

## **Trauma**

Trauma seems to be one of the unavoidable aspects of human life. By the time most people are adults, they will have experienced one form of trauma or another. A traumatic event is any event that involves serious injury or death of a family member or colleague, or any person. It could also be defined as any incident charged with profound emotion or involving serious threat in which event people could be killed. It is an event with extremely unusual circumstances that produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction beyond the individual's normal coping mechanisms, making them feel overwhelmed by feelings of fear, helplessness, horror, rage and shame.

### **Reactions to Trauma**

- It is normal for one to experience the following reactions after a trauma.
- Tearful feeling tired and a lack of energy, poor memory and concentration, sleeplessness, numbness, loss of feelings, irritability and low tolerance, increased muscle tension, nightmares and flash backs, loss of interest and headaches.
- Fear of similar events happening again, of losing control, of being alone, of damage to oneself or loved ones.
- Guilt for surviving or being better off than others, regrets for things not done.
- Shame at not having acted as you would have wished, for having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needy.
- Anger at what happened or who caused it or at the lack of understanding in others
- Disappointed about all the plans that can never be fulfilled.
- Strained relationships: the good feelings may be replaced by conflict, you may not have as much to give, and others may not understand or give you what you need.

## **Helpful care after Trauma**

### **Immediately after the event**

- Make sure you talk to people.
- Don't go home to an empty house; get a friend or a relative to stay with you.
- Talk about the incident with others, it will help you get over the reactions.
- Remind yourself that the event is over and you are safe now.
- Do some physical exercise to help burn off the tension and anxiety.
- Try to avoid alcohol, sedatives and sleeping pills - they will dull the experience and stop you dealing with your reactions properly.
- Try to avoid or reduce the use of stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola or cigarettes - you don't want to make your body more agitated than it is.
- Try to eat something even if you don't feel like it. Extreme stress responses can eat up a lot of your body's energy and cause weight loss.
- If you can't get to sleep, don't stay in bed tossing and turning – get up and do something relaxing until you are tired.

### **In the few days following the event**

- Remind yourself that your reactions are a normal result of experiencing traumatic events and will pass in time.
- Try to re-establish your normal routine as soon as possible, but don't exact too much on yourself. Slowly introduce yourself to tasks that seem hard.
- If you feel uncomfortable, anxious or afraid, take some long, slow abdominal breaths and remind yourself that the trauma is over.
- Be sure to do some things you enjoy that relax you, don't overwork yourself.

- Continue talking to your family, friends and colleagues about the trauma. This will help you get over your feelings. You might feel a bit detached from other people, still do not reject their support.
- Reduce stress levels by making sure you get enough sleep, eat well and healthily and exercise on a regular basis. Practice relaxation to reduce nervous tension.
- Be more careful when driving or using machinery as it is common to have accidents after severe stress.
- Permit yourself to have time to deal with the memories. Some aspects of the experience might be hard to forget.

#### **How to cope after a trauma**

- Accept feelings of numbness: Your mind allows the misfortune to be felt only slowly.
- Keep active: Helping others might bring some relief but be careful not to overdo it as a way of avoiding thinking about the event. Maintain a balance between the two.
- Confront reality: Return to the scene of event and attend funerals.
- Seek support: Share with others, allow others to offer physical and emotional support.
- Maintain privacy: As you deal with feelings, there will be times where you will need to be on your own or just with close family or friends.
- Process your feelings: It is helpful to think and talk about it over and over again. This will help you better process your feelings and helps you to move forward with your life.
- Understand the meaning of trauma: Discuss how this might link up with earlier events in your life.
- Examine and alter unhelpful attributions: e.g. "I should have done more."

#### **Some Do's and Don'ts**

- Do express your emotions - cry if possible.
- Do take every opportunity to review the experience with yourself and others.
- Do take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with those important to you.
- Do try to keep your life as normal as possible: let children keep up with their activities and stay at school.
- Do try to go along with situations or triggers that bring back painful memories of the event, rather than avoiding them.
- Don't bottle up feelings.
- Don't avoid talking about what happened.
- Don't expect the memories to go away – the feelings will stay for a long time to come.

#### **When to seek help**

- If you feel you cannot handle intense feelings or body sensations. If you feel your emotions not falling in place over a period of time, and you feel chronic tension, confusion, emptiness or exhaustion.
- If after a month you continue to feel numb and empty and do not have the appropriate feeling described.
- If you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep.
- If you have no person or group with whom to share your emotions and you feel the need to do so.
- If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems.
- If you have accidents.
- If you continue to smoke, drink or take drugs in excess since the event.
- If your performance suffers.
- If you note that those around you are particularly vulnerable or are not healing satisfactorily.

- If as a helper you are suffering exhaustion.

Do remember that you are basically the same person as you were before the event.

Do remember that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Do remember that if you suffer too much or too long that help is available.

### **Where to find help**

- Cornerstone Counselling Service has qualified Trauma Counsellors Tele: 0207 723 8050
- Your family doctor
- The Social Services department of your local Council
- Cruse Bereavement Care: Website – [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)
- Local representatives of : British Red Cross Relate Samaritans
- Your Citizen's Advice Bureau will have the address of these and other voluntary organizations that can help you.

Taken from an article by Thembe Mapingire in the BUC Mental Wellness handbook( 2009)

References: 1. Powell Trevor, The mental Health handbook (2000) speech Mark Publishing Ltd. 2. Centre for stress management (2004) Trauma and PTSD