

Trauma—reacting and recovering

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing 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) emotional and behavioural factors. These reactions are normal and show how the event has affected the person.

The following *physical reactions* may indicate traumatic stress:

- fatigue or exhaustion
- disturbed sleep
- nausea
- nightmares
- restlessness
- headaches
- excessive alertness and being easily startled.

The following *thinking reactions* are common after distressing events:

- poor concentration
- poor attention and memory
- visual images of the event
- intrusive thoughts
- disorientation
- confusion.

Common *emotional reactions* to trauma include:

- fear
- numbness and detachment
- avoidance
- depression
- guilt
- oversensitivity
- anxiety and panic
- withdrawal and tearfulness.

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.

Recovering from trauma

The following general tips may help your recovery from trauma.

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience.
- 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.
- Avoid making major decisions or big life changes until you feel better.
- Don't bottle up your feelings—talk to someone who can support and understand you.
- Try to keep your normal routine and stay busy.
- 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.
- Relax—use relaxation techniques such as yoga, or do things you enjoy like listening to music.
- When the trauma brings up memories or feelings, try to confront them.

Seek professional help

Traumatic stress can cause very strong reactions in some people that may not subside on their own. This can then lead to other conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder. 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.

Things to remember

- It is normal to have strong reactions following a distressing event.
- People can experience a range of physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural 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.

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 mental health call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

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