

# Recognising the Effects of Traumatic Events

Most people involved in a frightening event experience a strong emotional reaction. It's reassuring to know that, even though these feelings may be very unpleasant, they are normal reactions in a normal person to an abnormal event. It is often difficult for those who were not involved to understand what you're going through; you could show this tip sheet to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them. Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to trauma.



## EMOTIONAL

- Shock — disbelief at what happened
- Fear — of a recurrence, for the safety of you or your family
- Anger — at the injustice and senselessness of it all, or a generalised anger and irritability
- Sadness — about human and material losses, or feeling depressed for no reason
- Shame — for having appeared helpless or emotional

### Sleep

- Restless and disturbed sleep
- Feeling tired and fatigued

### Physical agitations

- Easily startled by noises
- Palpitations, trembling or sweating
- Breathing difficulties
- Headaches or general aches and pains
- Nausea, diarrhoea or constipation



## BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

### Social

- Withdrawal from others and a need to be alone
- Easily irritated by other people
- Feelings of detachment from others
- Loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies

### Work

- Not wanting to go to work, poor motivation
- Poor concentration and attention

## Habits

- Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
- Loss of appetite or increased eating
- Loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- Loss of sexual interest

## Thoughts and feelings

- Flashbacks or feelings of 'reliving' the experience
- Dreams and nightmares about what happened
- Difficulty making simple decisions
- Problems with concentration and memory

The signs and symptoms described above are common reactions to a traumatic experience, although occasionally they may not appear until some time after the event. Most of them are part of the normal process of recovery and help the person adapt to the trauma.

They can, however, be very unpleasant for those affected and their families. Usually they will diminish over a period of a few weeks, although some may last for months or even years, especially if the experience was particularly frightening.

You may also find that the feelings get worse when you are reminded of the event or when you discuss your experiences with other people. Try not to let that stop you from talking about it — in the long term, sharing your experiences and feelings with others will help.

**Some people benefit from extra help in overcoming the effects of a traumatic experience. Do not be afraid to get help if you think you need it: it's not a sign of weakness.**



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