

Coping with a Major Incident

The aim of this leaflet is to enable you to understand what may happen in the days and months after the major incident/disaster, to give you some control over events.

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The aftermath of the incident

Overall people are resilient and most people will recover without long term problems. However, what you have seen and heard may have an effect upon you. Although you may not have been physically injured, coming to terms with these events can be difficult.

Each person's experience of and feelings after the traumatic event are unique. The incident may arouse powerful and upsetting feelings, although these settle in time without professional help.

How you might be affected

After any major incident, it is normal to experience a number of stress reactions that may continue for some weeks. After an event where there is loss, it is also normal to experience grief and mourning may be felt.

Traumatic events are shocking and emotionally overwhelming situations. People directly involved or those who lost loved ones may be most affected. However, witnesses of these events, friends and relatives may also be affected.

How you might feel immediately after the event

Shock

- Feeling stunned, dazed or numb.
- Feeling cut off from what is going on around you and your feelings.

Denial

- Finding it difficult to accept that this has happened.
- Behaving as if it hasn't happened.

Over several hours or days, the feelings of shock gradually fade and other reactions may take their place.

Reactions commonly experienced within the first few weeks of a traumatic event include:

- Tearfulness and sadness.
- Fear and anxiety.
- Feeling numb or dreamlike.
- Unpleasant thoughts and images about the event.
- Nightmares.
- Reluctance to discuss the event or wanting to talk about it all the time.
- Sleep difficulties.
- Feeling helpless.
- Feeling angry or irritable.
- Wanting to avoid people, places or activities that remind you of the event.
- Feeling guilty or to blame for some aspect of the trauma.
- Concentration and memory problems.
- Tiredness.
- Headaches and bodily pain.
- Young people and children often become unsettled in their behaviour. They may act more aggressive or fearful than usual.

They may become clingy and demanding. They may also 're-play' the trauma in their play.

These reactions are normal, understandable and usually reduce gradually over time.

What can I do that's helpful?

Taking each day at a time is essential after any traumatic event. It is important to establish a sense of safety and security. It is often helpful to try to:

- Be patient with yourself - it may take weeks or months to learn to live with what has happened.
- Try to re-establish your usual routines such as going to work and school.
- Spend time with family, friends, and peers, who may be able to help to support you through this difficult time.
- Children need support and reassurance from trusted adults who can help the child to feel safe and to talk about their fears and worries, as they wish.
- You may find it helpful to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you and to go to memorial services or funerals.
- Take good care of yourself physically, including eating well, exercising regularly, reducing alcohol and/or drug use and getting enough sleep to reduce stress and prevent physical illness.
- Talk it over when you feel ready and comfortable to do so. Don't worry if you get upset or cry while doing this.
- Take care - after a trauma people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful with regards to driving and around the home.
- Limit your exposure to pictures of the event if they are distressing to your child.

What would not be helpful?

- Don't bottle up your feelings - strong feelings are normal and bottling them up will make you feel worse. Let yourself talk as you feel ready.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol - this can help numb your feelings but can stop you from coming to terms with what has happened.
- Don't make any major life changes - your judgement may not be at it's best and you may make decisions that you later regret.

How would I decide if I need professional help?

Most people who have encountered a traumatic event find that their symptoms subside over time. However, reactions and recovery times vary for different people.

If your symptoms do not improve over time and continue to concern you (e.g., because they are causing difficulties in your relationships or in your work) it may be beneficial to seek professional support.

Where do I find help?

In the first instance, contact your GP. Your GP can give you advice and refer you or your child to someone experienced in working with these difficulties if you both feel this would be helpful.

Alternatively, you may wish to contact a helpline for advice. This could be in the form of a helpline set up by the local authority to offer guidance, or it could be one of the following support groups and caring organisations:

- **Disaster Action** - Provides support and guidance to those affected by disasters.
Telephone: 01483 799 066
www.disasteraction.org.uk
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** - Offers counselling, advice and support throughout the UK.
Telephone: 0870 167 1677 (Monday - Friday 9.30 am to 5 pm).
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk
- **British Red Cross** - Lead support agency for family assistance.
Telephone: 0870 170 7000
www.redcross.org.uk
- **The Samaritans** - Offers a 24-hour helpline for those in crisis.
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90
www.samaritans.org.uk
- **Assist Trauma Care** - offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma.
Telephone: 01788 560800 (Helpline)

For useful information on coping with trauma see the following websites:

- International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies
www.istss.org
- Royal College of Psychiatrists Mental Health Information
www.rcpsych.ac.uk
- The UK Trauma Group
www.uktrauma.org.uk

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