

Coping With A Major Personal Trauma

This leaflet is designed to help people who have suffered major trauma. You may have survived a major disaster, have been physically or sexually assaulted, perhaps been involved in a bad car accident, had your life threatened, nearly died, or witnessed other people having those experiences. Everybody's reactions to these events are unique. This leaflet outlines the types of reactions that many people have described after suffering such a trauma. It also shows how you can help the normal healing process to occur and how to avoid some pitfalls.

Normal Feelings and Emotions Often Experienced After Trauma

Fear

- Of damage to oneself and/or those we love.
- Of death, of being left alone or having to leave loved ones.
- Of breaking down or losing control.
- Of a similar event happening again.

Anguish and Sadness

- For deaths, injuries and losses of every kind.

Longing

- For all that has gone. 'What if...','If only...'

Guilt

- For being better off than others e.g. for being alive, not injured, having things.
- Regrets about things not done. 'I should have...'

Helplessness

- Crises show up human powerlessness, as well as strengths.

Physical and Mental Sensations

You may feel body sensations with or without the feelings described. Sometimes they may be due to the trauma even when they develop many months after the event.

Some common sensations are: tiredness; sleeplessness; bad dreams or re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks; fuzziness of the mind including loss of memory and concentration; dizziness; palpitations; shakes; difficulty in breathing; choking in the throat and chest; nausea; diarrhoea; muscular tension which may lead to pain e.g. headaches, neck and backaches; dragging in the womb and menstrual disorders; changes in sexual interest. Physical pain from injuries may take a long time to go - you may be in extreme discomfort, which can make people feel low, irritable, tired and hopeless about the future.

Accidents are more frequent after severe stresses. Alcohol and drug intake may increase due to the extra tensions and the wish to forget.

Family and Social Relationships

New friendships and group bonds may come into being. On the other hand, strains in relationships may appear. For a while, you may be dependant on someone during recovery; you may not be used to this. The good feelings in giving and receiving may be replaced by conflict. You may feel that too little or the wrong things are offered, or that you cannot give as much as is expected.

Shame

- For having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needing others.
- For not having reacted as one would have wished.
- For not having acted as a man, or woman 'should'.
- For not having been brave enough.

Anger

- At what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen.
- At the injustice and senselessness of it all.
- At the shame and indignities.
- At the lack of proper understanding by others.
- 'Why me?'

Hope

- For the future, for better times, to get over this.

Nature heals through allowing these feelings to come out. This will not lead to loss of control of the mind, but stopping these feelings may lead to nervous and physical problems. Crying can give some relief. Talking about these feelings - putting the feelings into words - may also help.

The following may make the events and the feelings about them easier to bear:

Numbness

Your mind may allow the trauma to be felt only slowly. At first you may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream, something that has not really happened. This is part of the shock reaction. Sometimes people can unhelpfully be viewed as not having been affected, or uncaring or indifferent.

Activity

Keeping busy and helping others may give some relief. However, over-activity can be detrimental if it diverts attention from the help you might need for yourself, or the rest you might need in order to physically recover.

Reality

Accepting the reality e.g. attending funerals, thinking about losses, returning to the scene, may help you to come to terms with the event.

Going over the trauma

As you allow the trauma more into your mind, there is a need to think about it, to talk about it, and at night to dream about it over and over again. Children play and draw about the event. These phenomena may be part of the process of making sense of what has happened. Sometimes it can be hard to accept that the trauma was part of the tragedy, violence or senselessness of life and perhaps something over which you had little or no control. You may well be asking the question 'Why me?' Getting some answers may help, but sometimes it is impossible to get all the answers. You might also ask: 'Why not me?'

Privacy...

In order to deal with these feelings, you may find it necessary at times to be alone, or just with family and close friends.

...and Support

On the other hand, it can be a relief to receive other people's physical and emotional support. Try not to reject it. Sharing with others who have had similar experiences can feel good. Barriers can break down and closer relationships can develop.

Activity and numbness (blocking of feelings) may be over-used and may hinder your recovery. Sometimes the flashbacks, nightmares and other disturbing experiences can carry on for months.

If problems persist some of the following may help:

- Talking to people (friends, relations, professionals) about your experiences, the traumatic incident and how it has affected you.
- Giving yourself set times in the day to think (and perhaps write) about the incident, and times to try and forget about it and do some other activity.
- Thinking and talking about how your beliefs about yourself and the world in general may have changed.
- Reducing your arousal levels e.g. relaxation techniques for nervousness and fear. Doing some physical activity (sport, exercise) can help reduce tension or anger.
- Try not to avoid situations that remind you of the trauma-'get back on the horse as quickly as possible', providing it is safe to do so. You may need to do this on a step-by-step basis.
- Try to think of any positives that have come from your experience.

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This leaflet was written by Dr Guy Holmes, Clinical Psychologist, and is based upon the experiences of people who have suffered major traumas in their lives.

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Copies can be downloaded from www.shropsych.org or obtained from:

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