



# Responding To Traumatic Events

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Guide for Individuals



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# • Guide for Individuals

Traumatic events come out of the blue and by their very nature, are shocking and unexpected. They can take many forms, including an accident, sudden death, a workplace incident, suicide, assault, violence, and an act of terrorism. An incident does not have to result in physical injury for it to be traumatic, and these events do not only affect those who were present at the time. Whatever the nature of a traumatic event, your experiences and reactions will be very personal to you. The aim of this document is to help you understand:

- Normal reactions to trauma
- The do's and don'ts of responding to trauma
- Sources of additional support

## **Normal reactions to trauma**

Traumatic events can show us how fragile life is and that in some circumstances, we have little or no control. This can leave us feeling shocked and saddened, and often, extremely vulnerable. However, it is important to remember that these reactions are completely normal. They are simply a normal person's way of coping with an abnormal and unexpected event.

Understanding what is happening when you react to a traumatic event will help you be less fearful and better able to handle things. These reactions may last for several days or even a few weeks and may include the following:

### **Feelings**

- Numbness and detachment
- Anxiety, depression and sadness
- Guilt for being better off than others, or surviving an event
- Regret or shame for not reacting as you would have wished
- Bitterness or anger; at what has happened, at whoever caused it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all and a sense of "why me?"
- Fear of returning to where the incident took place
- Fear of a similar event happening again
- Fear of yourself, or loved ones, being harmed
- Fear of being on your own, or having to leave loved ones
- Worrying about breaking down or losing control

## Behaviour

- Inability to concentrate, or make simple decisions
- Impulsive actions, or searching for quick fixes
- Irritability, anger, or violence
- Disturbed sleep, or upsetting thoughts, dreams and nightmares
- Loss of interest in your family, friends and daily routine
- Changes in sexual interest
- Loss of confidence

## Physical

- Headaches, nausea, stomach pains, tightness in the chest, muscle pain - generally feeling unwell
- Listlessness and feeling tired
- Increased sensitivity to noise, or people
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, edginess
- Loss of appetite
- Increased dependency on smoking, drinking, drugs, etc.

## The Do's and Don'ts

- **Don't attempt to numb the pain** with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes or coffee. These will create more problems in the long run.
- **Don't bottle things up.** You will recover from the event better if you allow feelings to come out. Talk, cry, share your thoughts, write them in a journal - whatever helps you.
- **Don't force your exposure to the reality.** Limit your time around the sights and sounds of what happened. Don't dwell on TV, radio, or newspaper reports on the event.
- **Don't make big life changes** or snap decisions until you are sure you have fully recovered from the event.
- **Don't try to fight recurring thoughts,** dreams or flashbacks. These are normal and will decrease over time.
- **Do understand that everyone reacts differently to trauma** – don't question why you are reacting differently to someone else.
- **Do give yourself time** and permission to feel out of sorts, anxious or sad. You've been through an ordeal and will have good and bad days. Don't be discouraged - it's part of the healing process.
- **Do look after yourself.** Take time out to rest, sleep, think and care for yourself. Eat healthy meals. Be careful not to skip meals or to overeat.
- **Do maintain your routine** as much as possible. Make as many daily decisions as possible – this will give you a feeling of control over your life.
- **Do be more careful** around the house and when you are out and about. Drive more carefully. Accidents are more common after severe stress.
- **Do express your needs** and emotions clearly and honestly. It can be useful to find one person to talk to on a regular basis, so they can give you feedback on how you're doing.



- **Do spend time with others who care** - don't isolate yourself. You might also want to share your feelings with others who are affected and check to see how they're doing.
- **Do let children who are affected talk** about their emotions and express themselves in games and drawings.
- **Do remember that you are basically the same person** that you were before the event.
- **Do remember that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.**
- **Do remember that support is available**, if you are finding things difficult.

### **When to seek extra support**

If you experience any of the following, it may be worth seeking additional support:

- You cannot handle your intense feelings, emotions or bodily reactions
- You continue to feel numb, tense, confused, or exhausted
- You feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks
- You continue to have nightmares and a poor sleeping pattern
- You keep making mistakes, or have accidents
- You are smoking, drinking or taking drugs to excess
- Your relationships suffer
- Your work performance suffers
- You have no person, or group, with whom to share your emotions and you feel the need to do so

### **Where to go for extra support**

- Your GP
- Your workplace Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or counselling service
- Your Human Resources or Occupational Health department
- Local support groups
- Library or bookshop – there are many useful publications on the subject of trauma

**FREEPHONE: 0800 243 458**

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