

Coping with the Aftermath of a Traumatic Experience

What's a "Normal" Response to a Trauma Experience?

Following a traumatic experience, it is normal to feel overwhelmed, frightened, anxious, disoriented and confused. It is normal to feel on edge and fearful that disaster will occur again.

It is normal to feel numb, disconnected and withdrawn – often described as being “in shock.” It is important to remember that *people respond in different ways to traumatic experiences*.

In the first few days and weeks, it is normal to re-experience the traumatic event, in the form of intrusive thoughts, images or nightmares. These might be pictures or “snapshots” of what was witnessed or a video replay of the event. It is normal for this to be accompanied by overwhelming physical sensations associated with fear and anxiety such as a racing heart or rapid breathing.

What Can I do to Help Myself?

Be kind to yourself and remind yourself that *you are having a normal response to an abnormal experience*. It will help to talk and to allow yourself to think about what has happened. Talk to friends and family about what you have experienced if you can.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by intrusive thoughts and images then “grounding” strategies can help. Being “grounded” means being fully in the present and aware of your surroundings - rather than back in your traumatic experience, feeling as though it is happening again. *Some people find that using a grounding object such as a stress ball, a piece of jewelry or a pebble can help. Some people also find it helpful to use statements such as “I’m safe”, “I’ve survived”, “it’s not happening any more” to remind themselves that what they are “reliving” is just a memory.*

Longer-Term Reactions

People typically find that many of their immediate symptoms decline or disappear during the first few days or weeks.

If after 4 weeks you are still re-experiencing the traumatic event in the form of intrusive thoughts, images or nightmares, avoiding reminders associated with the experience, feeling anxious fearful or on edge, feeling helpless, hopeless, emotionally withdrawn, sad, depressed or irritable then you might benefit from talking to someone.

Where Can I Get Help?

Self-Help

Self-help Video: The Impact of Trauma on the Brain: <https://youtu.be/yb1yBva3Xas>

Organisations for Support and Guidance

MIND <http://www.mind.org.uk> or The Samaritans <http://www.samaritans.org>

For Emergency Service Workers <http://www.ptsd999.org.uk>

Trauma-Focused Therapy

Make an appointment with your GP and ask for a referral for Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR).