



# Coping with trauma

Your reactions to extremely stressful experiences



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**NORTHUMBRIA**  
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# Where to find additional help

**You may be able to overcome your reactions to extreme stress on your own.  
Members of your family and colleagues at work can provide practical help and support.**

Northumbria Police provides an Occupational Health Service.

These confidential services provide another way of finding help to reduce reactions caused by extremely stressful events:

## **Occupational Health Unit**

Occupational Health Counsellors

## **Telephone Numbers**

Ext: 64850 External Dial: 0191 221 9850

## **Outside Agencies**

For information on organisations external to Northumbria Police who can provide support, contact the Occupational Health Counsellors.

## **Your General Practitioner**

Your GP will be able to offer you help and advice following involvement in a traumatic event and may be able to refer you to a local specialist.

# When to ask for help

**Reactions to traumatic events usually fade as time passes. Some events, however, can be extremely distressing, may go on for a long time, or have a special and personal meaning for you, and feelings may surface at a later date for no obvious reason. You should consider seeking further help if:**

- Your intense feelings or body sensations continue to be overwhelming, or your feelings are not falling into place.
- Memories, dreams and images of the event continue to intrude on your consciousness making you feel frightened, deprived of rest and unable to function as you did before.
- You can find no relief from tension, confusion and exhaustion. You find yourself getting uncontrollably angry.
- Your work performance is affected.
- You have become overactive to avoid feeling upset.
- You have nightmares or cannot sleep.
- You have no person or group with whom to openly share your feelings.
- Your relationships are suffering badly or people keep commenting on how much you have changed.
- You find yourself more accident prone.
- Smoking, eating and drinking habits change for the worse.
- You find yourself relying more on medication.
- You feel "burnt out".



# Introduction

**This booklet has been written to help you when you have been involved in a potentially traumatic event.**

This could include events such as:-

- A serious incident or accident
- A disaster
- A personal event involving members of your family or colleagues
- An event that has happened to you personally i.e. an assault or road traffic accident
- Or an event where you have feared for your life or physical safety.

By their very nature, these events are distressing. Psychological and physical reactions that follow such experiences are usually intense; they often confuse, frighten and shock. You may also be surprised by reactions that are unfamiliar and seemingly out of character. However, certain reactions are normal after involvement in traumatic events.

This booklet details the common reactions which are experienced and offers advice to help you understand and cope. It can be used again and again whenever necessary.

# Some feelings you may experience

## **Sadness**

Deep feelings of sadness are common, especially when tragic deaths have occurred, when someone is injured or extreme damage has been caused.

## **Helplessness**

A feature of traumatic events is that they can be overpowering. Such crises can draw out the best in us but they can also make us feel powerless or unable to help. In addition, some of the feelings and reactions you may experience after the event may also make you feel helpless and out of control.

## **Re-living the Event**

The impressions left by an event may be so strong that it is relived long after it actually happened. Flashbacks and dreams are common, as is the re-experiencing of sounds, tastes and smells associated with the event and the feelings that surfaced during or after the event. Sometimes, too, you may suddenly start to feel as if the original event is about to happen again. Re-experiencing can be very distressing and frightening, but this is not unusual.

## **Numbness**

The shock of an event can leave you feeling numb and emotionally exhausted. Feelings you used to have may be blocked for a time and your ability to deal with day to day pressures is reduced. You may feel like withdrawing from other people, giving up interests, sports and activities you used to enjoy.

# What you can do to help yourself

**The most important thing is not to bottle up feelings and memories you have about what happened however shocked and surprised you may be.**

**To reduce the impact of a stressful event you may find it helpful to:**

- Take time to reflect on the event and find ways to relax. Try and get enough rest and sleep.
- Express your emotions and let your family and friends share your grief. Express your needs clearly to them.
- Be aware that your family and friends will experience similar feeling to yourself. Allow them to talk about their emotions and express themselves.
- Try to maintain existing routines and think of other things.
- Make sure you know what did happen rather than rely on what you think happened. Let yourself experience the feelings you have about what happened and talk to others about it.
- Take every opportunity to review the experience within yourself and with others. Allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care.
- Avoid using alcohol as a method of coping.
- Try to remain physically active.
- Think of the meaning of life following the event and continue to make plans for your future. Help others.

Some of these ways of helping yourself appear to contradict one another, but you should find time and space for each. It will take time to come to terms with your experience – try to be patient.

Accidents are more likely to happen after severe stress.

You need to be especially careful when driving, at work and around the house.

