

Trauma and Recovery

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In the course of our work we are sometimes exposed to distressing events, which can be unexpected, tragic and extreme. These events have the potential to overwhelm even the most resilient people. However, each person has their own unique way of surviving and getting through the days and weeks after an event. We want to support and respect your reactions and hope you will find this leaflet useful and to feel informed about what you are going through.

What is happening to me?

After a frightening incident you may experience some unfamiliar reactions. This is because our bodies take the major force of the impact and automatically respond in ways that allow us to protect ourselves. This is the “fight or flight” response.

This automatic response is caused by a surge of the hormone “adrenaline”. Typically we experience increases in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and breathing. We also may experience nausea, shaking and sweating. Normally these reactions are temporary, but every time we experience a new problem or threat, we may get a spike of adrenaline and a repeat of these symptoms.

As well as the physical reactions, we may have a range of thoughts and feelings. Thoughts are often focused on questions and the search for information, such as:

Why did this happen now? What made this happen? How can I make it better?

What will happen to me over the next few days?

After the initial surge of adrenaline in our bodies we often have a sense of exhaustion as we try to recover from the extreme stress response. However, even though we are desperate to rest, we often find it difficult to sleep. Physical reactions you might experience over the first few days after an incident can include:

- Tense muscles
- Headaches and backache
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Extreme anxiety
- Panic reactions
- Avoidance of the situation in which the incident occurred

You may find it difficult to relax or switch off, as your mind and body continue to process the incident. Memories and images of the event may appear unexpectedly in:

- Dreams
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Day to day thoughts

Relationships can be affected and altered during the days following a traumatic event. We can sometimes become critical and irritated with those around us, due to our chronic stress and exhaustion. It can be difficult to switch roles between the intensity of the work role and the emotional demands of home and family.

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What can I do to help myself?

Recognise that you are working through an extremely stressful situation that will have a physical and emotional effect on you which is different from your everyday reactions.

- Attempt to get some routine into your day, which includes work, rest and relaxation. Try to schedule one enjoyable activity each day
- Spend some time each day with people you are close to
- Take more care than usual doing physical activities e.g. driving, cooking and using machinery. After a major trauma you are more accident prone
- Try to avoid making any major life decisions at this time, but talk through smaller decisions with colleagues and family, as this helps you re-establish feelings of control over your life

How long will it take me to recover?

Some people will begin to feel better, calmer and back in control after a few days. For others it can take a few weeks and sometimes a few months. Each person will have their own unique way of getting through this time, and therefore it is important to find the right strategy that suits you, your personality, and your family circumstances.

- Set realistic goals for yourself, your team and your family
- Review and reward what has been achieved, both the significant and the small achievements
- Talk about the ups and downs of recovery with those around you
- Develop a plan to maintain healthy habits and plan contingencies to deal with times of stress
- Use your network of support from colleagues in other places who are not affected in the same way as you

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How will I know when I have recovered?

Recovery is usually characterised by a gradual decrease in the intensity of your trauma reactions and an ability to look back with a positive sense of achievement and confidence. However, recovery is not something that happens all at once, nor is it straightforward. Sometimes we think we have recovered, but the stress reactions can return unexpectedly when we are under pressure, or when we are reminded of certain events.

There are certain circumstances, which can hinder our recovery, therefore if you have experienced one of the situations below, it will probably be helpful to talk to a professional about your feelings and experiences:

- The traumatic event was prolonged and intrusive
- You are highly critical of you own actions and behaviours at the time of the event or after
- You were struggling with other personal or work related difficulties before this event
- This current experience is bringing back vivid memories of a previous traumatic experience
- Before the event you were experiencing depression, anxiety or other debilitating conditions
- You have begun to use alcohol or other addictive substances to help you

Don't struggle on your own.