

# Coping with the effects of a traumatic event

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## Introduction

Most of the time, our lives seem safe and predictable. We hear about serious incidents like car accidents, assaults, or natural disasters on the news, but we rarely think these things will happen to us or our loved ones.

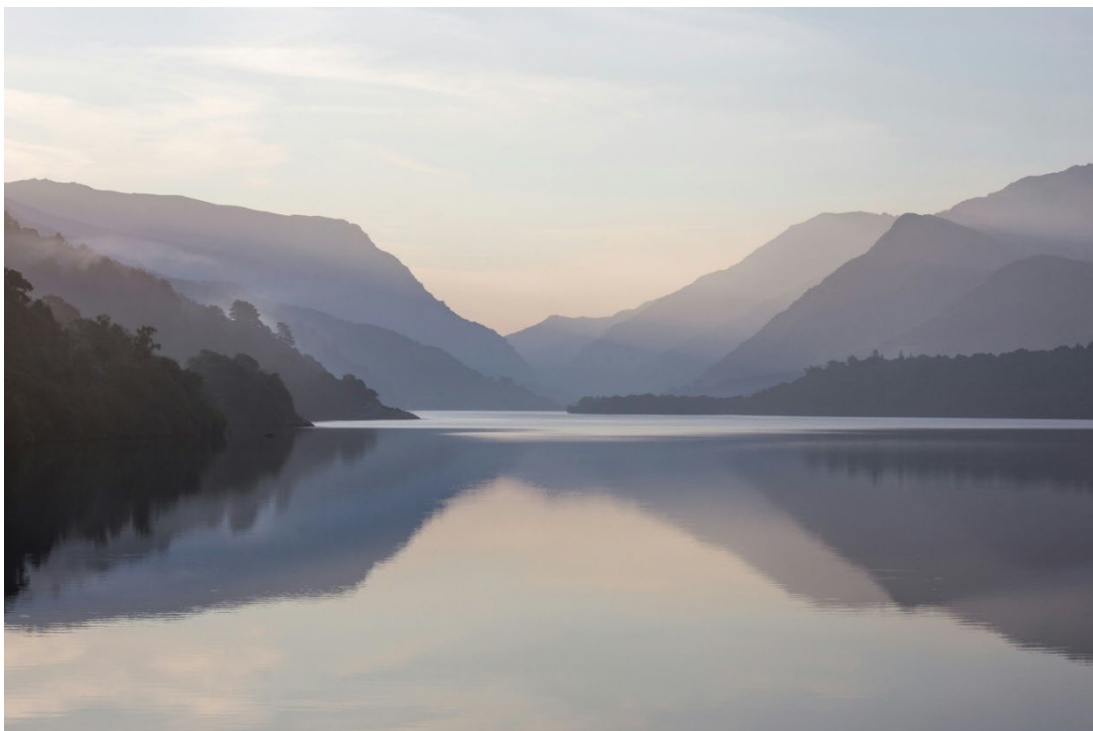
Yet, unexpectedly, any of us might face such challenging times. These moments can catch us off guard, affecting not just strangers far away but sometimes us or those close to us.

When faced with these sudden shocks, it is natural to feel a range of unfamiliar emotions that are hard to manage.

This leaflet is here to guide you through some of the feelings you might be encountering. It is meant to be a brief overview of what can be considered 'common' reactions to traumatic events.

It is important to remember that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to feel. Everyone's experience is unique, and people react differently even to the same event. Although your own experience will be unique and personal to you, this booklet will give you some idea of common reactions and how others have sometimes reacted in similar situations.

We hope the information will help you to understand and handle the thoughts and feelings you might experience.



## How do people usually react after a traumatic event?

While some people might feel shaken by what has happened, others adjust to their experience with little distress. Some of us may feel satisfied by the way we acted during the event, especially if we were able to help to others. It is not uncommon to feel a gratitude for life or an appreciation for our ability to support those around us.

However, not everyone is as fortunate. The impact of a traumatic event can leave others feeling shocked and disoriented, struggling to accept what has happened. In the immediate aftermath, it is typical to experience confusion, distress, anger, and fear. These emotions, while unsettling, are natural responses to the intense stress of a traumatic experience.

For most, these acute reactions do not last long, and fade over days or weeks. Yet, the severity of the trauma and ongoing reminders (such as media coverage) can prolong recovery. Understanding and acknowledging these emotional and behavioural responses is crucial in the healing process.

Because they can be unfamiliar, it can be helpful to describe the range of feelings, emotions, and behaviours that victims and their close ones may exhibit after a traumatic event.

