

# Coping With Trauma

Some practical advice

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## Introduction

It is very common for someone who has been through a traumatic experience to have a strong emotional reaction. This is normal and is the mind's way of dealing with what has happened. Most reactions settle after a few months.

If you have been through a traumatic experience, this leaflet is designed to help you understand your emotional response. It also suggests ways of coping with your feelings and coming to terms with what has happened to you.

If you know someone who has been through a traumatic experience, this leaflet may help you to understand what they are going through, and what you can do to help.

## What happens immediately after a trauma?

Shock is common straight after a trauma. Shock may affect people in different ways. A person may feel stunned, dazed or numb. Some people feel cut off from their own feelings, or from what is going on around them.

Another common reaction is denial when someone is not able to take on board the enormity of what has happened, but others may mistakenly feel that the person is being strong or doesn't care about what has happened.

Shock and denial are the body's way of protecting itself immediately after a trauma. Over hours or days the feelings of shock gradually decrease and other thoughts and feelings take their place.

## What are the common thoughts and feelings after a trauma?

Each person's response to a trauma is different. Feelings vary from person to person and last for different amounts of time. These are some of the common things that people experience:

### **Fear and Anxiety**

Following a trauma some people have a fear that the same thing will happen again. They may also be afraid of losing control of their feelings and breaking down.

### **Helplessness**

Some experiences leave people feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Many of us don't think about tragedies that might happen to us, but a trauma can leave us feeling very vulnerable.

### **Anger**

It is common to feel angry about what has happened and with whoever caused the trauma, or allowed it to happen.

### **Guilt**

A trauma may leave someone feeling guilty that they have survived when someone else may have suffered or died. They may also feel guilty that they could have done more to prevent the trauma.

### **Sadness**

There may be sadness about the results of the trauma, especially if it led to death, injury or a loss. Crying can bring a sense of relief.

### **Shame and embarrassment**

The strong feelings after a crisis can be unexpected. Some people feel ashamed about the way they feel, especially if they feel helplessness and need others to support them.

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## **Hope**

It is common for people to hope that things will improve in the future and that their life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after the trauma.

## **Relief**

It is common to feel relieved following a trauma. Relief that it is over and that the danger has gone.

## **What physical problems might I experience?**

Strong emotions are accompanied by changes in the body. After a trauma a person may experience many different physical and psychological sensations. These include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Nightmares
- Poor concentration
- Memory problems
- Difficulty thinking clearly
- Headaches
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sex-drive
- Aches and pains
- Heart beating faster

## What can I do to help myself?

### **Give yourself time**

Give yourself some time to accept what has happened and to learn to live with the consequences of the trauma. You may need time to grieve for what you have lost.

### **Find out what happened**

Make sure you know what actually happened. It is better to face the reality of the trauma rather than relying on what you think may have happened. It can help to attend events associated with the trauma, such as funerals or memorial services, which may help you to come to terms with what has happened.

### **Ask for support**

Do not be afraid to ask friends and family for support. They may need you to ask them for help, because they are not sure how to respond. A times you may want to be alone or just to be with those close to you.

### **Talk it over**

Gradually allow yourself to think about the trauma and to talk about it with others. Take things at a pace that you are comfortable with.

### **Establish a routine**

Even if you don't feel much like eating, try to have regular meals and eat a balanced diet. Taking some gentle exercise can help.

### **Take more care**

After a trauma people are more prone to accidents. Take care around the home and when you are driving.

## What other difficulties might I experience?

In the time after trauma a person may also experience other difficulties. For example feeling cut off from other people, feeling others don't understand, and feeling angry with others for no obvious reason. You may also experience negative feelings about going back to work, loss of motivation and loss of interest in things.

## Is there anything I shouldn't do?

### **Don't bottle up your feelings**

Strong feelings are a natural response to a trauma. Don't feel embarrassed about this. Bottling up your feelings can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Allow yourself to talk about what has happened and how you feel.

Sometimes you will want to be around other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the normal healing process. It is important to remember that different people have different ways of dealing with a trauma.

### **Don't take on too much**

Being active can distract you from what has happened, but allow yourself time to think about what has happened and gradually return to your old activities.

