



**Avon Partnership**  
Occupational Health Service

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# Coping after a traumatic event

## A guide for healthcare staff

This booklet has been prepared to help healthcare staff understand the ways in which you, your colleagues and others typically respond to a traumatic event. It also provides information about how to cope with these responses and outlines the sorts of things which may help to reduce the likelihood of experiencing unpleasant symptoms in the long term.



*Investing in good health at work*



Avon Partnership NHS Occupational Health Service is hosted by University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust, also partnered with North Bristol NHS Trust and Weston Area Health Trust.

## Traumatic events

The types of traumatic events experienced by healthcare professionals vary considerably. There may be a large incident involving many casualties or experiences associated with a single patient which lead to personal distress.. What is important to remember is that it is not the event which determines how individuals react; it is rather how the event is perceived by him or her.

The effects of these experiences may be significant and will vary depending on the individual's history, previous experiences and the circumstances of the traumatic event. Experiencing trauma in the workplace is not uncommon and for this reason it is important that staff have access to support when they need it. This would include speaking to your line manager within the first week after the event and accessing support and information if you need it.

## What to expect

A great deal of research in recent years has led to a greater understanding about the ways in which traumatic events affect the safety or wellbeing of individuals, their families, colleagues or friends. These effects often vary from person to person, but are all normal responses to severe stress.

When we experience a stressful or threatening event, our bodies automatically respond in a way that helps us to protect ourselves or to escape from the situation. This response may include an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and breathing rate. Common reactions may also include intense fear, disbelief, numbness, anger, confusion, pounding heart, trembling or shaking, fast breathing, sweating and nausea.

It is also common for individuals to continue to react for a number of days, weeks or months following the event. Some of the most commonly reported reactions include:

- Anxiety or fear of being alone.
- Being easily startled by loud noises or sudden movements which remind you of the traumatic event.
- Flashbacks or dreams, whereby images of the event come suddenly into your mind for no apparent reason.
- Mentally re-experiencing the event.
- Physical symptoms such as trembling, shaking, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, headaches, sweating and tiredness
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including loss of appetite or changes in libido
- Sadness or feelings of loss or aloneness.
- Shock or disbelief at what has happened.
- Feeling numb or unreal.
- Detached from other people.
- Sleep problems, insomnia, waking in the night, dreams and nightmares.
- Problems thinking, concentrating or retaining information.
- Pre-occupation with the traumatic event.
- Guilt and self-doubt for not having reacted differently during the traumatic event.
- Feeling responsible for another person's loss, injury or death.
- Guilt because you seem to be less affected by the traumatic event than others.
- Anger or irritability at what has happened, at the senselessness of it all, often asking 'Why me?' which may impact on your relationships.

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions and this is not an exhaustive list. All of these are normal responses to a traumatic event; they are our body's and mind's way of understanding and coping with severe stress. In most cases, these symptoms will subside over a short period of time, over a few days, weeks or months. If they do not subside after several weeks make sure you seek out support.

## What to do immediately afterwards...

We have put together a list of advice that may be helpful directly after the traumatic event:

- Make sure that you are with people. If you live alone consider asking a friend or relative to stay with you.
- Talking about it may help you to make sense of the event.
- Try to avoid using alcohol, sedatives or sleeping pills, they will only dull the experience and not allow you to deal with your feelings.
- Restrict your use of stimulants, such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola or cigarettes. You do not want to make your body even more agitated than it already is.
- Accidents are more common after severe stress, so take extra care especially when driving and using machinery and be more careful around the house.
- Allow yourself time to deal with the memories. There may be some aspects of the experience which will be difficult to forget.
- Try to eat something even if you have no appetite, as extreme stress can 'burn-up' a lot of the body's energy and lead to weight loss and weakness.
- If you cannot sleep, try getting up and doing something relaxing until you feel tired, instead of lying in bed tossing and turning.

## How to handle the next few days

- Remind yourself that your reactions are a normal response will pass in time.
- Try to re-establish your normal routines as soon as possible, but do not demand too much of yourself. You may need to gradually introduce yourself to tasks which seem difficult.
- If you feel uncomfortable, afraid or anxious, take some long, slow abdominal breaths; remind yourself that you are safe and that the trauma is over.
- Make sure that you are doing things that are relaxing and enjoyable.
- Continue to talk to your family, friends and colleagues about the traumatic event because this will help you to get over your feelings.
- Even if you feel a little detached from other people, do not reject their support.
- Make sure you know the facts of what happened rather than relying on your memory
- Work on your general stress levels by ensuring that you have adequate sleep, a good diet and regular exercise. Practice relaxation exercises to help counter nervous tension.

If you know someone who has experienced a traumatic event and has had to take time off work, it is important to recognise that their general self-confidence may have been affected. They may need your support and the support of the Trust when returning to work.

## Summary:

- X **DON'T** keep your feelings bottled up.
- X **DON'T** avoid talking about the experience.
- X **DON'T** make the mistake of thinking it's weak to show how you are feeling
- X **DON'T** expect to get over the event quickly.
- ✓ Make sure you eat well, rest, sleep, keep active, and spend time with family and friends
- ✓ Be aware that your concentration may be affected which may impact on your work-performance, driving and home-life.
- ✓ Talk to someone
- ✓ Try and mix with people who care about you
- ✓ Give yourself time and permission to process what's happened

## When you need to seek further help

As mentioned previously, usually reactions to traumatic events decrease over time. However, sometimes they continue for too long in which case it is important to ask for help. You should consider this if:

- You feel overwhelmed, constantly on edge, exhausted, are unable to sleep and have nightmares.
- After a month or so you feel numb or have to keep active in order to ward off distress.
- You have not spoken to anyone about what has happened because you find it difficult to open up or because you have no supportive family, friends or colleagues.
- You are resorting to drugs, alcohol, medication, smoking or food as ways of coping.
- You find yourself becoming uncontrollably angry, irritable or tearful which is also affecting your relationships.
- Your memory and levels of concentration are not returning to normal.

## Remember!

**Anyone can experience the reactions described in this leaflet**

**Please talk your manager or supervisor about how you feel so they can understand how the event has affected you and help you access additional support if necessary .**

**Sharing how you feel is a way of actively coping with what's happened so you can go on safely caring for others.**

**Consider giving a copy of this leaflet to your manager and colleagues so they understand and can be supportive**

**If these experiences continue to disrupt your life, seek advice from your GP or Staff Support on the following number:**

### CONTACT

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This booklet was developed in collaboration with University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust Psychological Health Services, based on a document developed by the Health Psychology Department, Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.