These can include any of the following:

- **Becoming jumpy:** Easily startled by noises or sudden movements, etc.
- **Trouble sleeping:** Difficulty falling asleep, restless nights, or disturbing dreams, initially about the event but later these might become more general.
- **Sudden reminders:** Unexpected thoughts or images of the event that pop up without warning, sometimes triggered by things around you that bring back memories of what happened.
- **Re-living the event:** Feeling as though the traumatic event is happening all over again, often with vivid sensory details like smells, tastes, or touch.

- **Guilt:** Regret for actions taken or not taken, feeling responsible for letting down oneself or others. There may be feelings of guilt for surviving when others did not.
- **Sadness:** Experiencing low moods and tearfulness.
- **Anger:** About what happened to you or at those you believe to be responsible for the event.
- **Feeling Numb:** Feeling detached or unable to experience any feelings of love or anger.
- **Withdrawal:** Pulling away from others and retreating into yourself.
- **Disappointment:** Thinking that people (including family) do not really understand how you are feeling.
- **Avoiding Thoughts:** Avoiding thoughts and memories associated with the event.
- **Behavioural avoidance:** Staying away from places, people, or activities which remind you of the event.

In the early stages, avoiding reminders like TV footage or discussions about the incident may help you cope and gradually come to terms with the experience. However, it is important to watch if this avoidance lasts for weeks or months, as it might make the recovery process more difficult.



## Physical reactions

You might also experience physical sensations alongside the emotional reactions described above. These symptoms often indicate anxiety, tension, or stress, such as:

- Shakiness, trembling
- Tension and muscular aches (especially in the head and neck)
- An inability to sleep, tiredness, lethargy and fatigue
- Poor concentration, forgetfulness
- Palpitations, shallow rapid breathing, dizziness
- Gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea
- Changes to your menstrual cycle or loss of interest in sex.

## Impact on relationships and families

In some cases, a shared sense of adversity or loss brings people closer, strengthening relationships or building new ones. Yet, trauma can put pressure on these ties, especially when the support received doesn't match what is needed or when others do not understand your experience and expect too much of you. This mismatch can leave some feeling misunderstood and pile on the stress, pushing them towards unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as drinking or drugs.

When a family experienced the loss of a loved one, each person might grieve in their own time and way. This depends on many factors, such as their closeness to the person, whether they saw the death, their way of coping, and their past experiences with grief.



## Is the way I'm feeling and reacting common?

Again, it is important to emphasise that there are no “right” or “wrong” ways to react after a traumatic experience.

Everyone's reactions are unique, and not everyone will feel everything mentioned or to the same extent. The specifics of the traumatic event make a difference; more intense distress often follows particularly shocking or violent events. Serious injuries can also change your emotional response, potentially numbing or delaying its impact. Your reactions may also differ from others due to your unique personality, how you express emotions, and your coping mechanisms.

After a traumatic event, most people experience a range of emotions from mild unease to intense anxiety, fear, or anger. Similarly, your reactions may be mild or more intense.

**If you experience intense reactions like physical discomfort, sleep issues, or recurring memories, fear or guilt shortly after the event, know that these are common responses to abnormal events and in most cases are not long-lasting.**

There is no reason to feel scared or ashamed of these feelings; they're not unusual or a sign of weakness. Sharing how you feel about the incident may in fact help you come to terms with what has happened.





## Things you can do to promote recovery

### 1. Seeking and accepting support

Receiving both physical and emotional support can be deeply comforting. Avoid isolating yourself by trying to seem strong or handle everything alone.

Engaging in conversations with those who share similar experiences can be very helpful, helping you to let go of bottled-up emotions and build stronger bonds.

Some friends might hesitate to offer help, wanting to but unsure if they should. Do not be afraid to reach out and clearly communicate your needs. Research has shown that social support and community networks help psychological recovery.

### 2. Take time for yourself

To deal with your feelings, you will at times find it necessary to be alone, or with close friends and family only.

### 3. Acknowledge what has happened to you

Talking openly about the traumatic event with a trusted friend or family member can be a crucial step in your healing journey. While it may not solve everything, it opens the door to processing your feelings and experiences, helping you move towards acceptance and recovery.

### 4. Staying active

Staying engaged in activities, helping others, and sticking to familiar routines can offer a sense of normality and purpose.

