



University of Essex

AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT



OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

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INTRODUCTION

You may have been involved, or know someone who has been involved in, a traumatic incident.

The impact of an event may be so significant that it may be re-experienced for several hours after the incident and individuals may appear out of character (over the top or withdrawn).

Flashbacks and dreams are also common as is the feeling that the event is happening again. The reactions to this, although natural, can be distressing and frightening.

You may know someone who suffers from the following feelings and reactions. This is a normal occurrence following involvement in, or witnessing of, an abnormal event.

If you have been involved in a traumatic incident and do not experience any reaction, this is normal too.

POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

■ Sadness

Profound sadness is common following traumatic deaths, severe injuries and losses of every kind. It is not unusual to cry.

■ Anger

Anger may be felt about the injustice (senselessness) of an incident. This anger may not dissipate and can present as angry outbursts.

■ Continual adrenaline reaction

You may feel that your body is in continuous turmoil (churned up). You may find it difficult to rest, sleep or have peace of mind.

■ Memory loss/difficulty concentrating

You may experience loss of concentration or memory.

■ Numbness

A traumatic experience may cause blocking of feelings, withdrawal from feelings, interests, people and activities.

■ Living on borrowed time

Traumatic events can fundamentally change a person's outlook on life and possibly induce morbid thoughts on death. They may also trigger concern for family members' safety and mortality.

■ Helplessness

These incidents may be overwhelming, making us feel powerless to help.

■ Guilt

When others have been injured or killed, a common reaction is to feel guilty for surviving or for not having done more.

■ Panic

This emotional reaction may arise suddenly, is usually short-lived and can be very distressing and unpleasant.

■ Fear

New fears and worries may start to feature in your life. The fear of losing control or breaking down may be intense. Fear of a similar incident happening again may become a pre-occupation.

POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF TRAUMATIC STRESS ON YOUR BODY

Mind and body work in conjunction and, in addition to emotional distress, the human body may react in certain ways.

After the 'adrenaline rush' required at an incident, the body may need to shut down, leading to extreme tiredness or exhaustion.

Alternatively, the 'adrenaline rush' may persist, resulting in:

- Palpitations of the heart
- Rapid respirations
- Tremors, shaking, profuse sweating especially palms of hands
- Gastro-intestinal symptoms such as diarrhoea, vomiting, constipation, loss of appetite, comfort eating
- Tension. This can result in muscles tensing, causing headaches, backaches or general stiffness, chest pains, dizziness, a choking sensation (lump in the throat)

All of these are common physical symptoms.

POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF POST – TRAUMATIC STRESS ON RELATIONSHIPS

After a traumatic event, you may tend to distance yourselves from those you are close to, be they friends, colleagues or family. You may imagine your feelings are best not shared.

This is the very time when you **should** share your feelings. You and your family may experience some or all of the following (however, the list is not exhaustive):

Avoiding anything to do with the incident

It is not unknown that people involved in a traumatic event wish to avoid anything that might remind them of what happened, for example; avoiding certain locations, sounds, people, smells.

Pre-occupation with the incident

In the first few days and weeks after a traumatic event, it is often normal to feel somewhat preoccupied with what has happened. This might only tend to indicate serious problems if it lasts longer than a month or disrupts usual activities and relationships.

Withdrawal

If a person is struggling to cope with what has happened, they might not be able to talk to their partner, family or friends. They may become withdrawn and assume that no-one around them will understand.

Constantly recounting the event

Others may not understand why the affected person needs to talk about what happened, and may become frustrated. Sometimes, people believe the affected person should "pull themselves together" but this is difficult to do and the individual affected will need patience and understanding from those around them.

Nightmares and Dreams

Having disturbed sleep or waking in a panic or a sweat is not uncommon. A partner might find

this frightening or disturbing.

Feeling that life is pointless

Some people become apathetic or find it hard to see the point in ordinary daily activities.

Inability to make decisions

If a person is preoccupied with what has happened, they may find it difficult to make even simple decisions about things that are normally straightforward.

Disinterest in relationships

Friends and families may find it difficult to understand when a person seems to lose interest in the people and relationships closest to them. Disinterest may occur because of pre-occupation with the incident.

Suppressing feelings

It is not uncommon for a person who has been affected by a traumatic event to suppress their feelings, or give vent to their feelings at inappropriate times. Some people find it difficult to maintain their usual reactions and behaviours.

Loss of self-esteem and self worth

A person involved in, or witness to, a traumatic incident may doubt their self worth as a result of having felt unable to "make a difference" to what was happening at the scene.

