

## Trauma and crisis

Many people face traumatic situations in life. A traumatic or critical incident typically refers to an event that an individual is exposed to which is unexpected, outside their usual range of experience, and involves some form of loss, injury, violation or death. Some common traumatic experiences include being physically attacked, being in a serious accident, being in combat, being sexually assaulted, and being in a fire or a disaster. The horrific incidents which happened in London on 7 July 2005 illustrate the devastation traumatic events can have on human life and infrastructure, but also on people's emotional wellbeing.

People who go through traumatic experiences often have symptoms afterwards. How serious the symptoms are depends on many things, including a person's life experiences before the trauma, a person's own natural ability to cope with stress, how serious the trauma was, and what kinds of help and support a person receives from family, friends, and professionals following the trauma.

Because most trauma survivors don't know how trauma can affect people, they often have trouble understanding what is happening to them.

### What do trauma survivors need to know?

- Traumatic experiences happen to many people. No one can completely protect themselves.
- People who react to traumas experience a set of common symptoms and problems that are connected with being in a traumatic situation.
- Having symptoms after a traumatic event is not a sign that something is wrong with you.
- By understanding trauma symptoms, a person can become less fearful of them and be able to manage them better.
- By recognising the effects of trauma and knowing more about the symptoms, a person will be more able to make decisions about treatment.

### Normal reactions to traumatic experiences

The reason people who are exposed to such situations often have symptoms and problems afterwards is because such shocking situations typically cause an instinctive reaction within us, which is trying to protect ourselves and others from harm. We may also struggle to make sense of how this could happen, and the incident will play on our mind until we can work out why it happened. In doing this, we can find positive ways of coping and making sense of what we are experiencing, but equally, we can find negative methods of coping.

Although everyone's experience is very personal, there are often a number of similar reactions which most people experience in these circumstances. The effects of trauma can be immediate or can arise after a period of time has elapsed. It is quite normal to feel any or all of the following after being exposed to a traumatic experience:

- numb
- shock
- disbelief
- tearful
- relieved
- guilty
- fearful
- restless
- disappointed
- irritable
- lonely
- helpless
- tense
- agitated
- emotional
- tired
- angry

You may find yourself:

- having intrusive thoughts about the incident
- unable to concentrate
- having difficulty in sleeping
- feeling angry or aggressive
- experiencing anxiety or depression
- having unusual dreams or nightmares
- unable to talk about the incident
- drinking more alcohol than usual
- not wanting to leave home
- having flashbacks to the traumatic event

### Timings

Most people will go through a process of making sense of the event which begins with shock and realisation in the first 24 hours or so, and moves through to reacting to the event and coping usually within 48 to 96 hours. It can take two to four weeks for people who are more seriously affected to recover. However if symptoms persist it is unlikely they will dissipate and therefore it is essential professional help is sought.

### Useful advice

Normally reactions to trauma become less intense over time, however there are ways in which you can speed up the process of recovery. It is helpful in coming to terms with the incident if you take note of the following advice.

### Don't:

- ignore your symptoms
- drink alcohol to escape symptoms
- take unprescribed sleeping pills or medication
- isolate yourself
- put yourself under more pressure
- get overtired or miss meals
- bottle up your emotions

### Do:

- talk about the incident
- talk about your feelings
- speak to a doctor or seek professional help
- maintain a good routine
- try to relax
- take exercise
- go back to the location of the incident
- go back to work

Short term reactions are very common but sometimes symptoms can persist and can cause a number of more serious problems for example post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a specific set of problems resulting from a traumatic experience that is recognised by medical and mental health professionals. It can, however, only be diagnosed after symptoms have remained for more than four weeks, as most people are initially affected by some symptoms. It is therefore extremely important for support to be available in the initial aftermath of a trauma so that symptoms do not persist or escalate. This is provided by your company through BUPA Employee Assistance.

### BUPA Employee Assistance

Your employer is committed to providing support to help you if you have been affected by a traumatic event and to ensure any negative experiences are dealt with as quickly as possible. They have appointed BUPA Employee Assistance. This assistance provides a confidential, independent advice and counselling helpline. It is available 24 hours a



day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. So you can always get help when you need it. Call free 0800 269 616.