumatic event needs therapy.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline 13 11 14

If at any time you are worried about your or a loved one's mental health call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

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