Loss of interest in usual activities

As with "withdrawal", a person may lose interest in their work, hobbies etc. Sometimes, this loss of interest in what is familiar is characterised by a desire for change – possibly a new home or a new job.

SELF HELP

Talking to friends, family, colleagues can help.

Further help

Experience shows that reactions to traumatic incidents usually fade as time passes. However, if you continue to experience:

- The incident in the forefront of your mind
- Feelings of tension, exhaustion, confusion or restlessness
- Feelings of anger
- Those close to you commenting on your personality change
- Deterioration of your work performance
- Nightmares, flash backs, panic attacks or disturbed sleeping patterns
- Adverse impact on your relationships
- A change in sexual drive
- Being more accident prone
- Feeling as if you want to avoid contact with work, or people connected with it
- An increase in your smoking/drinking habits
- Erratic eating patterns
- Over reliance on medication

...don't bottle it up

If you feel you need to speak with someone in confidence about your thoughts and feelings, there is help available, please see pages 8 and 9 for further information.

HELP AVAILABLE FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF ONLY

Occupational Health

T 01206 872399

E ohquery@essex.ac.uk

The Occupational Health Service provides professional advice on work-related health issues to University staff. We are proactive in the prevention of work-related ill health, and so offer a wide range of resources to promote good health and wellbeing.

We also provide specialist guidance and advice to employee relations, heads of departments/ sections and supervisors regarding fitness for work and the effect of ill health on an individual's employment.

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

The EAP service is a confidential information service designed to help you with personal or work-related problems that may be affecting your health, wellbeing or performance. The counselling service is available to all current employees who are on the University of Essex payroll.

The service offers access, 24 hours a day and 365 days per year, at no cost to you. For more information regarding the EAP service please visit the Occupational Health Service webpages: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/health-and-wellbeing/employee-assistance-programme>

Support available:

- Legal guidance
- Financial information
- Debt counselling
- Health and wellbeing information
- Younger care
- Elder care

To access the EAP service please contact HealthHeroes on:
T 0800 358 48 58
(outside UK: +44 141 271 7179)

Online Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

SilverCloud programme uses clinically proven tools based on CBT techniques to help you identify key problems and then offers activities to help you overcome these. SilverCloud can be accessed from your computer, tablet or mobile phone, 24/7. To access this please follow this link www.essex.ac.uk/staff/health-and-wellbeing/silvercloud-for-staff

HELP AVAILABLE FOR STUDENTS

Student Wellbeing Support Line: Open 24 hours a day, including over weekends and bank holidays. The number is 0900 028 3766

Colchester Campus

Student Services Hub (SSH)
First floor, Silberrad Student Centre,
Colchester Campus
T 01206 874000
E wellbeing@essex.ac.uk

Opening hours
09:00-17:00 Monday to Friday

Southend Campus

Student Services Hub (SSH-SC)
Second floor, The Forum, Southend Campus

T 01702 328444 (Ask for the Student Services Hub)
E wellbeing@essex.ac.uk

Drop in between 11:00-14:00
Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday & Friday

Loughton Campus

Student Services Hub (SSH-LC)
Ground floor, Hatfields House, Loughton Campus
T 02085 085983
E wellbeing@essex.ac.uk

Drop in between 13:10-14:10
Monday to Friday

18:10-19:00
Monday & Thursday

Residence Life

Student support can offer advice, support and a listening ear and will refer callers to appropriate services where necessary. The team includes counselling and mental health practitioners.

Togetherall is a safe, online peer-to-peer mental health community that empowers individuals to anonymously seek and provide support 24/7.

To sign up, go to togetherall.com and use your student email address to register as a member of a university or college.

Samaritans: 116 123

REPORTING A CONCERN ABOUT A STUDENT

If you are concerned about the welfare of a student you can also use the online form to report your concerns. The form can be found on the Student Support web page www.essex.ac.uk/students/contact/report-concern.aspx and can be used by staff, students, friends or family.

This form is not reviewed outside of normal business hours, including bank holidays and closure periods. If you consider the situation to be an emergency, ie. someone is at immediate risk or harm, please contact Security on your campus.

The University will keep information you submit in confidence in accordance with data protection legislation. However, we may need to take specific actions based on the submitted information to protect the health and welfare of the University community. Although the Behaviour Intervention Team strives to ensure the privacy of reporters and other involved parties, we cannot guarantee confidentiality.

NOTES