### 5. Returning to your normal routine

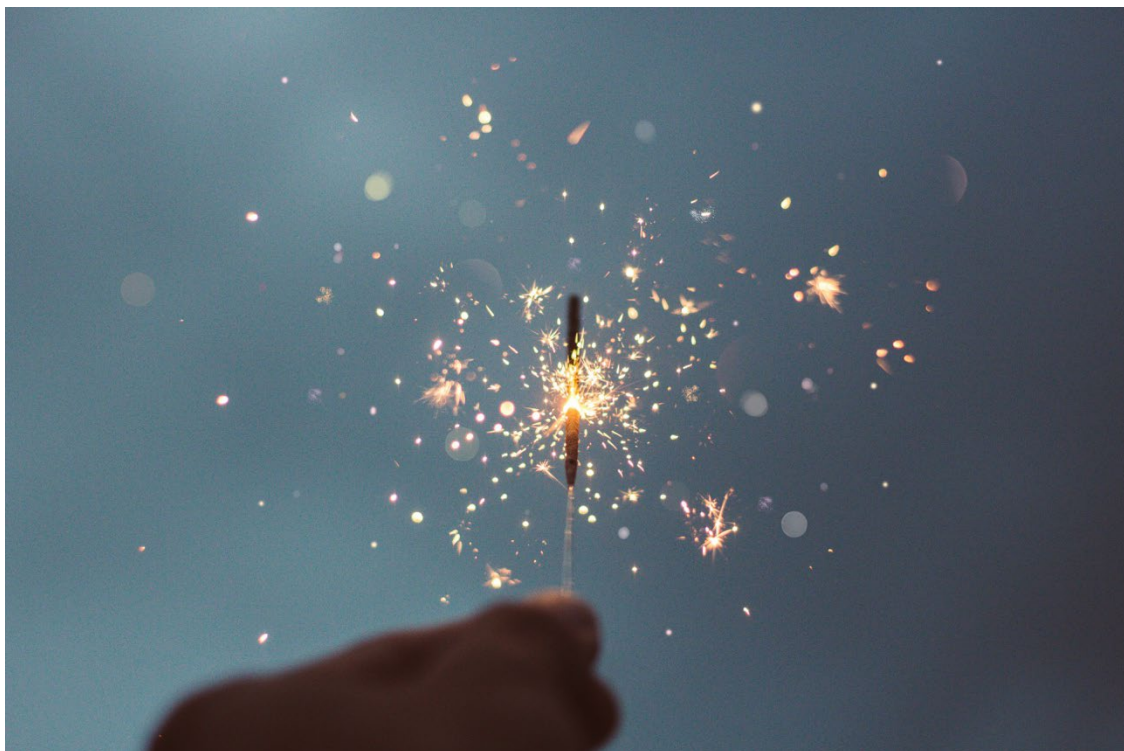
Getting back to your regular daily activities soon after the event helps keep fears from becoming overwhelming by staying engaged with familiar tasks and schedules.

## Some useful strategies are as follows:

- Stick to a regular schedule to bring structure to your days.
- Plan your week, setting aside time for both mandatory tasks and leisure, and consider breaking your day into manageable time slots if helpful.
- Do not be overambitious at the start; set achievable goals and understand that starting small is preferable to taking on too much at once.
- Try to maintain a consistent sleep schedule and avoid napping during the day. Keeping a sleep diary might be helpful.
- Explore new hobbies or interests you have been curious about but haven't had the opportunity to try.

Gradually incorporate these activities into your weekly routine, starting with short periods of 10-15 minutes to avoid overwhelming yourself.

Be consistent and remember; doing activities briefly but regularly is better than not doing them at all.





## **The process of recovery**

Recovery from trauma is as varied as the reactions to it. Experiencing a traumatic event floods individuals with intense emotions and thoughts that can be overwhelming. These feelings - fear, pain, shock, or numbness - are like emotional baggage hastily packed at the moment of trauma. Therefore, it is prone to popping open unexpectedly. This sudden opening can happen when something in your daily life "bumps" into it, like reminders of the trauma or similar situations. When it bursts open, all those distressing thoughts, images, and feelings you've tried to keep out of your mind spill out.

Over time, most people gradually unpack and repack this suitcase, which helps in coming to terms with and making sense of their traumatic experience. While some items, like the memory of the trauma, must be kept, they can gradually let go of burdens such as guilt and anger. They also learn to view the event from a different perspective and organise their emotional responses better. The goal is to manage this baggage so well that it no longer opens unexpectedly, allowing individuals to examine its contents when they choose, without feeling overwhelmed. As the incidents of it bursting open become rarer, the suitcase - and its impact on daily life - becomes less and less noticeable.

Though painful at first, this process of unpacking and repacking becomes more manageable with time. Ways of helping this process are discussed below.

