

Trauma – reaction and recovery

Public health information

Summary

It is normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions following a distressing event. On most occasions though, these reactions subside as a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process. There are many things you can do to help cope with and recover from such an experience.

A traumatic experience is any event in life that causes a threat to our safety and potentially places our own life or the lives of others at risk. As a result, a person experiences high levels of emotional, psychological, and physical distress that temporarily disrupts their ability to function normally in day-to-day life.

Examples of potentially traumatic experiences include natural disasters, such as a bushfire or flood, being witness to an armed robbery, having a serious car accident, being in a plane that is forced to make an emergency landing, or being physically assaulted.

Reactions to trauma

The way a person reacts to trauma depends on many things, such as the type and severity of the traumatic event, the amount of available support for the person following the incident, other stressors currently being experienced in the person's life, the existence of certain personality traits, natural levels of resilience, and whether the person has had any traumatic experiences before.

Common reactions include a range of mental, emotional, physical and behavioural responses. These reactions are normal and, in most cases, they subside as a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process.

Examples of common reactions to trauma are:

- feeling as if you are in a state of 'high alert' and are 'on watch' for anything else that might happen
- feeling emotionally numb, as if in a state of 'shock'
- becoming emotional and upset
- feeling extremely fatigued and tired
- feeling very stressed and/or anxious
- being very protective of others including family and friends
- not wanting to leave a particular place for fear of 'what might happen'.

Mental reactions to trauma

Mental reactions to trauma include:

- reduced concentration and memory
- intrusive thoughts about the event
- repeatedly playing parts of the event over in the mind
- confusion or disorientation.

Emotional reactions to trauma

Emotional reactions to trauma can include:

- fear, anxiety and panic

- shock – difficulty believing in what has happened, feeling detached and confused
- feeling numb
- not wanting to connect with others or becoming withdrawn from those around you
- continuing alarm – feeling like the danger is still there or the event is continuing
- let-down – after the crisis is over, exhaustion may become obvious. Emotional reactions to the event are felt during the let-down phase, and include depression, avoidance, guilt, oversensitivity, and withdrawal.

Physical reactions to trauma

Traumatic experiences can result in physical reactions including:

- fatigue or exhaustion
- disturbed sleep
- nausea, vomiting and dizziness
- headaches
- excessive sweating
- increased heart rate.

Behavioural reactions to trauma

Common behavioural reactions to trauma include:

- avoiding reminders of the event
- inability to stop focusing on what occurred
- getting immersed in recovery-related tasks
- losing touch with normal daily routines
- changed appetite, such as eating a lot more or a lot less
- turning to substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and coffee
- sleeping problems.

Making sense of the traumatic event

Once the distressing event is over, you may find yourself trying to make sense of the event. This can include thinking about: how and why it happened, how and why you were involved, why you feel the way you do, whether feelings you now have reflect on what kind of person you are, whether the experience has changed your view on life, and how.

Helping resolve traumatic reactions to trauma

There are a number of strategies that can be put in place to help a person resolve traumatic reactions.

Some common well identified examples include:

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing or frightening experience and that you will have a reaction to it.
- Accept that you will not feel your normal self for a period of time, but that it will also eventually pass.
- Remind yourself daily that you are managing – try not to get angry or frustrated with yourself if you are not able to do things as well or efficiently as normal.
- Don't overuse alcohol or drugs to help you cope.
- Avoid making major decisions or big life changes until you feel better.
- Gradually confront what has happened – don't try to block it out.
- Don't bottle up your feelings – talk to someone who can support and understand you.
- Try to keep to your normal routine and stay busy.
- Don't go out of your way to avoid certain places or activities. Don't let the trauma confine your life, but take your time to get back to normal.

- When you feel exhausted, make sure you set aside time to rest.
- Make time for regular exercise – it helps cleanse your body and mind of tension.
- Help your family and friends to help you by telling them what you need, such as time out or someone to talk to.
- Relax – use relaxation techniques such as yoga, breathing or meditation, or do things you enjoy, such as listening to music or gardening.
- Express your feelings as they arise – talk to someone about your feelings or write them down.
- When the trauma brings up memories or feelings, try to confront them. Think about them, then put them aside. If it brings up other past memories, try to keep them separate from the current problem and deal with them separately.

Healing and recovery process

Any event that places a person's own life or the lives of others at risk results in the human body going into a state of heightened arousal. This is like an 'emergency mode' that involves a series of internal alarms being turned on. Emergency mode gives people the capacity to access a lot of energy in a short period of time to maximise the chance of survival.

Most people only stay in emergency mode for a short period of time or until the immediate threat has passed. However, being in emergency mode uses up vital energy supplies and this is why people often feel quite tired afterwards.

The normal healing and recovery process involves the body coming down out of a state of heightened arousal. In other words, the internal alarms turn off, the high levels of energy subside, and the body re-sets itself to a normal state of balance and equilibrium. Typically, this should occur within approximately one month of the event.

Seeking help from a health professional

Traumatic stress can cause very strong reactions in some people and may become chronic (ongoing). 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
- deliberately try to avoid anything that reminds you of the traumatic experience
- have no one you can share your feelings with
- find that relationships with family and friends are suffering
- are becoming accident-prone and using more alcohol or drugs
- cannot return to work or manage responsibilities
- keep reliving the traumatic experience
- feel very much on edge and can be easily startled.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

After a distressing event, some people find their reactions are serious and do not gradually subside after a month. Severe, prolonged reactions can be disabling, and can affect a person's relationships with family and friends as well their capacity to work. Such reactions might indicate post-traumatic stress disorder. In this condition, the impact of the event continues to cause high levels of stress.

If you think you might be experiencing PTSD, you should seek help from a health professional.

If at any time you are worried about your mental health or the mental health of a loved one, call Lifeline 13 11 14.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Local community health centre
- Medicare Local
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Australian Psychological Society Referral Service Tel. 1800 333 497
- Lifeline Tel. 13 11 14
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days).

Things to remember

- It is normal to have strong reactions following a distressing or frightening event, but these should begin to reduce after a few weeks.
- People can experience a range of physical, mental, 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.

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