

Helping yourself 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, you might experience strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. You might find it hard to cope and it might take a while to come to terms with what has happened. Generally, these feelings will resolve on their own, and with the support of family and friends, you will recover. This fact sheet will provide you with some ideas to help you manage in the days and weeks after a trauma.

Coping after trauma

Recovery after trauma doesn't mean forgetting your experience or feeling no emotional pain when remembering it. Recovery means becoming less distressed and having more confidence in your ability to cope, as time goes on.

Even if you don't feel like it, try to do some of the things suggested below. They might help you to come to terms with the traumatic event you experienced and reduce some of the distress associated with it.

- Recognise that you have been through an extremely stressful event and that you will have an emotional reaction to it. Give yourself permission to feel rotten, but also remember your strengths – even though it's tough, you can deal with it.
- Look after yourself by getting plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep), regular exercise, and by eating regular, well-balanced meals. Physical and mental health are closely linked, so taking care of one will help the other.
- Cut back on tea, coffee, chocolate, soft drink, and cigarettes. Your body is already 'hyped up' enough, and these substances will only add to this. Try to avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope, as they can lead to more problems in the long term.
- Make time for relaxation – whether it's listening to music, taking a bath – whatever works for you. It might be helpful to learn a relaxation technique like meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, or breathing exercises.
- Structure your days and try to schedule at least one enjoyable activity each day. Try making a timetable for each day, including some exercise, some work, and some relaxation.
- Resume your normal routine as soon as possible, but take it easy. Don't throw yourself into activities or work in an attempt to avoid painful thoughts or memories about the trauma. Tackle the things that need to be done a bit at a time and count each success.

- Try not to bottle up your feelings or block them out. Recurring thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks are unpleasant, but they will decrease with time.
- Avoid making major life decisions like moving house or changing jobs in the days and weeks after the traumatic event. On the other hand, make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible, such as what you will eat or what film you'd like to see. This can help you to feel more in control of your life.
- Spend time with people you care about, even if you don't want to talk about your experience. Sometimes you will want to be alone, and that's OK too, but try not to become too isolated.
- Talk about your feelings to other people who will understand, if you feel able to do so. Talking things through is part of the natural healing process and will help you to accept what has happened. As you start to feel better, you may even wish to provide support to others who have been through similar situations.
- Write about your feelings if you feel unable to talk to others about them.
- Keep informed of the facts through media and other information sources, but don't overdo it. Try to avoid repeated viewing of disaster or trauma scenes.
- Give yourself time to re-evaluate. A traumatic event can affect the way you see the world, your life, your goals, and your relationships. Again, talking this through with others might help.

If you've tried these strategies and things still aren't improving after a couple of weeks, or if you are having trouble coping, talk to your GP or mental health professional.

For more information

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

Talk to your GP.

For immediate assistance call Lifeline on 13 11 14.