

# Coping after a potentially traumatic experience

Adversity is part of life and any of us can find ourselves affected by a potentially traumatic event.

When this happens, we may experience emotional and psychological distress including feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, or anger. These stress reactions can be very intense, and they may come right after the event, or can develop later, in the weeks and months that follow.

In most cases, these reactions will lessen over time, and most of us will gradually start to feel better. This is especially true if we can use healthy and helpful ways of coping and when we receive support from those close to us in our families and communities.

There are many different situations that have the potential to threaten our psychological safety and wellbeing. Some potentially traumatic events involve a direct threat to our physical safety, such as accidents, assaults, terrorist incidents or environmental disasters.

Other events have the potential to be traumatic because we are exposed to the suffering of others. Some examples of these indirect threats include witnessing harm to others or a traumatic bereavement.

## How long will I feel this way?

There is no timescale for getting over a traumatic experience.

In most cases, these difficult and distressing feelings will last a few days or weeks and then begin to lessen over time.

If you are continuing to feel some of these feelings after a month but they are improving and you are beginning to feel better, then it is likely that natural healing is taking place, and you are on the path to recovery.

However, if things aren't improving, are getting worse, or you are continuing to feel significant distress, then it is worth seeking professional advice and support as you may be developing a post traumatic injury.

## How might I feel?

There is no right or wrong way to feel in the face of a challenging or potentially traumatic incident, and those involved, whether directly or indirectly may experience a range of emotions and reactions. You may experience none, some, or all of these and that is OK.

- You may feel **anxious and afraid**, and these feelings might be triggered when you are reminded of what has happened even if you are now safe.
- You may feel **sad and upset** or be grieving especially if you have experienced loss.
- You may **feel cut off and distant** from others and the world around you and notice that you feel **numb and disconnected**. Things may feel **unreal**, and it may be difficult to accept what has happened.
- You may notice that you feel **shame or guilt** about what you did or did not do during and after the incident. And, if you survived when others didn't, may feel **confusion, guilt** or even **elation**.
- You may notice that you feel **angry or have feelings of aggression** towards other people or may find yourself **acting recklessly** or in **self-destructive ways**.
- You may notice that you are thinking a lot about what happened and during the day may be experiencing **vivid memories** (including images, sounds or smells) or having distressing and **frightening dreams** at night.
- You may find that your **sleep is disturbed** and that you find it **difficult to concentrate** and/or have become **forgetful**.
- You may notice **changes** in **appetite, energy**, and **irritability**.
- You may experience **physical body symptoms** such as sweating, racing heart, shaking, churning stomach, headaches.
- You may notice that you are trying to **avoid people, places or situations** that remind you of what happened. Or find that you are working hard to not think about what happened.
- **You may not experience any of the above**, and whilst you accept you have been through something difficult and distressing, **you are doing fine**.

## What can I do to help myself?

Traumatic experiences can disrupt the things that keep us well. It is important to be patient with yourself and give yourself time to heal. It is also important to recognise that we can take steps to help our recovery by maintaining or reconnecting with helpful resources and supports.

### 1. Seek out social support.

Seek out support from friends, family, colleagues or other people in your world with whom you feel safe, and you can trust. You may not want to talk, but being amongst others will help you to feel supported and connected, rather than alone and isolated. If you do feel able to talk about what has happened this can help your brain begin to make sense of what you have been through and should help to reduce distressing thoughts, memories, and dreams.

### 2. Try to maintain structure and routine to your day.

This includes routines around eating, sleeping, and your everyday activities. It can help to get back into routine around work and leisure activities too when you feel able.

### 3. Take gentle exercise.

We know it helps our bodies if we can stay active through regular exercise. This is especially important after we have experienced a trauma because it helps our alarm system re-set and uses up the stress hormone, adrenalin.

### 4. Calming strategies.

It can take time to recover from a traumatic event. Help yourself by knowing what it is that helps you feel calm and try to practise this regularly. This could be using breathing or relaxation exercises, or may be about listening to music, spending time in nature or sitting down with a book or box set. Notice what works for you and aim to practise it regularly.

### 5. Avoid avoidance

In the days and weeks after a shocking experience our minds will try to make sense of it and to come to terms with the aftermath. To do this we will find ourselves thinking and perhaps dreaming about what happened. Although this can be upsetting, it is a natural part of our recovery so try to allow your mind and body to do this, rather than pushing the thoughts and feelings away. Talking to others can help, but so can taking time on your own to reflect on your experience.

### 6. Connecting with others who have been through the same or a similar experience.

It can be really helpful to connect with others who have experienced the same event, who you can relate to, and with whom you can access mutual support.

### 7. Try to avoid too much media.

Try to avoid watching too much TV or accessing too much social media around the event. Whilst some information may be helpful, too much can keep us focused on the trauma experience and lead to an increase in distress. We need time and space away from constant reminders so we can soothe ourselves and begin to turn our alarm system down.

## What might be unhelpful?

Because of the strong and painful feelings that can follow a traumatic event, it makes sense that people try to find ways to lessen the pain and dull or block the feelings. Unfortunately, these efforts to cope can bring their own problems.

### 1. Try to avoid using alcohol or substances.

It can be tempting to use of alcohol or drugs to cope with painful feelings. These may bring relief in the short-term, but they tend to create more problems in the long term. Using alcohol or drugs may suppress the difficult memories and feelings while you're using them, but when you stop the thoughts and feelings are still there.

This can prevent natural processing and recovery, meaning the pain and distress last longer. Be cautious about using substances and try some alternative strategies to help you cope with the aftermath of trauma, like connecting with others or getting out for some exercise and fresh air.

### 2. Notice if you are withdrawing/avoiding.

Again, it may feel like it is helpful to withdraw from others or to avoid places or situations that might remind you of what happened. However, this can leave you feeling isolated and alone and can make your thoughts and feelings harder to manage in the long term.

## Post Traumatic Growth

People who have been through periods of trauma and adversity sometimes experience something called Post Traumatic Growth. Post Traumatic Growth is when people who come through adversity report positive outcomes such as a renewed appreciation for

life, improved relationships with others, a sense of personal strength, new opportunities or spiritual change. People who have experienced post traumatic injuries can also experience Post Traumatic Growth when they recover.

## When might I need to reach out for professional support?

Look out for warning signs:

- If after a month you are continuing to experience distressing memories and nightmares that are not improving, or are getting worse, you may benefit from professional support.
- If you continue to feel anxious, on edge or easily startled and this is interfering with how you function day to day, then this too can be a sign that you may need some extra help.

- If you have started to avoid people, places or situations, for fear that they will trigger painful memories and feelings, then some additional support may be beneficial.

If you are noticing any of these warning signs, or any other signs of distress linked to the event, then reach out for help sooner rather than later. Support is available and there are effective treatments to help you to heal and recover.