



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

# COPING WITH TRAUMA

## Information Sheet

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## Introduction

This information leaflet is designed for you if you have been recently exposed to a traumatic event. It aims to provide you with information to help you understand your experience and reactions and how best to help and support yourself while you are healing.

## What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is usually one which involves an encounter with death or other serious harm. This can happen if we are directly attacked, or involved in a serious accident or health event. It can also happen if we see someone else hurt or threatened with hurt (including attempting suicide) or indeed if we are involved in dealing with the injured or dead in the aftermath of such an occurrence. As well as threats to our bodily integrity we can also sometimes be traumatised by threats to our psychological integrity – for example when we feel a sense of emotional harm as a result of an aggressive verbal assault. Sometimes other events, which may not appear particularly traumatic to others or even ourselves, can cause us to feel traumatised if they have a particular significance for us.

## Why do I feel traumatised?

We go about our everyday lives at home and in work, expecting or assuming that things around us will be normal and that the ups and downs and stresses that we will meet will be within our ability to handle. We know in the back of our minds that accidents and tragedies can happen, but we live with the assumption that they won't happen to us. When trauma happens it can therefore shake or shatter our assumptions about ourselves and the world – in particular our beliefs about our safety, our ability to cope and justice or fairness in the world. For a while we may feel distressed and overwhelmed as we struggle to re-build our experience of the world to include the fact that this traumatic event has occurred. We often need to adjust or re-build our assumptions about ourselves and our life post trauma – often particularly the assumptions we hold about our safety, predictability and our coping skills. We may have experienced physical injury or even disability as a result of the event and may also find ourselves struggling to make adjustments in relation to this and to grieve our perceived losses.

## The Experience of Trauma

Our immediate reactions in an acutely traumatic situation are usually geared towards our survival by engaging us in immediate coping responses. Our survival instinct prompts us to react instantly to a potential threat, and triggers the actions in us that will generally help us to deal with it. While the incident is occurring a variety of chemicals are rapidly released into our blood stream to give us high energy, highly focussed concentration, and some immunity to pain.

The following are some of the specific reactions you may or may not experience during and following a traumatic event.

*Remember these are normal reactions to abnormal traumatic events.*

**DURING THE INCIDENT:** At the time of the incident you may find yourself acting automatically and feeling nothing. Or you may be frozen and unable to act. If you are struck you may not feel the blow. Time may seem to slow down or stand still. You may feel your heart pounding and feel tension and fear. There can be a sense of shock and disbelief.

## IMMEDIATELY AFTER

**Immediately after the incident** you may react with uncontrollable shaking, nausea, crying, tension, weakness in the limbs or feeling drained. Or you may feel high and full of nervous energy. Or you may remain numbed for some time. These are normal human reactions based on the body's 'fight or flight' response, and are not related to any personal strengths or weaknesses.

**AS THINGS SINK IN:** After a traumatic incident we may feel physical and emotional hurt. These emotional hurts can be considered natural reactions to traumatic events. Initially shock or numbness mean that pain or upset are not initially felt too strongly - emotions may be flat and you may feel a bit 'spaced out' or disconnected from your surroundings. When the numbness fades emotions can feel powerful and overwhelming.

Feelings might include:

- ◆ Deep sadness or a vague sense of loss.
- ◆ Helplessness and shame at not being able to control the situation better.
- ◆ Anxiety about your safety or the safety of your close family. You may find yourself more hyper-vigilant to dangers in your environment. You may feel anxiety around the place or similar places where the incident happened or in relation to similar scenarios.
- ◆ Anger, pent up at the time, may be released later at friends, family, work colleagues. You may feel angry with an individual, at an employer, at 'society', at God.
- ◆ You may feel guilty and question if something you did or didn't do contributed to you or others being hurt.

### Recovering from trauma

Our mind and bodies seek to heal and recover and the reactions we experience are often largely geared to assist with our healing and our self-protection

while this healing is happening. You may find the following description of stages helpful in understanding this healing process. We may not always move through the stages below in sequence – we may go back and forward through these stages for a while - for example feeling numb to dawning realisation to feeling numb again. We may proceed through these stages in a few days or over a longer period of time. The length of time it may take us to heal and adapt can vary depending on a number of factors such as the nature of the trauma, its personal significance for us or the extent of our physical injuries.

### STAGES OF RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA

**Shock/Numbness:** In the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, we usually find ourselves 'coming down' from the highly charged state we were in during the trauma as our body seeks to return to a steadier state. We may feel shocked and numbed for a while, we may burst into tears or shake uncontrollably, we may be giddy or 'high', we may be agitated - we will almost always feel drained.

**Realisation/ Acknowledgement:** During this stage the reality of what has happened and its significance begins to dawn on us and sink in. This can be quite a disconcerting and upsetting time and we often struggle against the fact that the traumatic event has occurred and the apparent consequences of it e.g. 'Its not right or fair' 'It shouldn't have happened'.

**Acceptance:** At this point we begin the process of accepting the event and it's consequences, perhaps still bargaining at times or considering 'if only' scenarios, but ultimately striving to accept the losses and changes that may result from the event.

**Adaptation:** At this point we invest our energies in adapting and adjusting psychologically and practically if needs be, integrating the traumatic event into our life experience.

*Nature heals through allowing these feelings to be expressed*

**LONGER TERM** The after effects of trauma usually begin to fade after a few weeks. However it is also normal for these feelings to occur for some time afterwards. Previous traumas, current high stress or feelings of insecurity can exacerbate the effects of an incident. A seemingly minor event may trigger emotions associated with previous upset or other trauma.

### *Helping Yourself*

While there is a natural healing process that kicks in after such a trauma, you can help yourself in some ways: -

- ◆ Immediately after a traumatic incident don't go home alone or spend the evening alone if possible.
- ◆ Don't become too alarmed at your reac M h