### **Avoid alcohol and drugs**

Although it is tempting to use alcohol or drugs to blot out difficult feelings, these can prevent you from coping with the trauma in a healthy way. Excess use of alcohol or drugs can worsen feelings of depression or cause other health problems.

### **Don't make any major life decisions/changes**

Avoid making major decisions or life changes if you can. These decisions are often stressful and can make problems worse. You may later regret having made some decisions. Take advice from people you can trust.

## When should I seek professional help?

You may receive a lot of help from family and friends, but professional help is available if difficult feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long.

Your GP will usually be the first person to contact. It is common to ask for help if you experience any of the following:

- You have no-one to share your feelings with
- You cannot handle your feelings and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety or nervousness
- You feel that you are not returning to normal after six weeks
- You are isolating yourself from other people more and more
- Those around you suggest you seek help
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep
- You are experiencing distressing, intrusive memories or flashbacks
- Relationships with those close to you are suffering.
- Your work is suffering
- You are having accidents
- You are drinking or smoking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings

## What professional help is available?

Effective treatments are available for someone who is suffering after a trauma. Your GP might suggest that you meet with someone who is experienced in helping people cope with the emotional impact of a trauma. They will usually use a talking treatment, such as counselling or psychotherapy. For example cognitive behavioural therapy has been shown to be helpful.

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You may find that there is support group for people who have been through a similar trauma to yourself. It can be helpful to realise that others have had similar reactions and emotions.

Sometimes medication such as antidepressants can be helpful following a trauma. Your GP will discuss whether this would be helpful for you.

## Coping with trauma in children

It is often hard to know how much we should speak to children after a traumatic event, should they be shielded from horrors or talk honestly about them?

To understand this, we first need to know how children respond to trauma.

## How do children respond to trauma?

Individual children will respond differently to traumatic events. Their age will also affect how they respond. However, children may:

- Become fearful and anxious
- Have trouble sleeping or have nightmares
- Start bed wetting
- Become preoccupied with memories of the event
- Have poor concentration
- Behaviour gets worse
- Complain about headaches or stomach aches
- Have flashbacks
- Have anxieties about death/ may not be able to understand that death is permanent
- Feel responsibility or guilty for the event
- Withdrawal
- Reluctance to go to school



## The following are suggestions that you can use to help children:

**Create a safe environment:** One of the most important steps you can take is to help children feel safe. If possible children should be placed in a familiar environment with people that they feel close to. Keep your child's routine as normal as possible. Children find comfort in having things being consistent and familiar.

**Provide children with reassurance and extra emotional support:** Create an environment in which children feel safe enough to ask questions, express feelings, or just be by themselves. Children often find it easier to talk to other adults rather than their parents, so let your child talk to a trusted relative or professional.

**Be honest with children about what has happened:** Provide accurate information, but make sure it is appropriate for their development level. Very young children may not need to fully understand because they are not old enough to be aware that something bad has happened.

**Monitor exposure to the media:** Do not over expose children to television, radio and social media. This is certainly the case when the images are graphic and live. Use alternative audio and video materials to distract them from live television and social media. You may also channel their feelings and curiosity into some form of helping behaviour. Adolescents will have a better idea of what has happened. It may be appropriate to watch selected news coverage with an adolescent.

**Try to put the event in to perspective:** Although you yourself may be anxious or scared, children need to know that such events are rare. They also need to know that the world is generally a safe place.

**Get help for yourself:** your child will be able to manage their feelings and emotions better if you are not feeling anxious and fearful.

## When should you seek professional help for you child?

Many children and adolescents will display some of the symptoms listed above as a result of trauma. Most children will likely recover after a few weeks with social support and the aid of their families. Other children, however, may develop longer term anxieties.

There are a range of professionals who can advise at this time. If you are concerned you might want to contact one of the following;

- School Nurse
- School Psychologist
- Your GP

## Other sources of information

Royal College of Psychiatrists: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event>

This Way Up: <https://thiswayup.org.au/how-do-you-feel/traumatised/>

Disaster Action: <https://www.disasteraction.org.uk/>

Assist Trauma Care: <http://assisttraumacare.org.uk/>

Mind: <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/coping-with-traumatic-events/>