



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

When Trauma Affects Someone Close to You

Information Leaflet

Compiled by Dublin South Psychology Services
Our Lady's Clinic,
Patrick's St., Dun Laoghaire,
Co. Dublin.

Tel: 01 6637300

What is 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, if we experience traumatic bereavement 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, witnessing suicide or attempted suicide. 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.

How do Traumatic Events affect us?

When an event such as the above happens we can react with a range of responses. These reactions can happen even though we do not experience serious harm – it is the perception of the potential damage to us that causes the effects. We can also experience these reactions when we ourselves were not in danger, but we see or know of a traumatic incident happening to someone close to us.

Following a traumatic incident we usually react in ways that are normal, but it may be beyond what we or others expect or are prepared for. These effects can happen (or not) regardless of the strength or other qualities of the people involved. They come from the triggering of our deepest survival instincts, and can therefore be very powerful.

They are a combination of us adjusting to the shock of what happened, and processing it in order to adjust and return to a normal level of arousal.

When someone close to you is affected by a traumatic event, the support you offer and your own concerns can be helped by you knowing and understanding what to expect. It is also normal for your loved one not to experience the following or to experience just some of these reactions. Remember it is the event that is 'abnormal' or out of the ordinary not the person's reactions.

Common reactions following a traumatic event

Soon after an incident:-

- Numbed emotions or sense of 'going through the motions'
- Or
- Agitated, 'high' behaviour,
- Tension, nausea, crying
- Sense of collapse (weak knees, fatigue)
- Confusion, concentration and attention difficulties

Then:-

- Sadness and grief
- Helplessness
- Lack of concentration
- Anger, Irritability, short temper
- Anxiety about safety
- Panic attacks/ panicky feelings

- Easily startled, hyper-alert to dangers
- Sleep problems
- Nightmares, flashbacks (strong waves of feeling as if back in the situation),
- Difficulty going out, or being in crowded places
- Getting lost in thoughts and feelings, losing track of time
- Memories of what happened intruding
- Less interest in normal activities
- Questioning of basic beliefs, assumptions
- Pessimism about the future
- Drinking and smoking more
- Appetite changes
- Tired and drained

These are common reactions, though not everybody will experience them all. Healing takes place naturally, and after-effects usually start to fade after a few weeks, although some people may have longer lasting effects.

Ways for family members and friends to help

While these responses are normal, they can put strain on relationships with people closest. Family and friends may bear the brunt of irritability. They may feel shut out and feel powerless to help. They may worry about the health of the person. They may not understand why the person wants to do certain things or not. The following are ways you can help your loved one and take care of yourself.

- ◆ Knowing about and accepting normal reactions to traumatic events can help you not become too alarmed by their reactions - remember they are normal and that they will pass.
- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatised person
- Offer your assistance and listening ear.
- If needed, offer practical help with everyday tasks such as cleaning, cooking, caring for family, minding children.
- Give them some private time; don't overwhelm them with your concern. Some of the time they may not feel like talking.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them they are lucky it wasn't worse – traumatised people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- Don't take decisions for them or pressurise them into doing something they may not be sure they want.
- Don't give instant solutions to their problems, such as quitting their 'dangerous' job or giving directions about travel or study. This may hinder them from talking to you about their feelings.
- Make sure you look after yourself. Try to get enough sleep, eat well, get some exercise and get support for yourself

Further Support after a Traumatic Event

Taking care of ourselves, allowing time to heal and recover and the support of family and friends are likely to be sufficient in helping us as we recover and heal following traumatic events and losses. The activation of these supports often occurs naturally in a way that may vary depending on age and circumstances. If someone has few family or social supports the healing and adjustment can be more difficult.

Sometimes because of the nature of an event or its significance for us additional supports may be helpful. These may take the form of some more formal critical incident support services provided through your health service, education or workplace setting. You can discuss this with your GP, by contacting your Primary care Psychology services or accessing counselling services provided in your education or workplace setting.

If you have concerns about the safety of a family member, please discuss this with your GP or access out of hours supports through the A&E department of your local hospital.