

# Traumatic stress: learning to cope

## ***What is 'traumatic stress'?***

Some things can upset us so much that we find it very difficult to cope. They may be the result of violence, abuse, threats, or seeing other people being injured or treated cruelly, especially if we are unable to do anything about it.

If you are finding it difficult to cope because of reactions to these sorts of stresses, the following will help you understand why, and will help you handle it. (The word 'trauma' comes from an old Greek word for 'injury'. 'Traumatic stress' is like the shock people felt after being in a battle.)

## ***What makes it difficult to cope?***

When there is danger, we become very alert, our heart beats faster, we breathe harder, our blood pressure goes up and we tense up. What is happening is that our body is quickly getting ready to fight or to run away. Only our ancestors with this reaction survived the dangers of life long enough to have children, and so it has come down to us! When the need to run has passed, people describe the following unpleasant feelings and effects:

- shock
- anger
- fast breathing
- disbelief
- confusion
- sweating
- numbness
- pounding heart
- excitement
- brief loss of memory
- intense fear
- trembling or shaking
- feeling sick

These feelings can die down after a while but sometimes unpleasant thoughts, pictures and feelings come back days or weeks later. This shows that the body is recovering from severe stress. At these times, people describe:

- Experiencing anxiety or fears, such as fear of danger to themselves or a loved person; fear of being alone; fear of being in other frightening situations, or worry that something similar will happen again.
- Avoiding situations or thoughts that remind them of the traumatic event.
- Being easily startled by loud noises or sudden movements.

- Having flashbacks, where images of the traumatic event pop into their mind, or where they seem to live through the event again.
- Having physical symptoms such as tense muscles, shaking, stomach upsets, feeling sick, headaches, sweating, tiredness.
- Thinking all the time about the events.
- Losing interest in all sorts of things, including food or sex.
- Feeling sad or lonely.
- Being shocked at what has happened. Not being able to believe it. Feeling numb, unreal or distant from people. People often ask ‘Why me?’
- Forgetting things, especially about parts of whatever caused it, and having other problems with thinking and concentrating.
- Having sleep problems such as difficulty in getting to sleep, waking up in the night, or having strong dreams or nightmares.
- Feeling guilty and blaming themselves for not doing something different during the traumatic event. They may feel responsible for another person’s death or injury, even if they are not. Some people also feel guilty if other people’s suffering has been greater than their own.
- Feeling angry at what has happened or at what caused it. They might also feel angry because what happened does not make sense.

The same event will affect different people differently — some more and some less. They may experience other things too. *But in most cases these effects will disappear after a few hours, days, or weeks.*

### ***What you can do***

#### **Immediately after the event:**

- Make sure you are with people. Do not go into your cell alone — ask a friend or a Listener to stay with you.
- Talk about it. Most people find that talking helps them get over the reactions. Talk in your own way and in your own time. It may be easier to talk about some parts of what happened than about others.
- Remind yourself that the event is over and that you are now safe.
- If possible get some physical exercise. This will help to ‘burn off’ some of your tension and anxiety.
- Try to eat something, even if you do not feel like eating.
- Avoid sedatives or sleeping pills because they will dull the experience and stop you from dealing with your feelings.
- Cut down on stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola, or cigarettes. You do not want to make your body more agitated.
- If you cannot sleep, get up and do something until you feel tired.

### **How to handle the following days:**

- Remind yourself that your reactions are normal and will go away in time.
- Try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible. But take on difficult tasks slowly.
- If you feel uncomfortable, scared or anxious, slow down your breathing and remind yourself that you are safe and that the trauma is over.
- Keep on talking in your own way and in your own time to someone you trust. Most people find that this helps them get over their feelings. Even if you feel a bit distant from other people, don't reject their support. It is OK to show your feelings. You may find that a Listener or Buddy, a particular officer, the chaplain, or a traditional healer can help.
- Sometimes painful thoughts and memories will come into your mind. When they do, try to let the thoughts pass through your mind without trying to push them out. This can be hard to do; but doctors have found that if people can do this, they seem to feel better faster than people who try to force the thoughts away.
- If you have a disturbing or frightening dream, try writing it down or describing it in detail to someone you trust — perhaps several times. Some people have found that this helps.
- Make sure you get enough sleep, food and regular exercise. Practice relaxation to help reduce nervous tension. A relaxation exercise is described below.
- Be more careful than usual around the wing and with machinery. Accidents are more common after severe stress.
- Be kind to yourself. Do some relaxing things you will enjoy — painting, playing pool, reading, for example.
- Allow yourself time to deal with the memories. There may be some things that you will always remember, but you can aim to learn to live with them. Be patient with yourself.

### **How to practise relaxation**

There are two main ways to relax — meditation and relaxation — and they both take practice. Try them to see which you prefer. Then practise for about 20 minutes every day. You will need to find somewhere quiet where you will not be disturbed.

*Meditation:* In meditation or yoga the body is calmed by focusing your mind. It is best to find someone to teach you, but if you cannot, try this simple meditation:

1. Sit on a chair or bed, keeping your back straight, with your hands in your lap.
2. Close your eyes and breathe slowly through your nostrils.

3. *Feel* the air as it flows in and out of your nose and *listen* to the sound.
4. Keep as still as you can until the time is up.
5. If your thoughts wander, just bring them back to your nose.

*Relaxation*: Teaching your muscles to relax. You will need that quiet place and time, and somewhere to sit.

First, practise slow breathing for a few minutes. As you breathe out imagine the tension flowing out of your body.

Second, try to think only about what you are doing. If worries drift into your mind while you are relaxing, don't try to stop them, just let them float gently across and out of your mind without reacting to them.

Third, relax the muscles of your body, as listed below. Do this by tensing them for 7–10 seconds, then relax them for 10 seconds. Don't tense the muscles so hard it hurts, and don't *try* to relax — just stop tensing and let the muscles relax themselves. The order of relaxing is: hands, head, body, legs, like this:

6. Hands: Clench one fist, then relax. Then do the other hand.
7. Lower arms: Bend your hands down at the wrist, as if trying to touch the underside of your arms, then relax.
8. Upper arms: Bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension in your upper arms, then relax.
9. Shoulders: Lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then relax.
10. Neck: Stretch your neck gently to the left, then let your head fall forward, then stretch it to the right, in a slow rolling motion, then relax.
11. Forehead: Raise your eyebrows, then relax.
12. Eyes: Screw up your eyes, then relax.
13. Jaw: Clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then relax.
14. Tongue: Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then relax.
15. Chest: Breathe in deeply, hold it, then breath out and relax.
16. Stomach: Push your tummy in to tighten the muscle, then relax.
17. Upper back: Pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then relax.
18. Lower back: Lean your head and upper back forward, curving your back and tensing the lower back, then relax.
19. Buttocks: Tighten your buttocks, then relax.
20. Thighs: Push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax.
21. Calves: Lift your toes off the ground, then relax.
22. Feet: Gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then relax.

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes enjoying the feeling of relaxation. At other times, try relaxing muscles when you notice they are tense.

*Some people find that they go on having serious problems several months after the distressing event. If this happens to you, please talk to your doctor or nurse. You may need extra help. There are treatments that can help you.*

This leaflet is adapted with permission from: Andrews G and Jenkins R, (Editors), 1999, *Management of Mental Disorders (UK Edition)* World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse.