

An introduction to dealing with

Trauma



What is Trauma?

Everyone is affected by trauma or traumatic events during his or her lifetime. And our responses to these events – however moderate or severe – are often normal. You may be wondering, ‘What is normal?’ In cases of trauma, there is a whole range of normal reactions, including:

A sense of impending catastrophe

Recognition of grave danger

Enormous sadness

A feeling of vulnerability

Outrage and anger

Relief and guilt about surviving

A loss of focus/concentration

Self-destructive behaviours

Flashbacks/nightmares

Interrupted sleep

Grief is also part of the traumatic experience. Grief is a kind of ‘normal illness’ whereby the body and mind heal from a loss. Therefore the grieving person also may have transient symptoms like trouble concentrating and sleeping, memory problems, feeling as if life is meaningless or a general lack of enthusiasm for daily living.

Following exposure to trauma, many factors can trigger intense revivals of our initial reactions. These unexpected reminders lurk at the edge of our awareness and can prompt sudden emotional reactions. What’s important to remember is that the vast majority of people, 80 to 90 percent, do not become significantly impaired or disabled by tragic experiences – even those whose lives are profoundly affected. Human beings are amazingly resilient. Most of us are able, eventually, to resume normal lives even after the most painful tragedies.



Who is at risk?

It's not always easy to know who's at risk for suffering more severe reactions to trauma.

Generally those who are directly affected are most vulnerable, as are people who are already stressed, lack support systems, or have a history of prior trauma or emotional illness.



Trauma and Children

The symptoms of trauma among children are not always as clear. Children and adolescents often find it hard to ask for, and accept help. Therefore, it's important that parents and teachers be sensitive to the child's needs and watch for any changes in functioning, such as sleeping patterns, eating behaviour, studying and social activities.

Parents can be respectful of the child's ways of dealing with trauma by allowing him or her to talk about feelings and express them in drawings and other 'non-verbal' constructive activities. Help children understand they are safe and loved. Provide explanations that are simple to understand. Be a good listener and observer. Most children work through the circumstances just fine. In fact, studies show that even after a major traumatic event, most children, too, do not become seriously disabled.



How to Cope?

People who have suffered a traumatic experience often feel 'crazy' or abnormal. Trauma can affect the way we think, feel and behave. To help deal with these feelings, look for ways to restore and recover a sense of safety, trust, control and self-worth. Be willing to make use of available supports. There are many ways to relieve anxiety. Identify and use what works for you.



How to deal with Trauma?

10 important tips:

1. Take care of yourself. Do things that will be soothing or comfortable to you to provide a 'release'. Exercising, writing in a journal, meditating, listening to music and spending time with friends and family are just a few ways we can help to restore a sense of normality.
2. Pay attention to your own reactions and feelings; try to put your experiences into words.
3. Don't try to downplay or minimise what's happened.
4. Talk to people who have had similar experiences and seek their support.
5. Avoid impulsive changes in your life.
6. Give yourself time to grieve and to cry if necessary.
7. Pay attention to such things as your diet, sugar, caffeine or nicotine intake and alcohol or recreational drug use.
8. Be willing to engage with other people.
9. Take your time to heal.
10. Seek therapeutic support such as counselling, to talk about how your feeling.

What Communities can do?



A community that has undergone a tragic event should come together to offer support in various ways. Providing education is useful. Memorial services, support groups, accurate information and a gradual re-building of shattered lives are very important. Being aware of and making a range of professional services available is also helpful. The focus for the community should be rallying around its survivors and the grieving to promote a healing process.

Getting Further Help

In some instances when trauma is severe, it can result in persistent panic attacks, depression, substance abuse or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that can last a brief time or become chronic. In PTSD, one can experience the repeated anxious reliving of a traumatic event over an extended period of time; people can experience vivid flashbacks or, conversely, they may try to avoid anything that reminds them of the event; or they may become irritable, have trouble sleeping or concentrating.

In considering professional help, these are some of the important questions to consider. Is the level of distress interfering with normal routines? Do you find yourself turning to 'dysfunctional' ways of coping such as drug or alcohol abuse or violent or abusive behaviour? Do these symptoms fade over time? Are you beginning to feel emotionally disabled?

A person suffering from severe trauma or depression should contact their doctor or a mental health professional for an evaluation. Medication may prove helpful. Psychotherapy/ counselling has also been proven to be helpful.



Remember

Research suggests that getting help as soon as possible after a traumatic experience can limit or prevent future problems arising.





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