# Who is most at risk?

**No-one knows in advance how you or anyone else may react to a particular stressful event. What happens after extreme stress is to some extent dependent on what was happening in your life before the event, what you had to do during the incident; how you dealt with the demands of the situation and some early reactions you may have had to it.**

For instance, if your life prior to the event had been troubled through difficulties within your own family, feeling alone, unexpected changes or upheavals, loss or bereavements or poor health, your reactions may be more marked than had your circumstances been more favourable.

If during the event you as an individual became aware of your vulnerability or mortality, the event may have a significant impact on you.

If, when looking back on the traumatic event, you recognise feeling as if you were not part of the event, acted as if you were on 'automatic pilot' or you may have felt so confused during the incident you had difficulties making sense of what was happening, it is possible you may experience some difficulties, processing what has happened.

To some extent, how you react after an incident will be dependent on what you were required to do at the time. The more unusual your duties, the longer the duration of exposure and how close you felt to, or personally identified with the victims, are important considerations.

Anger and irritability, jumpiness, trouble with concentrating, high arousal upon exposure to reminders of an event may suggest the impact on you could prove more marked or last for longer than you might expect.

## **Tension and Restlessness**

You may feel wound up, making it difficult to rest, fall asleep or have peace of mind. Poor memory for events and names goes along with finding it hard to concentrate.

## **Fear and Avoidance**

New fears and worries may appear in your life. These may be about going out of doors, being afraid to leave those you care for most, or being left by them. Other fears may be about breaking down, losing control, having unbearably intense feelings, or worries, that the original incident may happen again.

You may also find that you wish to avoid some or all situations that remind you of parts of the trauma and when you are confronted with a situation that reminds you of the trauma you may feel anxious and upset.

## **Hypervigilance and Jumpiness**

Hypervigilance describes what you experience when you are especially watchful of your environment and look for potential danger, even when there is no obvious need to do so. You may feel an exaggerated concern for your own safety and be overprotective to those people who are close to you.

You may also find yourself more sensitive to noises and smells around you and feel more on edge and jumpy that you were before the trauma.

## **Emotionality**

You may find that you are more emotional than usual finding that you become tearful more easily and more often than before the trauma. Crying does help. It is usually better to express your feelings than to hold back tears.

## **Anger**

Intense feelings of anger may be caused by seemingly minor events. You may feel this is “out of character”. Relatives, friends and colleagues may comment on changes in you since the event. More constant anger may be felt about the injustice and senselessness of what happened or towards those who appear to have caused or let an event happen.

## **Guilt**

Rather than feeling relieved at having survived when others were killed or injured, it is not uncommon to feel guilty. This takes the form of wondering if more could be done to help. You may question whether you deserve to have survived when seemingly more deserving people were not so lucky.

In addition you may feel guilty for something you did or didn't do or feel somehow responsible for what happened.

## **Longing**

You may find yourself longing for things to be as they were before the trauma and yearning for all that has gone. Often this can include wishing you were the same as before the trauma instead of experiencing the feelings and emotions detailed in this booklet.

## **Relationships**

Stresses and strains previously taken as being part of life can appear unbearable to someone who has been through a traumatic event. A tendency to withdraw from close contact with relatives, friends and colleagues is sometimes observed, leading to additional personal problems. Relationship difficulties of long standing may get worse along with a growing sense that “nobody can possibly understand what I am going through”.

This mistaken view is a major obstacle to seeking help and support at a time of need. Other people are your main source of comfort at a time of crisis.

# How you can be affected physically

**As well as emotional strain, you may be affected physically.**

**This may occur very soon after a traumatic event but can develop many months later.**

**Some of these are:**

## **Tiredness, Exhaustion and Tension**

Traumatic events place intense and prolonged strain on your body. This does not always stop when an incident is over. Your body may continue to be physically and emotionally over aroused leading to tiredness at first and later exhaustion. Sometimes the strain under which you are placed expresses itself in muscle tension. This can be accompanied by symptoms ranging from general stiffness and tension, to specific localised pains, headaches and dizziness.

Emotional reactions are often associated with short or long term bodily responses such as palpitations of the heart, sweating and mild tremors. These may develop into periodic shaking, stomach pains, problems of digestion, or panic attacks. Medical treatments can provide some relief from these reactions. It is important to keep in mind, however, that onset may be linked to the traumatic event and that talking it through with someone could be an essential step towards finding long term relief.

## **REMEMBER**

You may experience some or all these reactions only occasionally or all the time. Typically, reactions start to lessen within a week or so, before fading away altogether over a longer period of time. If they do not, then it is important that you should take the initiative and talk to someone about your reactions to extreme stress.



This booklet was prepared by Northumbria Police Occupational Health Unit and is based upon a similar booklet produced by The Lincolnshire Joint Emergency Services Initiative.