

### **Don't bottle it up:**

Reaching out to supportive friends can be very helpful. Talk about your feelings and stress reaction with someone who is a good listener and is most of all supportive. Talking to friends, family and colleagues is a natural way to heal from very stressful experiences. The memories of what happened may come into your mind and there is often a need to think and talk about it to help you adjust. Don't worry if you cry when you talk. It's natural and usually helpful. Take things at a pace that you feel comfortable with.

### **Give yourself time:**

It takes time – weeks or months – to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or who) you have lost.

### **Get into a routine:**

Even if you don't feel like eating, try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help, but start gently.

### **Get back to social activities:**

Spend time engaging in activities that are fun or entertaining.

### **Don't make any life changes:**

Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you will later regret. Given time traumatic experiences can often be a turning point for many people who find they can re evaluate the meaning and value of life and appreciate the little things that they had often overlooked.

### **When should you get professional help?**

Many people find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce. However, you may need to seek professional help if your feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long.

### **You should ask your GP for support if:**

- You feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety or other reactions.
- You have no one to share your feelings with for support.
- You detach from friends and family more and more.
- You are drinking too much, or using drugs to cope with your feelings.
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep.
- Your work is suffering.
- You feel that you are not returning to normal after six weeks.

Your GP will refer to appropriate HSE services, for example, primary care psychology, child and adolescent mental health, adult mental health.

- **After Hours GP Service - North East Doctor On Call - 1850 777 911**

### **You can also access free helpline support:**

- Samaritans - 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.ie](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)
- Pieta House - 1800 247 247 or text "help" to 51444
- Bereavement Support Line – 1800 80 70 77 (Mon-Fri, 10am to 1pm)
- Crisis Text Service – text "hello" to 50808

### **Children and Adolescents can access:**

- ISPC Childline Helpline - 1800 66 66 66 or text "talk" to 50101
- ISPC Teenline – 1800 833 634

## **Helping Adults to cope after a traumatic event**

A traumatic event is one that can be deeply distressing and frightening. It can include e.g. being involved in or witnessing, a serious accident or traumatic death. Even though the event may be over, it is very common and quite normal, for people to experience emotional reactions to what they have experienced.

This leaflet describes how people commonly react after a trauma, provides some ways of coping and where to go for help and support.



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive



Connecting for Life  
Cavan and Monaghan

## Why do we react strongly to traumatic events?

There are many reasons why a trauma can leave us with a strong emotional reaction. Firstly, traumatic incidents usually occur suddenly and without warning. We have no time to prepare or adjust to this new experience and we are faced with not knowing what to do or how to behave. Secondly, the experience of a traumatic incident often shatters the basic beliefs we have about life, e.g. being safe, secure and with particular meaning and purpose.

## How Adults experience traumatic events?

We all react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings and you may be surprised by the strength of your feelings.

Some common feelings include:

**Shock** - Immediately after a traumatic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, numb, stunned and not connected to what is going on around you.

**Numbness** - A traumatic experience may cause blocking of feelings, and result in your withdrawal from interests, people and activities.

**Denial** - When in denial you are unable to accept that the traumatic event has happened, so you react as though it hasn't happened. Friends and family may think that you are not affected by the incident or that you don't care about what has happened.

Over several hours or days, the feelings of shock and denial may fade, and other thoughts and feelings may take their place.

**Adrenaline Reaction** - you may feel your body is in continuous turmoil (churned up) you may also find it difficult to rest, sleep, and experience a loss of concentration.

**Sad** - particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.

**Angry** - about what has happened and with whomever was responsible.

**Frightened** - that the same thing will happen again, or that you may lose control of your feelings and break down.

**Guilty** - that you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it.

**Ashamed or embarrassed** - that you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you.

**Relieved** - that the danger is over and that the danger has gone.

**Distanced** - After a traumatic event, you may distance yourself from those you are close to, friends and family.

You may experience some or all of the reactions below:

- Changes in appetite.
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
- Have difficulty thinking clearly.
- Aches and pains.
- Feel very tired.
- Feel that your heart is beating faster.
- Poor concentration.
- Changes in sex drive and libido.

## What can you do?

### Accept:

It is important that you acknowledge you have been through a highly stressful experience.

### Take care of yourself:

Maintain a regular routine of eating, sleeping and daily activities. Allow yourself extra time to complete tasks and get plenty of rest. Try not to rely on alcohol or drugs and avoid making hasty decisions.

### Practice Breathing:

People under stress or experiencing panic unconsciously change their pattern of breathing. When you feel stressed or panicky take 4 to 5 slow deep breaths that let you inhale and exhale completely. Relax your muscles as you exhale.