Understanding reactions to traumatic events

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This leaflet is for people who have experienced a traumatic event. It is a guide to help you, your family and friends to understand the different feelings and reactions you may be experiencing. The process of physical and emotional recovery can take time, although this naturally varies from person to person.

**Common reactions following a traumatic event**

After experiencing or witnessing a frightening or traumatic event it is common for people to experience strong physical feelings and emotions and/or to find that they are behaving differently. This may happen straight away or for some people it may be several weeks or months later that reactions occur. These are normal and for the majority of people they start to fade and settle down within a few months. Sometimes they can continue for a longer period of time or are more severe and get in the way of day to day life. In this case, it can generally be referred to as ‘PTSD’ or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

**Why do people have these reactions?**

At the time of a sudden traumatic event our bodies (including our brains) react immediately with a “fight, flight or freeze” adrenalin response. During the first few days and weeks, the parts of our brains that respond to threat can become overactive and release higher than normal stress or ‘threat’ hormones. This can mean that the
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adrenalin response keeps going – which is why we can feel more frightened and on edge, even some time after the event happened.

Traumatic events are generally sudden and unexpected and because there is no time to prepare beforehand, a person has to make sense of things after they have happened. When the threat system is active, the parts of our brain that help store and remember information don’t work so well. The sense of threat or danger can mean your mind holds on to the memory very strongly. It takes time to adjust to the new experience and for the sense of danger to subside.

In the days and weeks after the event, our brains naturally try to make sense of everything. There are different parts of the brain involved in sorting through information and feelings and adjusting to what has happened. Recovery often involves the brain going over and over things or ‘re-experiencing’ the memory, often in images or thoughts of the event or in dreams. This can of course be very unpleasant. It is part of the brain’s natural sorting out process and mostly this works well and things gradually settle down.
What symptoms do people often experience after a trauma?

Here is a list of some the experiences people can have both very soon after the event and sometimes on-going:

**Increased level of arousal**

- more sensitive to things around you (e.g. noise, smells)
- being more jumpy, more watchful of your environment
- difficulty sleeping
- irritability
- difficulty with concentration and memory
- feeling unsafe, helpless or vulnerable

**Re-experiencing or re-living of the traumatic incident**

- sudden or unwanted memories or pictures of the event (‘flashbacks’), which can be triggered by experiences, or can just come out of nowhere.
- distressing dreams
- feeling that it is happening again
- thoughts or images coming to mind that you feel you have no control over
- strong emotions linked to these (fear, panic, helplessness, sadness, horror)
Thinking in particular ways

- going over and over what happened (e.g. thinking about what might have happened if you had reacted differently or about alternative outcomes)
- difficulty thinking clearly or making decisions
- worrying or having racing thoughts
- blaming yourself

Other feelings

- feeling numb or empty of feelings and emotion
- feeling distant from reality
- can occur in cycles with re-living and strong emotions
- shock
- feeling angry
- guilt or shame

These experiences can feel very scary and people sometimes fear they are ‘going mad’. However, they are part of dealing with a very difficult and overwhelming experience that your mind is trying to make sense of. Remember that it is the situation that is abnormal, not you.
How can I help myself?

Things likely to be helpful are:

- Remember that your reactions are normal. They are not a sign that you are going mad. Your mind is making sense of what has happened.

- Find someone you can talk to about what happened and your feelings. This can help reduce the overall fear and calm the ‘threat’ system.

- Return to your normal routine and activities as soon as possible, particularly those things that matter to you.

- Take care of yourself and spend time with people who will support and relax you.

- Try not to over-rely on distracting yourself, or avoiding the feelings and thoughts associated with the event, for example by drinking more alcohol, taking drugs or even going out a lot more than usual. These things can disrupt the brain’s natural sorting out process and mean the symptoms go on longer.

- If you are worried that things are not resolving after several weeks, consider talking to your GP about getting some help. Psychological therapy can be very effective in helping resolve traumatic experiences so that you can reclaim your life.
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