

COPING WITH TRAUMA

Life can be very unpredictable. One minute you can be going about your business as usual. The next minute, with no warning, you can be exposed to a traumatic event.

EXAMPLES OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS:

- Serious injury
- House fire
- Hostage-taking
- Natural disaster
- Fatal accident
- Suicide
- Robbery
- Assault

These events shock your senses. You experience dreadful sights, sounds, smells or other sensations.



UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES CAN I BE AFFECTED?

There are many different ways in which you can be exposed to a traumatic event. For example:

- You were directly involved
- A friend, colleague or family member was involved
- You were a witness or tried to help
- You escaped being involved by luck
- You feared that someone you knew was involved, even though, as it turned out, they were not
- You weren't involved at all, but news of the event brought to mind a tragedy you had experienced in the past

To any of these circumstances, it is likely that you will have some reaction.



WHAT ARE SOME REACTIONS THAT I MIGHT EXPERIENCE?

No two people react the same way. However, there are common types of reactions:

Shutting out Reactions

Some reactions shut out the painful thoughts and feelings connected to the event. Examples include:

- Not wanting to talk about the event
- Can't recall important details of it
- Avoid people, places and objects that remind you of the tragedy
- If the event was job-related, you may have thoughts about quitting
- Being preoccupied with tasks that 'take your mind off things'
- Feeling as if you have no feelings at all about anything or anyone
- Withdrawing from others
- Alcohol or drug use
- Loss of interest in usual activities

Experiencing Reactions

Some reactions involve experiencing unwanted and painful thoughts, feelings and memories. For example:

- During the day, your mind may drift to images of the traumatic event
- Disturbing dreams or nightmares
- Sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring
- Distress at reminders of the event
- More cautious or safety-conscious than usual with yourself or others
- Being distracted by these thoughts can make it hard to concentrate or to remember things
- Intense waves of emotions including:
 - Shame at having been helpless
 - Anger at those responsible
 - Anger at those who don't deserve it
 - Guilt for how you thought you acted or for having escaped
 - Sadness about losses
 - Fear that the traumatic event will happen again

Physiological Reactions

Your body may express a variety of physical reactions including:

- Tightness in chest
- Racing heart
- Appetite change
- Difficulty breathing
- Aches and pains
- Easily startled
- Difficulty sleeping
- Low energy level

HOW LONG DO THESE REACTIONS LAST?

The length of time varies with each individual. Generally, over time the reactions fade in frequency and intensity.

Sometimes the painful thoughts and feelings do not show up until weeks or months after the event, just when you thought you had gotten over it all. This might make you fear that you're suddenly "going crazy".

ARE THESE REACTIONS SIGNS OF MENTAL ILLNESS?

Distressing reactions in the wake of a traumatic event are not signs of mental illness or "weakness of character". It just means that you are hurting from an extremely bad experience. It would be highly unusual if you did not have any reactions.

On the other hand, sometimes the reactions are disruptive enough that professional support is needed.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF?

- Get it off your chest. Talk about your thoughts and feelings to someone with whom you feel comfortable. Burying your feelings can cause problems later on.
- Tell others how you would like to be treated by them, and what, if anything, they can do for you. If people don't know what to do or say, they may feel awkward and avoid you.
- Adequate rest, exercise and nutrition will help you handle the stresses and strains caused by the event.
- Avoid alcohol and drug abuse.
- It may be less stressful for you to avoid news reports of the incident.
- If asked by the news media to make a statement, and you don't feel up to it, you can always say "no".

HOW CAN A FAMILY HELP A TRAUMATIZED MEMBER?

- Don't deny the event happened or try to minimize its impact on the traumatized members.
- Be patient and prepared to hear the "trauma story" repeated many times.
- Don't isolate or withdraw from the traumatized members. Encourage "togetherness" in all aspects of family life.
- Show love and caring
- Although others in the family will be affected by the stories and emotions of the traumatized member, do not blame him or her for upsetting the family.
- Think of the traumatic event as a "family problem" and decide on ways that members can help each other out through the difficult times ahead.
- If extra support is needed from outside the family, this should be arranged without delay.
- Avoid alcohol and substance abuse, and family violence.

WHEN DO I NEED PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT?

It's always a good idea to talk to a mental health professional if you're bothered by the traumatic event. This helps prevent more serious problems from developing, and helps you get on with your life as soon as possible. Consider professional support if:

- Since the event, it's hard for you to do your job, to be creative, to parent, or to initiate and maintain relationships with other people
- Your reactions still bother you or others
- after a month
- The painful thoughts and feelings do not show up for a month or longer after the event
- You have issues of fear, shame or guilt
- connected to your involvement in the event.



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