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**University Counselling Service**

# **Surviving Trauma and Disaster**

A traumatic event may be a major, public disaster that affects many people and involves loss of life such as war, earthquake, or Tsunami, or it may be an event that affects an individual and has meaning for that person, such as a car accident or an experience of physical or sexual assault.

This guide offers some information about common responses to trauma and ways of supporting yourself while you try to come to terms with what has happened. It also suggests when further help may be useful and where to get help.

The information may also be useful if you are supporting a friend or a colleague who has experienced trauma or if you have responsibility for students or staff.

### **It will not happen to me**

A traumatic experience lies outside the normal range of life experiences. It may be sudden, overwhelming, and unexpected. In these situations, our normal coping strategies are not sufficient, and an emergency system kicks in to help us process what has happened. Nightmares, flashbacks - (recalling aspects of the traumatic experience, sometimes in vivid and distressing detail) - and significant preoccupation with the event/what-happened are part of this process and could be seen as attempts to construct a coherent "story", so that eventually we can assimilate the memories that we have sufficiently to put the event to one side. As we start to do this, these reactions will gradually fade, but this can take some time.

The sense of being in control of our lives - our sense of personal security and fundamental trust in the world around us - can be badly shaken by traumatic events and disaster situations. Anxiety and hyper-vigilance are mechanisms to protect ourselves until the danger, whether real or perceived, has passed or until we start to feel more in control. A public or personal disaster may challenge our basic assumptions – for example, that the world is a relatively benign and meaningful place or that we are able to cope with anything.

While most people involved in a traumatic incident will be shaken by what has happened, some adjust to their experiences with little or no apparent distress. Sometimes people may even feel satisfied with how they have acted when faced by the traumatic event, for example if they have been able to help others who have been involved. Other people may be shocked and stunned by what happened and have confusing and distressing emotions and reactions. These reactions might happen immediately or there might be a delay of days, weeks or longer. Sometimes reactions may be triggered or re-activated by a subsequent event, months, or even years, later.

## **Common reactions to trauma**

*You may feel:*

- Numbness, shock
- Increased anxiety, agitation, arousal
- Fear that something else will happen, feeling unsafe, helpless, vulnerable, loss of control
- Anger at what has happened and at the reactions of others, increased irritability
- Guilt at surviving – “why me?,” wanting to help others
- Loss and sadness, regret
- Depression.

*You may experience:*

- Flashbacks - a vivid sensation that you are re-experiencing the event
- Nightmares and sleep disturbance
- Going over and over the event in your mind
- You might worry that you are going mad.

*Physical reactions include:*

- Tiredness
- Agitation, jumpiness
- Sweating
- Nausea, upset stomach
- Muscle tension, aches, and pain
- Loss of concentration, memory problems, inability to think clearly or make decisions
- Increased heart rate, palpitations
- Over breathing, hyperventilation, breathlessness.

*You might try to cope with your reactions by:*

- Drinking, smoking or drug use to escape or dull your feelings
- Avoiding thinking or talking about what has happened
- Going to great lengths to avoid a similar situation happening again
- Throwing yourself into work or helping others, to avoid your own feelings

These strategies may help you to survive the immediate aftermath, but in the longer term, they might not be effective in helping you to come to terms with what has happened.

## How can you help yourself?

Here are some ways of coping that people have found helpful:

