

Managing Traumatic Stress Symptoms and Stressful Events



Traumatic events are unexpected and negative incidents that suddenly and unexpectedly intrude on our daily lives. Traumatic events are usually defined as situations that are life threatening, or where there is a significant threat to one's physical and psychological integrity. For example, being present during an armed robbery, car accidents, natural disasters, workplace accidents, unprovoked human aggression and assault can trigger traumatic stress reactions. Other less severe but still stressful situations can also trigger traumatic reactions in some people.

The severity of the trauma experienced varies across individuals and situations, and is influenced by such factors as the nature of the traumatic event, available support, concurrent stresses, personality and coping resources. An event that one person may find mildly traumatic may be experienced as severely traumatic by someone else.

Common Reactions to trauma

When you experience a traumatic event it is quite normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions. These reactions often remain after the traumatic event has ceased and can take days or weeks to subside. Sometimes the symptoms of a stress reaction may last longer than days or weeks, depending on the severity and circumstances of the trauma and available follow-up support. Common physical, cognitive (thinking) and emotional reactions indicative of traumatic stress are outlined below:

Physical

- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Disturbed sleep
- Nausea
- Nightmares
- Restlessness
- Headaches
- Excessive alertness and being easily startled

Cognitive (thinking)

- Poor concentration
- Poor attention and memory
- Visual images of the event
- Intrusive thoughts
- Disorientation
- Confusion

Emotional

- Fear
- Numbness and detachment
- Avoidance
- Depression
- Guilt
- Over-sensitivity
- Anxiety and panic
- Withdrawal and tearfulness

These are normal reactions. Although these symptoms can be distressing, they are part of the natural healing process that a person goes through as the mind and body readjust and come to terms with what has occurred. The underlying psychological process is similar to 'digestion': A person has an overwhelming experience that the mind needs to take time to digest, to make some sense out of the event and put it into perspective.

It is quite normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions to traumatic events. These reactions often remain after the traumatic event has ceased and can take days or weeks to subside. With understanding and support from family, friends and colleagues the stress symptoms usually resolve more rapidly. However, sometimes a traumatic event can be so distressing and the ensuing distress so severe that professional assistance may be needed.

There are several things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from stressful events. The following points provide some general advice:

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and acknowledge that you will experience some reaction to it. Excessive denial, or refusal to accept your feelings, can delay the recovery process.
- Remind yourself daily that you are not abnormal and that you can and are coping; don't be angry with yourself for being upset. Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.

- Also avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened; gradually confronting what has happened will assist in coming to terms with the traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings; talk to people and share your experiences with others when opportunities arise. This may feel uncomfortable at times, but talking to understanding people is helpful in dealing with trauma. Your APS Psychologist is highly trained and supportive of your need to talk things through and can be an extra support if needed.
- Try to maintain a normal routine; keep busy and structure your day.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Allow yourself time to rest if experiencing fatigue, and remember that regular exercise is important.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs and the normality of your reactions; help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or need a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- Make time to practice relaxation; you can use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music - this helps your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- If the trauma that you experience stirs up other memories or feelings from a past unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood experiences, try not to let them all blur together; keep them separate and deal with them separately.
- Express your feelings as they arise; whether you discuss them with someone else, or write them down in a diary - expressing them in some way helps the healing process.

When to seek professional assistance

Traumatic stress often leads to sudden changes in our patterns of daily living and the experience of unusually strong emotional reactions. You should seek professional assistance if you:

- are unable to handle the intense feelings or physical sensations
- continue to feel numb and empty and do not have normal feelings
- feel your emotions are not returning to normal after approximately three to four weeks following the incident
- continue to have physical symptoms
- continue to have disturbed sleep and/ or nightmares
- have no person or group with whom you can share your feelings and emotions
- find relationships with friends, family and colleagues seem to be suffering as a result of the trauma
- are becoming accident prone and are increasing the use of alcohol or drugs.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a clinical condition that may develop in some people following exposure to a traumatic event. After an incident, even very major incidents, most people involved find that their stress gradually subsides. A few people may develop more serious ongoing trauma reactions that require more specific professional assistance and treatment. The natural psychological digestion process, referred to above, does not seem to work, or becomes blocked. These more prolonged reactions, which can be disabling and interfere with work and relationships, may warrant a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

These more serious ongoing problems definitely require professional assistance as they do not tend to resolve by themselves with the passage of time.

There are several effective psychological treatments that assist people in resolving post-trauma problems. For some people, medication may help to reduce the physiological arousal and strong emotions that can be stirred up by a critical incident. Your own doctor can advise on treatment options and referral for assessment and/or treatment of trauma reactions.