

Helping a friend or family member after a traumatic event

Traumatic events involve situations that are either life-threatening or have the potential for serious injury, such as physical or sexual assault, natural disaster, war or a serious accident. Most people will experience at least one of these types of events during their lives.

After a traumatic event, many people experience strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. They might find it hard to cope and it might take a while to come to terms with what has happened. These feelings will usually become less intense after a few weeks. The support of family and friends is particularly important during this time, and this fact sheet will provide you with some ideas of things you can do to help.

Provide practical support

After someone has been through a traumatic experience, re-establishing a normal routine can help to restore a sense of order and control in their life. Some of the ways you can help them return to their normal routine include:

- **Recognise that they have been through an extremely stressful event** and may need time and space to deal with it. You can help them to find that time and space by providing practical support, such as offering to take care of the kids or do the weekly shopping.
- **Encourage them to limit their exposure to media coverage of the event.** You might offer to keep track of the news and inform them of new or important information so that they don't feel the need to monitor it continuously.
- **Encourage them to look after themselves** by getting plenty of rest, eating well, exercising regularly, making time for relaxation and cutting back on coffee, cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol.
- **Join them in doing enjoyable things** and encourage them to plan to do at least one enjoyable thing each day. You may need to help the person come up with ideas of things they can do, for example, ask what activities they used to enjoy before the traumatic event.
- **Acknowledge their achievements.** Sometimes it's hard to see that things are improving, and the person may need you to point out when they have achieved a goal, no matter how small.
- **Encourage them to seek professional help** if they are still finding it hard to cope more than two weeks after the traumatic event.

Provide emotional support

Your friend or family member may or may not want to talk about their experience or feelings. If they do want to talk, the following tips may be helpful.

- **Choose a time to talk** when you won't be interrupted, or feel rushed or tired.
- **Provide reassurance** that distress is to be expected after an experience like theirs.
- **Understand that talking about trauma can be painful** and the person may get upset. This is a natural part of coming to terms with their experience. Don't feel that you have to make their distress go away.
- **Make another time to talk** if it seems like the person is too distressed to continue.

Listening is very important, but it can sometimes be hard to know what to say. Don't worry about having to say 'the right thing'. There is no right thing to say, but here are a few pointers:

- **Try to put yourself in their shoes**, don't interrupt, offer examples from your own life, or talk about yourself.
- **Avoid offering simple reassurances** such as, "I know how you feel" or "You'll be OK".
- **Acknowledge their distress** with statements like, "It's really tough to go through something like this", "This is such a tough time for you", or "Sometimes it's hard to see a light at the end of the tunnel".
- **Ask leading questions** like, "Would it be helpful to talk about [the event]?", "You've had a rough time, how are you going?", or "How's [Name] going?"
- **Show that you understand** by re-phrasing the information they give you. Try starting with something like, "You seem really...", "It sounds like...", "Did I understand right that you...", "No wonder you feel..."

If they don't want to talk, you can still show your support by spending time with them, talking about other things, and doing practical things to help. Let them be alone for a while if that's what they want, but encourage them to have company for some time each day. Becoming isolated or cutting themselves off from other people is likely to make matters worse rather than better.

For more information

Download a copy of *Recovery after Trauma – A Guide for People with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* from www.phoenixaustralia.org.