- Reminding yourself that these reactions are a normal response to an extraordinary experience. They do not indicate that you are going crazy. On the contrary, these reactions signal that your mind is engaged in processing what has happened and starting the mental process of understanding and making sense of the event
- Finding someone to talk to about what has happened, and your feelings about it. You may need to do this repeatedly in the first few weeks as you develop your own narrative for what took place.
- Allowing yourself to express your feelings in a safe and supportive situation
- Spending time with family, friends, or people you can trust. Allowing them to support you and telling them what support you need. Keeping in touch once you return to your normal routine
- Doing the things you enjoy – listening to music, being with friends, exercise, films, walking
- Allowing yourself to think about the event and your feelings when something prompts or triggers this. Finding strategies to help you to regulate your emotions when this happens – relaxation, breathing, or mindfulness techniques for example.
- Writing down what happened, your thoughts and feelings. Asking yourself whether your anxieties and concerns are based on reality or represent an accurate reflection
- Keeping up your normal routine as far as possible and returning to regular work or study when you feel able to. It may be possible to negotiate with your department to extend deadlines or defer exams. It is usually beneficial to resume your usual activities and routines, gradually if these have unpleasant memories
- Taking extra care. Accidents are more likely to happen whilst you are distracted and preoccupied
- Looking after yourself with regular rest, relaxation, healthy food, and exercise

## **How long will these reactions last?**

This depends on the nature of the trauma and the consequences for the individual. It also depends on the person's individual circumstances and the meaning of the event for them.

A person may initially feel overwhelmed by thoughts, feelings, and physical symptoms. The impact of these effects will usually start to subside over the next few weeks or months, but there may be occasions when strong feelings wash over the person again. Milder reactions may persist for many months or even years.

In the longer term, most people will recover and resume their lives much as before. However, for others, their lives may be permanently changed. For some people, a life threatening, or traumatic event will challenge deeply held beliefs about themselves, the world, and other people. They might re-examine their spiritual beliefs. The experience of coming to terms with trauma might be experienced as disturbing but it can also help us to feel stronger and more able to cope.

## **How can you help someone else?**

- Simply listening can be a significant help, when and if the person wishes to talk. They may need to talk about their experience repeatedly. It can be helpful to acknowledge how they are feeling and avoiding forced cheerfulness. You do not have to provide answers or solutions
- Ask the person what they find helpful and respect their wishes if this is possible
- It might be uncomfortable or distressing for you to hear the person's story or to witness their distress. You might decide to seek support or advice yourself. (Resources are listed at the end of this guide)
- The person may not want or need help beyond the support of family and friends, but if they appear to be struggling significantly with their distress, or if you have other concerns, you may want to encourage them to seek help
- If the person is talking about suicide, either directly or in vague terms, take it seriously. Encourage them to talk to their doctor. If this is not possible, speak to someone who can intervene, such as a Support and Wellbeing Officer, a member of residential staff or someone in your department. If you feel the person is immediately at risk of harming themselves, you may consider accompanying them to the Emergency Department at the

- Encourage them to resume or maintain their usual routine and activities and talking about everyday things might be helpful
- After a personal or public disaster, the initial offers of help will fade away, and this might leave the person feeling abandoned. Small acts of support sustained over a longer period are of value.
- A common response to disaster is a feeling of responsibility and a desire to help others. It is easy to become overwhelmed, so if you are involved in helping others or supporting a friend, take care of yourself first. Spending time with other friends and keeping up your own interests and activities will help to maintain a balance.

### **When is specialist help appropriate?**

Your first line of support is likely to be your family, friends, partner, religious/spiritual community, or other people involved in the event.

There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support. These may include your Support and Wellbeing Officer, your Personal Tutor, Residential Staff, or other support staff at the university, including the Chaplains and the Student Union Welfare Officer. Members of staff may consider asking for support from line managers, work colleagues or the Occupational Health Unit.

There is also a range of services available in the University and in the community if you need further help or support. A directory of services can be found at the end of this leaflet.

Do not hesitate to seek help if you experience any of the following:

- You have suicidal thoughts or feelings
- You are self-harming
- The normal reactions to trauma continue beyond the following weeks or months, or the symptoms seem to be getting worse rather than better
- You feel frightened or overwhelmed by emotional, psychological, or physical symptoms
- You experience a numbness or an absence of feelings beyond the first few weeks
- You feel you have no-one that you can talk to
- Relationships and friendships are negatively impacted in a sustained way

- You are concerned that you are drinking, smoking, or using drugs more than usual, to escape how you are feeling.