

# Support following a Traumatic Incident

*A traumatic incident is any event that can be considered to be outside of an individual's usual experience and causes physical, emotional or psychological harm.*

People all respond to traumatic incidents in different ways, and the feelings experience are perfectly normal – it is the nature of the stressful incident that is not normal. Predicting those of us that may be more vulnerable to experiencing trauma is difficult, as the evidence is not conclusive and because our psychology is complex and, in many ways, different in each of us.

## Reactions and Symptoms

**Normal** reactions to a traumatic event may include :

-  **Sadness** especially if there have been deaths, injuries or losses of every kind.
-  **Guilt** for not having been able to do more.
-  **Anger** at what has happened/whatever caused it/the injustice of it all.
-  **Shame** for not having reacted as they would have wished or for having been seen as helpless, emotional or needing others.
-  **Fear** that they may break down or lose control or of a similar event happening again.
-  **Memories** or feelings of loss or of concern for other people in their lives or of past or similar events.
-  **Disappointment** which can alternate with hope.

It is normal to experience a range of distressing symptoms for up to 4 weeks after an untoward experience. These may include, nightmares, poor sleep, hyper vigilance (being easy to startle), increase emotionality and tearfulness, all the emotions you mention, reliving and or replaying the experience in your mind, experiencing intrusions of the experience (visual memories, smell, sounds), and having a strong desire to avoid things related to the experience that you didn't beforehand.

## Supporting Yourself

Some DOs and DON'Ts of dealing with your feelings :

-  Do express and **share** your emotions and feelings with someone like your manager.
-  Do accept **support** that is offered to you including sharing your experience with others.
-  Do make time to **reflect** of your experience but be kind to yourself.
-  Do take the **time** to be with your family and friends.
-  Do try to keep to your **routines** as much as possible.
-  Do look after yourself, eat well and **exercise**.
-  Do **drive** with greater care, your concentration may be impaired.
-  Don't resort to **drinking** or smoking excessively or risk taking.
-  Don't avoid **talking** about what happened.

Your emotional responses to a traumatic incidents can centre on challenges to your core values and beliefs about yourself and how you see the world and whether there are any other factors in your life that may contribute to your vulnerability in any traumatic incident you are involved with, and therefore its impact on you.

## Supporting Your Staff

To support a person who has been exposed to traumatic events it may be useful to employ the following steps :

-  Be present, spending **time** with individuals.
-  **Listen** deeply and without judgement so you can help and reassure them.
-  Spend time with the traumatised person to truly **understand** how you can support.
-  **Empathise** and provide appropriate support.
-  Allow them some **private time**.
-  **Do not** take their **anger** or other feelings personally.
-  **Do not** tell them that they are **lucky** it was not worse, or 'you will get over it', or to pull yourself together.
-  Tell them that you want to understand and **assist** them.
-  Be gentle and **calm** with the individual.
-  Understand other people's **cultural diversity**.

Be aware of any other support is available for staff that you can signpost them to e.g. Occupational Health, Employee Assistant Programmes etc.

If you continue to experience these symptoms after **4 weeks** you need to seek help. There are a number of areas you can find additional help - Your line-manager, your colleagues or someone else you trust in your department or organisation, the Occupational Health Department, Welfare and Counselling Services or your GP.