

DEALING WITH TRAUMA

Research and literature show that people who have experienced a traumatic event recover more quickly and easily when they have the support of family, friends and workmates.

Witnessing or being involved in a traumatic event such as Victoria's recent bushfires can be a frightening experience. It is normal to experience strong physical and emotional reactions, which can be uncontrollable and distressing. Dealing with the experience and returning to normal can be difficult, and may impact on your everyday life. However, understanding and accepting your reactions and feelings can help you adjust and cope with the event. Here at the Anna Centre, we have several trained professionals to help you cope with your traumatic experience.

Common reactions to Trauma

Although each individual is unique, there are some common reactions to traumatic events. Not everyone will react in the same way, or to the same degree, but these experiences are normal, and are part of the recovery process. Some people may not feel that they have been affected at all. Reactions may last for days or weeks, depending on the person and the event. In most cases, reactions subside within several weeks and then things are able to return to normal.

Feelings	Things you might do	Thinking	Physical
<u>Shock</u> - Disbelief - Experience seems unreal or dreamlike - Numbness	Change in appetite/drinking/smoking habits	Difficulty concentrating	Tiredness
<u>Fears</u> - Losing control - The event repeating - Being alone - Death or injury	Change in sexual desire	Difficulty remembering, especially relating to the event	Dizziness
<u>Sadness</u> - Loss of the belief the world is a safe and predictable place	<u>Sleep disturbances</u> - Difficulty getting to sleep - Difficulty staying asleep - Waking early due to repetitive thoughts or increased anxiety - Dreams or nightmares about the event	<u>Confusion</u> - The world has changed for you - Unfamiliar feelings - Something from the past is troubling you again (common for unresolved issues to resurface)	<u>Gastrointestinal problems</u> - Nausea - Diarrhoea - Constipation
<u>Anger</u> - Towards those who caused or allowed the event to happen	<u>Avoidance</u> - Situations that remind you of the event - The place where the event occurred - Being alone or in crowded places	Flashbacks at unpredictable times and places	Muscle tension that may lead to pain - Headaches - Neck and back aches - Menstrual disorders - Chest pain
Shame		"If only..." thoughts	Difficulty in breathing
Guilt		"What if?" questions	Choking in the throat or chest
Anxiety (worry)		Attempts to shut out thoughts or memories of the incident	Palpitations
Mood swings (changeable moods for no apparent reason)			

Things you can do to help

The day and/or night of the event:

1. Make sure you are with people. If you live alone, call a friend or relative to have them stay with you
2. Talk about the event with others. Talking with people you trust will help you deal with the reactions
3. Restrict the use of stimulants (nicotine, caffeine). Your body is agitated enough, and does not need further stimulation
4. Avoid excessive use of alcohol. It will only dull the experience and not help you deal with the issues involved
5. Reassure yourself that the event is over and that you are safe
6. Acknowledge that you have been through a highly stressful event. A lack of acceptance of your feelings or denial may delay your recovery process
7. Temptation to take medication. This may even be encouraged by your doctor, family or friends. However, when taken initially or over a prolonged period, medication can interrupt or prolong the natural healing process

If you have difficulty sleeping:

- Talk to someone about what is running through your mind
- Get out of bed and do something – read, watch TV, iron, write about the event
- Use a relaxation tape (available from a counsellor, book shop or library)

Returning to work/study/routine:

Returning back to your normal routine after experiencing traumatic events may be difficult. However, recovery is usually quicker if you can resume a normal routine as soon as possible. Remember there will be people to help and support you.

Over the next few days and weeks:

- Start getting back to making everyday decisions, such as what to eat, what to buy, what movie to see and what clothes to wear. Taking control of your life is important
- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible
- Continue to talk about the experience and your reactions with those at work, your family and friends. Talking will help you deal with the issues
- Other unpleasant events from the past may come into your mind. It is usually useful to talk about these
- Look after yourself by ensuring that you have adequate sleep, a good diet, regular exercise and some relaxation
- You might find that some relationships are strained and tense or that new friends and group bonds develop
- Remind yourself that your reactions are normal and that they will pass in time
- When you feel uncomfortable, scared or anxious, take a few deep breaths. Remind yourself that you are safe and that the event is over

Your family and friends

- When someone close to you has been through a traumatic event it can be very difficult for you to know what to do
- You might find that you too, experience some of the reactions mentioned in this brochure, or you might find that the experience doesn't affect you at all

Other things that you can do:

- Encourage them to maintain a normal routine but also allow them to decide for themselves how best to use their time
- Encourage them to make as many of the everyday decisions that they did prior to the incident
- Encourage them to return to work (even if it is just for a short time), but let them decide when and how they will do this
- It is not helpful to urge the person to just "forget about it" and "put it out of your mind" or pretend it didn't happen. However small an event might appear to you, the experience can be very stressful and frightening for someone else
- Ask them how you can be most helpful, and be guided by their answer. Some people prefer to keep busy out of the house, while others prefer to stay at home. Some people like company while others prefer to be alone
- Remember responses to a traumatic event are normal responses to an abnormal incident though these can be very intense and stressful at times. It takes time to heal, accept and readjust.
- If they appear to be having some trouble coping with their experience, suggest that they seek professional assistance. Here at the Anna Centre, there are several trained professionals to help them cope with their traumatic experience.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- People react differently to the experience of being involved in a traumatic event. Some people react immediately, some after time, some intensely, some hardly at all
- A lot of people are left feeling very vulnerable and helpless. This is scary for them and can be scary for you. Reassure them that they are safe and that the event is over
- Some people might feel tense and appear snappy, angry, anxious, or tearful for sometime after the event and you might need to be patient with them
- Most people can benefit from being able to talk about the experience to someone who cares. So you can help by listening, perhaps more than once. It can be difficult to listen to someone else's distress. If you don't feel that you can handle it, say so gently and perhaps support the other person in finding someone else to talk to
- Many people need extra understanding and comfort and someone just to be there. You might feel there is nothing you can do. Being there is doing a lot
- The Anna Centre has several professionals trained to assist those who have been involved in a traumatic event.