Some reactions to trauma are ways of protecting a person or to handle the stress. These include:

### **Numbness**

At first, your emotions might feel distant or shut away, making the event feel distant or dream-like. This can be a way of allowing the distress of the incident to be felt only slowly and gradually. Others around you may (wrongly) think you are 'unfeeling' or 'being strong'.

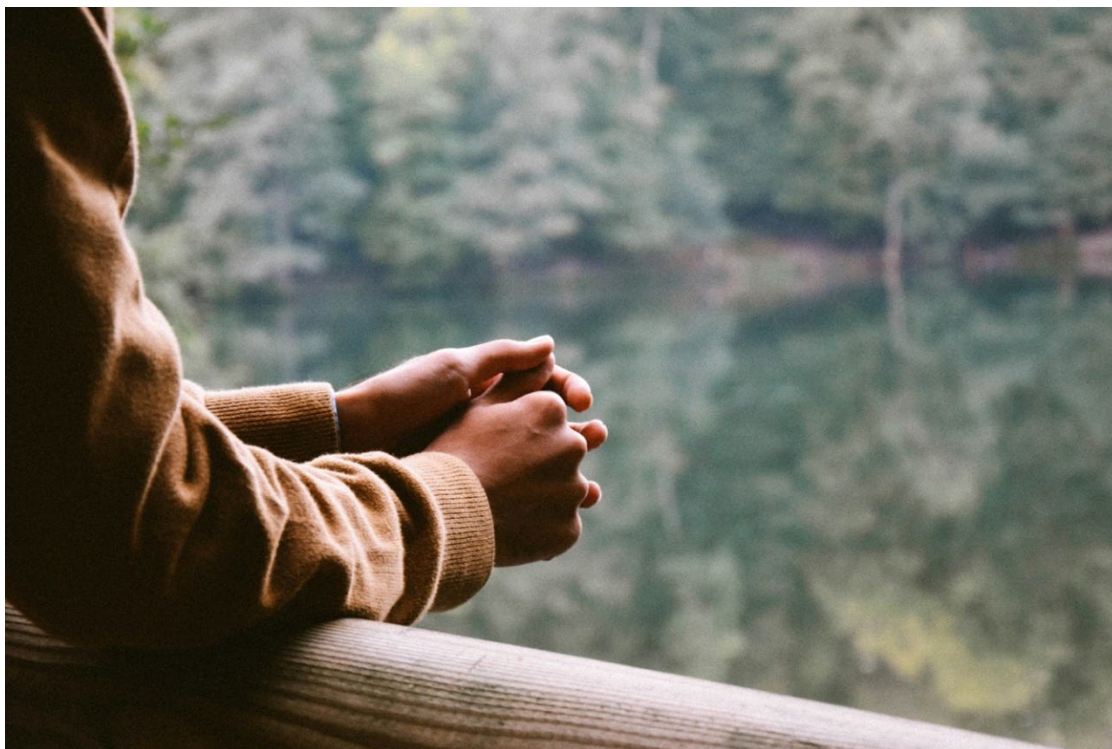
### **Going over the event**

Letting the experience enter your mind and thinking about it can help you make sense of what happened.

Over-activity or excessive use of distraction can, for example, be unhelpful if it prevents you thinking about what happened. Your recovery may take longer if you suppress your feelings too much or for too long

(numbness), or if you become preoccupied with repeated thoughts of the event.

Gradually confronting the reality of what happened, accepting support from others, and talking through your feelings are good ways of gaining emotional release and coming to terms with your experiences.



## **Who should I talk to?**

Talking about your feelings and reactions to what you have experienced is often helpful. Ideally, it is best to share with people you trust and feel comfortable around.

However, there might be times when talking to family or friends is not an option, whether due to distance, their involvement in the event, or to avoid causing them distress. In such situations, consider speaking with colleagues, your GP, a clergy member, or seeking professional mental health support - details of these are included at the end of the booklet.

Remember though that you do not 'have' to talk to a counsellor or therapist. Where possible it is usually enough to draw upon usual forms of support, such as from your family or significant others.

## Important points to remember

- If you have experienced a personal loss as a result of the incident, then recovery may take considerably longer.
- In addition, changes in outlook and attitude towards others and the world are common; these may be lasting and will fluctuate over time, but in most cases the effects are positive. However, if they are becoming distressing or problematic, they can be addressed with professional help.
- Anniversaries, birthdays, and other memorable occasions will come up. While these will be distressing, try and commemorate them in your own way. Family tensions and disagreements are normal, so aim for compromise and agree to differ.

