

Most people involved in a critical or traumatic event experience some kind of emotional reaction. It is important to know that even though these feelings may be very unpleasant, they are normal reactions, in a normal person, to an abnormal event. **You are not losing your mind or going crazy if you have these feelings.**

It is often difficult for those who were not involved to understand what you might be going through. You may wish to show this handout to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them. Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to trauma, which people may or may not experience:

## EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:

### Shock

- disbelief at what happened
- feeling numb, as if things are unreal
- feeling isolated from or different from other people

### Fear

- of a recurrence
- apparently unrelated fears
- anxiety

### Shame

- for having appeared helpless or emotional
- for not behaving as you would have liked

### Anger

- at the injustice and senselessness of it all
- scapegoating and frustration with bureaucracy
- generalised anger and irritability
- oversensitivity
- violent fantasies

### Sadness

- about the losses, both human and material
- loss of feelings of safety and security
- feeling depressed
- helplessness
- uncontrollable crying

## PHYSICAL REACTIONS:

### Sleep

- change in sleep patterns
- difficulty getting to sleep because of intrusive thoughts

## THINKING:

### Memories

- frequent thoughts or images of the incident
- thoughts or images of other frightening events
- flashbacks/body memories or feelings of
- attempts to shut out the painful memories
- inability to attach importance to anything other than this incident

### Confusion

- difficulty making simple decisions
- inability to concentrate and memory problems
- difficulty solving problems
- changes to your self-concept
- blaming yourself for the trauma
- lowered self-worth

## BEHAVIOUR:

### Social

- withdrawal from others and need to be alone
- easily irritated by other people
- feelings of detachment from others
- loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies
- not wanting to be alone

### Study or work

- not wanting to study or go to work
- lack of motivation
- poor concentration and attention

### Habits

- increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
- loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- loss of sexual potency/desire or increased desire for sex

The signs described above are common and normal reactions to a traumatic experience. People react differently to the experience of being involved in trauma. Some react immediately, some after a time, some intensely, some hardly at all. Usually the effects of the trauma will diminish over a period of a few weeks, although some may last for months or even years, especially if the experience was particularly frightening. You may also find that the feelings get worse when you are reminded of the event. Most reactions are part of the normal process of recovery and help the person adapt to the trauma. They can, however, be very unpleasant for those affected and for their families. Some people who develop long term effects after trauma may go on to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Some people may experience more severe effects from a traumatic incident if they have previously experienced other traumatic events in their life.

## COPING WITH TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS:

### Adjusting to the Experience

It is important to recognise that you have been through a highly stressful experience and to acknowledge that you will have an emotional and physical reaction to it. You may find that it is hard to talk about what has happened to you. Many people find that talking about how they are feeling is the most helpful thing to do, even though it may be hard. Try to seek out support (practical and emotional) from other people in your life.

Some people benefit from extra help in overcoming the effects of a traumatic experience. Do not be afraid to get help if you think you need it. It is not a sign of weakness or an indication that you are losing your mind. Often, the help you receive will be short and simple, and will prevent you from having longer term problems. You might want to consider seeking further assistance if:

- the problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than a few weeks
- you are having suicidal thoughts or thoughts about harming yourself that feel out of control
- you feel that you have no friends or family to whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel
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- Try not to make any major life decisions (such as moving house or changing jobs) in the period following the trauma. Equally, do make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible (e.g. what you want to eat or what film you would like to see). This can help to re-establish a feeling of control over your life.
- Talk to people who care for you about the incident and how you are feeling. Even though this process is painful it is usually helpful in coming to terms with your experience.
- Some people find that keeping a journal or diary is very helpful. Writing about how you feel, writing it down is almost as good. Keeping a journal can help you write your way through those sleepless hours.

## FLASHBACKS:

Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. They will decrease in time. Often people find that flashbacks help them to process the traumatic experience and get their life back on track. This does not mean you are going backwards or not healing. It more likely is a sign that your body and mind feels that you are ready to start to process the traumatic experience. When flashbacks occur it can feel like you are re-experiencing the event all over again. Some people say that flashbacks are so real that it makes them feel like they are back in the past when it happened. This is due to the way our memory systems work during trauma which results in the brain storing the traumatic experience in images and sensations that are not processed in the same way that we would usually process a memory. Below are 5 Steps for getting through a flashback:

1. Tell yourself you are having a flashback . name it for what it is . a memory. Let it wash over you.