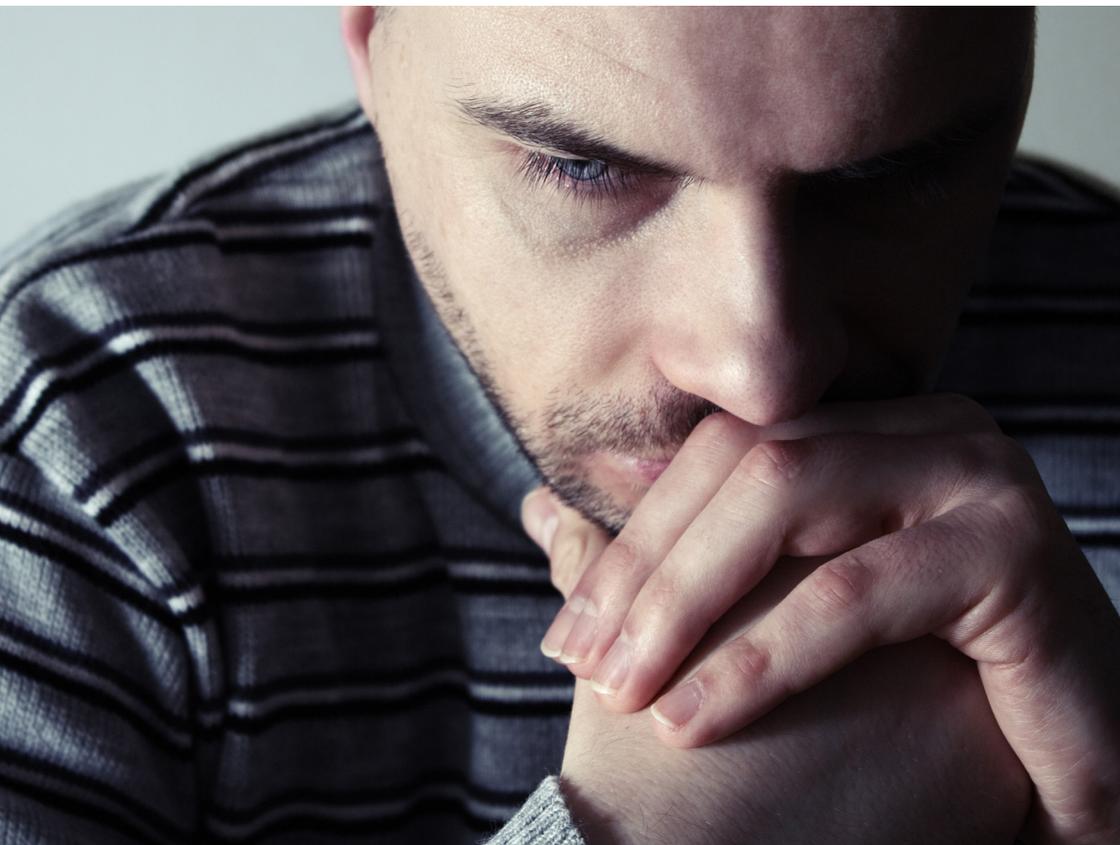


THE AFTERMATH OF A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

INFORMATION FOR ADULTS



This information is provided by the Coordination Team for Psychosocial Support for the Victims of Traumatic Events. The Team includes representatives of Social Work, the Victim Support Bureau, the Police, Mental Welfare organizations, and the GGD (local health authority). Please feel free to show this leaflet to other members of your immediate family, or to relatives, neighbours or any other individuals who were involved. Folders giving details of situations of this kind are also available for parents and children.

What are traumatic experiences?

- brief, overwhelming experiences triggered by sudden, external events;
- experiences that cause pain, confusion and fear;
- experiences that may involve physical injuries and/or a feeling that your life has spun out of control;
- experiences that suddenly make you feel vulnerable and that nothing is predictable, giving rise to insecurity and a sense of helplessness;
- experiences that produce other responses that may seem strange or unusual.

The information contained in this leaflet can help you to better understand your responses, and to cope with them more effectively.

What responses might you experience?

Grief

Being grief-stricken is normal, especially when lives are lost, people are injured, or if there is substantial material damage.

Helplessness

Traumatic events are always devastating. You are sometimes able to do act effectively in emergencies, but at other times you may feel powerless and unable to do anything.

Numbness

The shock of a tragic event may cause you to feel numb and emotionally exhausted. Normal feelings may be blocked for some time. You may find yourself less able to cope with everyday tensions. You may tend to avoid others or you may suddenly not feel like doing things you previously enjoyed, such as hobbies and sporting activities.

Denial

You may find that you do not want to talk about the situation, in order to forget it as soon as possible. You may try to block out your emotions and do your best to find distraction, by distancing yourself or by other means. As a result, those in your immediate family or social circle will not understand what is happening to you and may even actively avoid you.

