



Helping adults cope after a traumatic event

A traumatic event is one that can be deeply distressing and frightening. It can include being involved in or witnessing a serious accident, event, or traumatic death.

Even though the event may be over, it is very common and quite normal for people to experience emotional reactions to what they have experienced.

Why do we react strongly to traumatic events?

Traumatic incidents usually occur suddenly and without warning. We have no time to prepare or adjust to this new experience and we are faced with not knowing what to do or how to behave. The experience of a traumatic incident often shatters the basic beliefs we have about life – being safe, secure and with particular meaning and purpose.

How adults experience traumatic events

We all react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings and you may be surprised by the strength of your feelings.

Some common feelings include:

Shock

Immediately after a traumatic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, numb, stunned and not connected to what is going on around you.

Numbness

A traumatic experience may cause blocking of feelings, and result in withdrawal from interests, people and activities.

Denial

When in denial you are unable to accept that the traumatic event has happened, so you react as though it hasn't happened.

Adrenaline Reaction

You may feel your body is in continuous turmoil (churned up) you may also find it difficult to rest, sleep, and experience a loss of concentration.

Sad

Particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.

Angry

About what has happened and with whoever was responsible.

Frightened

That the same thing will happen again, or that you may lose control of your feelings and break down.

Guilt

That you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it.

Ashamed or embarrassed

That you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you.

Relieved

That the danger is over and that the danger has gone.

Distanced

After a traumatic event, you may distance yourself from those you are close to, friends and family.

You may experience some or all of the following reactions:

- Changes in appetite.
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
- Have difficulty thinking clearly.
- Aches and pains.
- Feel very tired.
- Feel that your heart is beating faster.
- Poor concentration.
- Changes in sex drive and libido.

What can you do?

Accept:

It is important that you acknowledge you have been through a highly stressful experience.

Take care of yourself:

Maintain a regular routine of eating, sleeping and daily activities. Allow yourself extra time to complete tasks and get plenty of rest. Try not to rely on alcohol or drugs and avoid making hasty decisions.

Practice Breathing:

People under stress or experiencing panic unconsciously change their pattern of breathing. When you feel stressed or panicky take 4 to 5 slow deep breaths that let you inhale and exhale completely. Relax your muscles as you exhale.

Don't bottle it up:

Talk about your feelings and stress reaction with someone who is a good listener and is supportive. Talking to friends, family, colleagues, or a specialist is a natural way to heal from very stressful experiences. The memories of what happened may come into your mind and there is often a need to think and talk about it to help you adjust. Don't worry if you cry when you talk. It's natural and usually helpful. Take things at a pace that you feel comfortable with.

Give yourself time:

It takes time – weeks or months – to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or who) you have lost.

Get into a routine:

Even if you don't feel like eating, try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help, but start gently.

Get back to social activities:

Spend time engaging in activities that are fun or entertaining.

Don't make any life changes:

Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you will later regret. Given time, traumatic experiences can often be a turning point for many people who find they can reevaluate the meaning and value of life and appreciate the little things that they had often overlooked.

When should you get professional help?

Many people find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce. However, you may need to see professional help if your feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long.

You should seek support from a specialist if:

- You feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety or other reactions
- You have no one to share your feelings with for support
- You detach from friends and family more and more.
- You are drinking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep.
- Your work is suffering.

Where to get support

The best route to accessing support is through Jersey Talking Therapies, who we have partnered with a range of private psychological therapists and counsellors to provide specialist services that are specific to the major incidents. To access this support, please email: JTT@health.gov.je and mention 'Major Incidents' in the subject heading.

Further support

There is no wrong door when it comes to accessing the support you need. In addition to counselling and psychological support, the following services can help, should this be your preference.

Listening Lounge:

01534 866793 Monday to Friday: 10am to 10pm. Weekends 8am-midnight. Call or walk-in.

Bereavement Support and Counselling (Jersey Hospice):

01534 285144 or email: bereavement@jerseyhospicecare.com

If you're worried about your mental health and need urgent support and help, don't hesitate to call Adult Mental Health 24-hour crisis line: 01534 445290