

Coping with Traumatic Events

Traumatic events happen throughout life, both within the home environment and also the working environment. They affect individuals differently and are normally defined as events that are not in the normal range of human experience such as being the recipient of violence or being exposed to extreme psychological trauma.

Any individual can experience a traumatic event, which may vary in intensity. It may be one single event, or it may be a process over a number of months, weeks or years. It is important however to realise that it is quite usual to suffer reactive symptoms and to experience varying degrees of “unwellness” following such events.

A helpful concept is to remember that it is the incident that is abnormal or a series of events that are abnormal and you are **NOT** abnormal.

Your reactions are often divided into either emotional or psychological reactions and physical reactions.

Emotional reactions may include;

- Helplessness, where you feel no longer in control of your life or your feelings.
- Tearfulness, frequent bursts of crying.
- Feelings of guilt, you may feel there were actions that you undertook, which you now regret or actions that you didn't undertake, which you regret. You may feel guilty that you are now alive or in a better position than other individuals who were involved in the incident.
- Anger, this may be addressed to a particular individual or a particular situation. It may be more generally addressed at the injustice and senselessness of the whole event or, at individuals who don't understand how you are feeling.

Physical reactions

- Clusters of headaches
- Joint pain and muscle pain
- Poor concentration
- Feelings of restlessness, being unable to relax or focus on more than one thing at a time
- Disturbances of sleep. You may notice that you wake early in the morning and also experience nightmares related to the incident
- Flashbacks at any time of the day or night. You may experience vivid images of the incident or individuals involved, and this may trigger other senses, for example, smell or noise, bingeing or loss of appetite.

Changes in your behaviour

You may find that unconsciously your behaviour changes and you may experience some of the following:

- Avoiding returning to the area where the incident or traumatic events took place.
- Not wanting to talk or share your experiences about the incident or events with anyone.
- Losing interest in hobbies and things that you previously enjoyed doing.
- A reduction in sex drive.
- A disturbance of your daily routine.
- Losing confidence in your own abilities.
- Becoming increasingly irritable with family and colleagues.
- Drinking more alcohol in an attempt to sleep or relax or smoking more cigarettes.

There are many things you can do to help yourself:

- Continually remind yourself after such an incident that it's quite normal to feel the way you do.
- Share your thoughts and feelings about the incident with other people who were involved in the incident who may have had similar experiences.
- Talk over the incident with someone else in order that you can get the facts sorted out in your own mind. Share your emotions with your close friends and relatives; do not abuse alcohol, prescription drugs, over the counter remedies, substances of abuse or cigarettes in an attempt to control your feelings and symptoms.
- Consider seeking personal professional help outside your friends and family, and this may be accessed via your General Practitioner or your Occupational Health Department.



Some “do’s” and “don’ts” that you might find helpful

Do take time to sleep, to rest and to think

Do take time to spend time with your family and those you love

Do express your needs clearly and honestly

Do take care when driving or operating machinery at work

Don’t bottle up your feelings

Don’t avoid triggers of the incident or events

Don’t abuse alcohol

When should I seek specialist support and advice

- If you are having difficulty handling the feelings or physical symptoms if you feel your emotions are not under control or if you feel chronic confusion, tension, emptiness or depression.
- If you continue to have physical symptoms after four weeks.
- If your work performance suffers
- If you continue to avoid places and people that remind you of the incident after four weeks.
- If you continue to have nightmares and your sleep remains disturbed, particularly if you are waking early in the morning after four weeks.
- If you have no one to share your feelings with
- If your relationships seem to be suffering or sexual problems develop
- If you are abusing drugs or alcohol.

Do not feel you are alone; many people suffer similar symptoms that you will be suffering after such events. Do not feel that nothing can be done to help you; there are many organisations and specialists who are available to assist you in managing your symptoms and returning to normal.

Don’t hesitate to seek further advice from your Manager, your Company’s Occupational Health Service, your General Practitioner or other National Agencies.

