

Coping with trauma

What is trauma?

A trauma is an extremely stressful event or incident, usually of a threatening nature. It is likely to have a pervasive impact on anyone experiencing it. Examples include serious accidents, rape, crime, natural and man-made disasters, witnessing an unexpected or violent death, etc. Less dramatic events and incidents can have a similar effect if they exceed a person's capacity to cope, or if they are perceived by the person as a threat to their physical or psychological integrity.

Common reactions

People involved in overwhelming disasters and incidents often report similar reactions. Knowing about these reactions can be useful, because it can help us see that we aren't going crazy or that we aren't weak and inadequate. Such experience is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Also, each individual may deal with trauma in a slightly different way, because each situation is unique. It could also be that there is a delayed reaction, or, that you experience the symptoms of shock sometime after the event. It may be that it is only after you feel safe that the real impact of what has happened starts to hit you.

Some signs of trauma or shock that may occur

- you are likely to experience many different emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt, etc. In the immediate aftermath you may feel vulnerable, the world might seem threatening, and the future uncertain. Fear and panic are very understandable. You may feel angry because of what has happened to you, angry because you do not feel in control of your life any more, angry with others for making you suffer either deliberately or unwittingly. You may start blaming yourself for what happened and feel guilty about the event.
- Or you may experience survivor guilt (guilt over surviving while others did not, although they are not responsible for it in any way)
- the experience could trigger physical symptoms such as palpitations, sleeping difficulties, poor concentration, agitation, dizziness etc.
- you may experience episodes of repeated reliving aspects of the trauma in the form of intense memories (called flashbacks), nightmares and frightening thoughts. You may also experience physical reactions to situations that remind

you of the traumatic event. This could disturb your day-to-day activities and functioning, and result in a lack of interest in normal activities

- at other times you may experience a sense of numbness, emotional blunting or feel that you don't care about anything. You may feel detached from other people and frustrated if they don't seem to understand how you feel
- traumatic events or incidents could rekindle feelings of previous trauma and loss, which have perhaps been buried or denied for many years
- trauma may lead to a reassessment of the meaning of your life, because it can overturn so much that was previously held dear.

It is important to realise that any of these reactions are understandable and normal responses to an abnormal and overwhelming event.

Helping your recovery

- it can be very helpful to talk about what has happened with someone you trust, such as a family member or a friend
- you may discover that you want to go over the event repeatedly. Talking about your feelings and the experience many times will help you to make sense of what has happened. It will also help you to make it less overwhelming
- write down your thoughts and feelings. This can serve as a coping mechanism and a way of expressing your emotions
- re-establish, if possible, familiar routines and activities. This will help you to restore order into your life, and allow you to feel more in control
- try to access positive memories to counterbalance the negative ones. Trauma can make this difficult, but your health depends on balancing negative memories with positive ones
- list your priorities and deal with them one at a time
- leave important decisions till later
- seek professional help if you are struggling.

Recovery

Recovery takes time. Like a physical wound, a psychological wound cannot be forced to heal quickly. There are some common elements in this period of healing, as you move from victim to survivor:

- you acquire more control in remembering the event. Memory and emotions are joined. The memory is re-examined and then filed away
- the trauma may still affect you, but it is no longer overwhelming
- the troublesome symptoms become more tolerable and predictable and gradually fade away
- you are able to reconnect with others and move on with your life
- you are able to give some new meaning to both the trauma and yourself as a trauma survivor
- for some it can lead to a reappraisal of their basic priorities and values, which may result in important positive life changes
- it may prompt some people to want to help others in similar circumstances

Helping a friend who has had a trauma or crisis

When supporting someone who has been traumatised, the most important thing you can do is offer to 'be' there with them. Immediately after a trauma, people are likely to be in shock and may not be able to talk about the incident or their feelings. It is important to be sensitive to what they most need at that time, whether it is practical, or listening if they want to talk.

They may not want to be 'debriefed' immediately after the event, as there is some evidence that this can reinforce the trauma and make it harder to deal with later.

If you are supporting a friend who has had a trauma or crisis, you may find it useful to look at a leaflet in this series: Helping someone you are concerned about.

How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:
<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling service or you can contact us at:
cmh@mdx.ac.uk

Further leaflets in this series

Abuse
Addictive behaviour
Anxiety and panic
Bereavement and loss
Coming to Britain to study
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
Depression
Eating disorders
Exam anxiety
Helping someone you are concerned about
Managing stress
Mature students
Mental health
Mindfulness
Presentation skills
Relaxation
Work difficulties and study blocks
Working in groups

Acknowledgement

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