

# Managing After Trauma

Traumatising events can include being assaulted, witnessing some harm to someone, a motor vehicle accident, a work accident, hearing shocking news and in fact any time you feel horror and powerlessness. It is natural for people to have strong emotional or physical reactions following an experience that makes us feel scared for own safety or for others. For most, these reactions subside over a few days or weeks. For some, the symptoms can last longer and be more severe.

The emotional repercussions of something traumatising seem to fall into the clusters below:

## Re-experiencing of the event

- Having dreams with themes relevant to the event
- Visual images and memories coming to mind intrusively
- Thoughts about what happened and why it happened and regrets intrude into our mind
- Sometimes feeling as if it is happening again (including sensory experiences)

## Sense of Danger

- A powerful sense that the world is no longer safe
- Waiting for the next awful thing to happen to yourself or someone you love
- Being watchful and vigilant for danger everywhere

## Emotional Changes

- Fearfulness, including that sense of danger mentioned above, and anxiety attacks
- Many people become irritable and cranky, with flashes of anger
- It is common to feel hopeless about the future, like nothing good will ever happen now
- People also feel numb and emotionally detached from things they normally value.

## Behaviour

- People tend to want to *avoid* any reminders of the accident
- It is equally natural to change our behaviour to *avoid* something similar happening again
- We tell people around us to be careful more
- It is common to withdraw and to *avoid* social interactions

## Thinking

- Concentration and short-term memory become impaired for a while
- Many people also try hard not to think about or recall the horrifying event

## Physical

- Easily startled or jumpy in response to noises or movements
- Feeling tired much the time
- Disturbed sleep

## **Time Course**

The symptoms described above are common reactions to trauma. Although these symptoms can be distressing, they will pass for most people. They are part of the natural healing process of adjusting to a very powerful event and we need time to make some sense out of what happened and learn to feel safe again. With understanding and support from family, friends and colleagues the stress symptoms usually resolve more rapidly. Most people find that it takes days or a few weeks for the reactions described above to pass. However, some people find that the symptoms persist badly for many months. You can optimise the recovery by following the advice below.

## **Tips on managing psychological trauma**

There are several things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from a traumatic event or situation. The following points provide some general advice.

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and give yourself permission to experience some reaction to it. Don't be annoyed with yourself for being upset.
- Remind yourself that anyone else would be needing a lot of time to adjust to what happened.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Keep busy and structure your day but find some time to rest each day as well.
- Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places.
- Regular exercise is helpful and important – don't wait until you feel like it, it is like medicine.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- Avoid making any major decisions or big life changes for a few months.
- Express your feelings as they arise. Whether you discuss them with someone else or write them down in a diary, expressing feelings in some way often helps the healing process.
- Gradually confronting what has happened will assist in coming to terms with the traumatic experience. At some point, it will probably be helpful to revisit the place where the event occurred, just to prove to your mind that you no longer need to be scared or exercise avoidance for ever.
- When you are ready, allow yourself to go through what happened in some detail. One of the best ways to do this is to write out what happened, in order, including your feelings and thoughts. If you find this too hard, it might suggest that you need to work with a psychologist on this.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs. Help them to help you by letting them know when you are tired, need time out, or need a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- Make time to practise relaxation. You can use a formal relaxation technique, or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. This will help your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- If the trauma that you experienced stirs up other memories or feelings from a past unrelated stressful occurrence, or even childhood experiences, try not to let the memories all blur together. Keep the memories separate and deal with them separately.

## When to seek professional assistance

Anyone can ask for a few consultations with a psychologist at any time. You should seek professional assistance if the symptoms resulting from the trauma are very distressing or last for more than a few weeks. Warning signs may include:

- Being unable to handle the intense feelings or physical sensations
- Worry or uncertainty about what is happening to you
- Feeling numb and empty beyond the first month
- Continuing to experience strong distressing emotions
- Continuing to have physical symptoms of being tense, agitated, and on edge
- Continuing to have disturbed sleep or nightmares
- Having no-one to support you and with whom you can share your feelings and emotions
- Having emerging relationship problems with friends, family and colleagues
- Increasing your use of alcohol or drugs.

## How is psychological trauma treated?

For some people the response to the trauma can be debilitating and treatment from a trained mental health professional can help the person to recover.

Treatments for a severe trauma response focus on providing education, stress management techniques, and helping the affected person stop the memories and images running through their head. There are '*cognitive therapy*' and '*exposure-based*' techniques that work here.

Medication, particularly some of the new antidepressant drugs like the SSRI's, can often be useful alongside trauma-focused psychological approaches.

If you ever wish to speak with a fully trained clinical psychologist, contact  
Basten & Associates, [www.bastenpsychology.com.au](http://www.bastenpsychology.com.au)