

Our Response to a Traumatic Incident

A traumatic incident occurs suddenly. It causes you to have unusually strong reactions. Your sense of safety and well being can feel shattered, and your ability to function normally may be temporarily interfered with. Even though the event may be over, individuals may react with different intensities at different times.

It is common for people to experience emotional and physical 'aftershocks' when they have passed through a horrible event. These stress reactions may appear immediately, or may take a few hours or days to occur. In some cases they may take weeks or months to occur. The important thing to remember is that you are experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Common and normal stress reactions to critical incidents are:

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
Chills	Confusion	Fear	Withdrawal
Thirst	Nightmares	Guilt	Antisocial acts
Fatigue	Uncertainty	Anger	Inability to rest or sleep
Insomnia	Hyper vigilance	Grief	Pacing
Nausea	Suspiciousness	Panic	Isolating self
Fainting	Intrusive images	Denial	Change in social behaviour
Twitches	Blaming	Anxiety	Erratic movements
Vomiting	Poor problem solving	Agitation	Change in speech patterns
Dizziness	Poor attention	Irritability	Crying
Weakness	Poor decisions	Depression	Change in appetite
Chest pain	Poor concentration	Sadness	Hyper alert to environment
Headaches	Poor memory	Apprehension	Increased drug or alcohol use
Loss of appetite	Disorientation	Shock	Over-use of prescription meds
Raised blood pressure	Mistrust	Emotional outbursts	Unusual excitement
Rapid heart rate	Mind fog	Overwhelmed	Fear of being alone
Teeth grinding	Rapid thoughts	Inappropriate response	
Blurry vision	Loss of confidence	Loss of self esteem	
Sweating	Self blaming		
Difficulty breathing	Circular thinking		
Shakiness			

When crisis strikes, the normal human tendency is to try to stop the pain. It's normal to build a wall around the incident in an attempt to keep it separate from the rest of your life. It is normal to think that you must 'buck up' and carry on with your responsibilities. Often our friends and family are not equipped to deal with what we are going through, so they will avoid bringing up the subject, and will not encourage us to talk about it.

However, if a person does not express and explore their feelings, traumatic reactions can hide for a time, only to re-emerge when we least expect it and are no longer able to identify why we are feeling bad and breaking down. Denied pain can also push through later in the form of increased illness. Unresolved feelings can lead to decreased productivity, breakdown in communication in your private life, a negative change of attitude, a perpetual sense of being a victim, and other unwanted changes that may affect many relationships, including your sense of yourself. You could think of unresolved feelings as a developing volcano with pressure building below the surface. The pressure will be relieved by accepting that your feelings are part of a process that you need to face and work through.

Working through a traumatic event, healing, and moving on, is a process that takes time and is unique to each person. You may not even be aware of your progress unless it is pointed out to you by someone else. Have faith, even if your progress feels painfully slow, that you WILL heal from this awful event. You will.

Suggestions for the Survivor of a Traumatic Event

AVOID ALCOHOL OR DRUGS TO COPE:

It may be tempting, but they cause more problems than they solve. People under stress may medicate with both legal and illegal drugs and when in pain it is hard to know how much is too much. Alcohol and drugs may affect judgement, decision making and behaviour. Drugs may prevent psychological resolution at the subconscious level. Once the alcohol and drugs are gone, you will have their effects to cope with along with your response to the traumatic event.

REACH OUT – PEOPLE DO CARE:

People react to psychological trauma by isolating themselves. By spending time with others you prevent yourself from becoming withdrawn and obsessed with the incident. Ultimately you will end up talking about the incident which contributes to recovery – talking is the best medicine. Receiving support from others will also make it perfectly clear to you that YOU ARE NOT ALONE. Almost all of us have experienced a traumatic event in our lives.

REMEMBER TO EAT AND SLEEP:

Emotional upheaval may make you vulnerable to illnesses. Eat at mealtimes even if it is only a handful of nuts or a glass of juice or a piece of cheese. Try to eat nutritious and comforting food, sitting at a table, and turn your attention to your meal. Sticking to your usual sleep patterns is important – while you sleep your body will begin to heal and your mind will begin to process what has happened. Maintaining daily routines around eating and sleeping are important to overall health and healing from trauma.

EXPECT THE INCIDENT TO BOTHER YOU:

Many of the emotions you experience may be unpleasant – sad, angry, outraged, impatient, out of control, etc. Don't fight your thoughts, they are normal and will decrease over time, becoming less painful. After a while you may experience a rollercoaster effect where you feel not too bad one day, but terrible the next. This too is normal, and over time your emotions will become more consistent. Be kind to yourself, allowing yourself time to grieve and feel the anger and pain – perhaps do this when you are alone and will not feel inhibited by how your feelings may impact others.

WATCH YOUR FIXATION ON THE INCIDENT:

Some people become obsessed with trying to make sense of, or find reasons for, what happened. They may feel like they have a tape recording of the incident playing repeatedly in their head. It may seem too unfair and unjust, and it may cause them to need to regain meaning or a sense of fair play in life. They may spend a great deal of time thinking 'if only I had' These thoughts are normal to some degree, but if they go on for months, you should seek help by talking to someone like a grief counsellor or doctor.

KNOW YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK:

Identify who your resources are – your doctor, your social worker, your counsellor, your victim services worker, your friends, your family members, your neighbours, etc. Think about the different kinds of issues you would take to the various members of your support network, and who would be the ones you would feel safe to reveal your innermost thoughts to. Safe people are those who are confidential, empathetic, supportive, nonjudgmental, and available to you.

STRUCTURE YOUR TIME:

Routines are important – they can be comforting and familiar. They can be reassuring to vulnerable family members as well. Make efforts to stick to long established routines around eating, sleeping, exercising, caring for children and pets, going to work, etc. Unstructured time should be part of every day too, and this is important time for you to spend reflecting on your feelings and overall wellbeing. Perhaps this can be later in the day when your responsibilities have been handled and things are quiet.

THINK ABOUT THINGS THAT HAVE UPLIFTED YOU IN THE PAST:

What are the things that have helped you cope in the past? Is it talking to your friends? Going to church? Walking in nature? Sitting on the edge of a lake? Doing a craft or a hobby? Journaling about your feelings? Reading self-help books? Playing with your children? Watching a comedy and having a good laugh? Getting a massage? Gardening? Physical activity? It is very important that you identify the things that uplift you and help you feel better during difficult times. Incorporate these things into your everyday routine – purposefully make time for them, they will help you heal.