Fear

New fears and worries may develop. You may be afraid to leave your house, or to be at home alone. You may be afraid that you are unable to cope, or that you are losing your grip on life. Alternatively, you may be afraid that the traumatic situation will occur again.

Feelings of guilt

Instead of being relieved that you functioned well in a time of crisis, you may feel guilty that others died or were injured. You may ask yourself whether you could have done more to

help. You might also start asking yourself why you survived while others were not so lucky.

Anger

Feelings of overwhelming anger may suddenly be triggered for no apparent reason. You may even feel that this is somehow abnormal. In addition, your friends or relatives might comment that you have changed since the traumatic event occurred.

Your feelings of anger or rage may persist for a long time, due to the apparent senselessness and injustice of what happened. You may be angry with those that caused the event, or with those who did nothing to avert the calamity.

A changed outlook on the future

Traumatic events may drastically change your outlook on life. For example, instead taking an optimistic view of the future, you may be filled with deep disappointment and pessimism.

Restlessness

You are unable find peace, to relax, or to sleep. You may also find it difficult to concentrate or to remember things.

Reliving the event

The event may have made such a strong impression on you that you relive it again and again. This may continue for a long time after the original event took place. Reliving traumatic experiences and having nightmares is all quite normal, as is re-experiencing the feelings you had during or immediately after the event. You may also be overwhelmed by a feeling that you are re-experiencing the original event. Repeatedly reliving such events can generate a great deal of tension and fear. Yet you should try to remember that these responses are all perfectly normal.

Crying

Crying brings relief. It is better to give vent to your feelings than to fight back the tears.

Talking

Talking helps, especially with someone you trust.

Family and friends

People often tend to withdraw from the company of relatives, friends or colleagues. This may lead to other personal problems of various kinds, and it may exacerbate any existing relationship problems. These issues are often combined with a growing feeling that "nobody understands what I am going through". This thought often prevents people from seeking the support and help of others whereas, in fact, other people are the most important source of support and consolation in times of distress.

Physical reactions

In addition to affecting you emotionally, traumatic events may give rise to physical reactions. These can occur immediately after the event but, sometimes, they can appear up to several months afterwards. Some of the most common physical reactions are:

Fatigue and exhaustion

Your body has been subjected to immense, protracted stress, and this will not suddenly disappear when the event itself is over. Your body may continue to experience excessive stress for a protracted period of time. This will lead to fatigue and, ultimately, to exhaustion.

Muscle tension

You may feel tension in various parts of your body. This could lead to: stiffness, pain in various places, headaches, a feeling of suffocation, pain in the chest, dizziness.

Palpitations

Long-term emotional imbalance invariably results in complaints such as palpitations, breaking out in a sweat, trembling and quivering, stomach ache and intestinal complaints. While medical treatment can often bring some relief, it is important to realize that these reactions should, in general, be attributed to the traumatic experience in question.

When trying to cope with what happened, the most important step is talking to others about it.

The best way to help yourself

First and foremost, you should never bottle your feelings up, no matter how traumatized or shocked you may be.

You could:

- try to distract yourself by thinking of other things, or by helping others;
- try to find out what actually happened, instead of trusting in your own view of events;
- try to be aware of the exact feelings triggered by the event in question, and talk to others about them;
- try to think about the importance that life holds for you after the event, and try to make plans for the future.

You will find it very worthwhile to try out these suggestions, even though it may involve a great deal of effort at first. It will take a lot of time to work through your experiences. The process of recovery cannot be hurried.

Those who have been exposed to serious stress will be preoccupied by it and will, therefore, be at greater risk. So, take extra care when driving,

when at work and when carrying out daily activities.

When should you ask for help?

As previously stated, your emotional reactions will gradually fade. However, some experiences are so traumatic that they continue to occupy your thoughts and to affect you for a long time. In cases like this you may need extra help. This is particularly applicable if, after a protracted period of time (approx. three months), you are still suffering from one or more of the following side effects:

- you are no longer able to deal with your feelings and physical reactions;
- you are no longer able to structure your feelings;
- you continue to be troubled by dreams, emotions and images of the event in question, which gives rise to anxiety and an inability to calm down;
- you are no longer able to relax, you feel confused and exhausted;
- your ability to do your job is affected;
- you have to continually distract yourself to avoid becoming upset;
- you suffer from sleep disorders;
- you often become angry without reason;
- you don't have anybody to share your feelings with;
- your relationships are starting to suffer from this, or your family and friends all say that you have changed;
- you are convinced that you are more accident-prone than you were before;
- you are more dependent on medicines, or you smoke, drink or eat more than before;
- you feel emotionally exhausted ('burnt out').

Issued by:

The Kennemerland Regional Team for Psychosocial Support for the Victims of Traumatic Events, January 2017.

The aim of this booklet is to provide a guideline for coping with traumatic experiences, such as accidents, disasters, or other tragic events suffered personally by you or by your relatives.

Addresses for assistance and advice:



You have spoken with:

Name:

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Organisation:

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