## When to seek professional help

It is important to share your experiences and emotions with family or friends early on. However, if your reactions are intense, causing significant distress, or last longer than 6 to 8 weeks, seeking professional guidance is recommended.

Some of the pointers which suggest you should consider asking for help include:

- If you feel that you are overwhelmed by and cannot handle intense feelings and bodily sensations.
- If you have no one to share your emotions with and you feel the need to do so.

If, after 6 months:

- You continue to feel numb and empty, or constantly experience tension, confusion, exhaustion, and other unpleasant bodily sensations.
- You find yourself staying excessively busy in order not to focus on your feelings.
- You keep experiencing sudden and recurring memories or thoughts about the traumatic experience.
- You continue to struggle with nightmares or poor sleep.
- You notice that your relationships are suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.

- You are drinking to excess.
- Your work performance suffers, you make mistakes or have accidents associated with poor concentration.



### **What sort of professional help is the most effective?**

There are a variety of talking therapies available, and you should ask your therapist or counsellor to whom you have been referred to explain the therapy they recommend - its approach, what to expect, and the evidence supporting its effectiveness.

Many types of therapy can be useful. If you are experiencing a marked and prolonged reaction to trauma, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) are often recommended by research, particularly for treating trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

CBT is an active therapy conducted over a relatively short period of time. It is focused on helping you manage fears and anxiety by teaching you how to challenge unhelpful thoughts, confront your fears step by step, and diary keeping.

If you are suffering from PTSD, then talking about the problem will help up to a point. EMDR is another effective method for easing trauma

symptoms and distress. Your therapist will detail how it could work for you.

In many cases, it is common for people to suffer from low mood and depression. In these instances, we would recommend discussing antidepressants with your therapist, GP, or counsellor. Despite negative stories you may have heard, when used as directed and under close supervision, these medications can be a valuable part of your treatment alongside therapies like CBT.

## **Some dos and don'ts to remember**

### **Do**

- Express your emotions and review the experience yourself and with others. Be open and clear about your needs with family, friends, and at work.
- Take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with your close family and friends.
- Try to keep your life as settled as possible after the initial period of often intense acute distress.

### **Don't**

- Bottle up feelings.
- Avoid talking about what has happened.
- Expect the memories to fade quickly; they may stay with you for some time.
- Forget that others will be experiencing similar feelings to you.

Although it is common to hear that "things will never be the same again" after a traumatic event, remember, you are still the person you were before the incident. Feeling overwhelmed is natural, and support is available to help you navigate through this.



## Support resources and contacts

### Immediate Support:

- If you are in distress or need emotional support, call **NHS 24** at 111.
- For **emergency services**, dial 999.
- **Samaritans:** Offers 24/7 urgent support to individuals experiencing a crisis, emotional distress, or suicidal thoughts: 116 123.

### NHS Inform's Self-Help for PTSD

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/ptsd-and-cptsd-self-help-guide](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/ptsd-and-cptsd-self-help-guide)



### The Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership websites

The **iThrive** website focuses on support available Edinburgh-wide: [ithriveedinburgh.org.uk/find-a-service/?location=edinburgh](http://ithriveedinburgh.org.uk/find-a-service/?location=edinburgh)



**Midspace** is Midlothian's online source of mental health and wellbeing information: <https://midspace.co.uk/service/>






**Eastspace** is East Lothian's online source of mental health and wellbeing information: <https://eastspace.org.uk/find-a-service/>



**Westspace** is West Lothian's online source of mental health and wellbeing information: <https://westspace.org.uk/services/service-template-organisation/>



## Voluntary Sector and Counselling Services

<b>Health in Mind:</b> For those who have been affected by childhood trauma: <a href="https://health-in-mind.org.uk/how-we-can-help/support/">https://health-in-mind.org.uk/how-we-can-help/support/</a>	
<b>Veterans First Point (V1P):</b> offers comprehensive assistance for those who have served: <a href="http://www.veteransfirstpoint.org.uk">www.veteransfirstpoint.org.uk</a>	
<b>Edinburgh Women's Aid:</b> 0131 315 8110 (Mon-Wed & Fri. 10am – 3pm, Thurs 10am-7pm, Sat 10am-1pm) - Offers confidential support, a drop-in service and information to women who have experienced abuse by their partner or ex-partner: <a href="http://www.edinwomensaid.co.uk">www.edinwomensaid.co.uk</a>	
<b>Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline:</b> 08088 01 03 02 Open every day from 6pm until midnight for anyone affected by sexual violence, no matter when or how it happened: <a href="http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk">www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk</a>	