

Managing Traumatic Stress Symptoms and Stressful Events

Traumatic events are unexpected and negative incidents that suddenly and unexpectedly intrude on our daily lives. Traumatic events can range from mild disruptions to our lives through sudden changes in physical circumstances such as missing an appointments, minor accidents, or the sudden departure of work colleagues or friends to more severe stressors like major medical conditions, the death of a loved one, severe and unexpected physical injury due to accident or assault and/ or major financial stressors and sudden unemployment. Of course the severity of the trauma experienced varies across individuals and situations and an event that someone may find mildly traumatic may be experienced as severely traumatic for someone else.

When you experience a traumatic event it is quite normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions. These reactions often remain after the traumatic event has ceased and can takes days or weeks to subside. Sometimes the symptoms of a stress reaction may last longer than days or weeks depending on the severity and circumstances of the trauma and available follow-up support.

Common Reactions After Stressful Events

Common physical, cognitive (thinking) and emotional reactions indicative of traumatic stress are outlined below:

➤ ***Physical***

- Fatigue/ Exhaustion
- Nausea
- Restlessness
- Head Aches
- Disturbed Sleep
- Nightmares
- Excessive alertness & being easily startled.

➤ ***Cognitive (thinking)***

- Poor Concentration
- Flashbacks
- Disorientation
- Poor Attention & Memory
- Intrusive thoughts
- Confusion

➤ ***Emotional***

- Fear
- Numbness & Detachment
- Avoidance
- Depression
- Guilt
- Over-sensitivity
- Anxiety & Panic
- Withdrawal & Tearfulness.

These are normal reactions. Although these symptoms can be distressing, they are part of the natural healing process that a person goes through as the mind and body readjust and come to terms with what has occurred.

It is quite normal to have strong emotional or physical reactions to traumatic events. These reactions often remain after the traumatic event has ceased and can take days or weeks to subside. With understanding and support from family, friends and colleagues the stress symptoms usually resolve more rapidly. However, sometimes a traumatic event can be so distressing and the ensuing distress so severe that professional assistance from your psychologist may be warranted. Psychologists have extensive training in dealing with difficult stress symptoms and assisting in the resolution of complex and painful emotional and physical trauma symptoms.

Things You Can Do To Help Yourself

There are several things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from stressful events. The following points provide some general advice. See your APS psychologist for further information and detailed strategies.

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and acknowledge that you will experience some reaction to it. Excessive denial, or refusal to accept your feelings can delay the recovery process. Remind yourself daily that you are not abnormal and that you can and are coping. Don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or other drugs to cope. Also avoid making any major decisions or big life changes.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of what has happened. Gradually confronting what has happened will assist in coming to terms with the traumatic experience.
- Don't 'bottle up' your feelings. Talk to people and share your experiences with others when opportunities arise. This may feel uncomfortable at times but talking to understanding people is helpful in dealing with trauma. Your Psychologist is highly trained and supportive of your need to talk things through and can be an extra support if needed.
- Try to maintain a normal routine. Keep busy and structure your day. Make sure you do not unnecessarily avoid certain activities or places. Allow yourself time to rest if experiencing fatigue and remember that regular exercise is important.
- Let your friends and family know of your needs and the normality of your reactions. Help them to help you by letting them know when you're tired, need time out, or need a chance to talk or just be with someone.
- Make time to practice relaxation: whether you use a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation or just make time to absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music – this helps your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.
- If the trauma that you experience stirs up other memories or feelings from past unrelated stressful occurrences, or even childhood experiences, try not to let them all blur together: keep them separate and deal with them separately.
- Express your feelings as they arise; whether you discuss them with someone else, or write them down in a diary – expressing them in some way helps the healing process.