

## Trauma Information sheet

### What is trauma?

Trauma is a word used to describe experiences that are so distressing they overwhelm a person's ability to cope with what is happening. We speak of someone being traumatised by an event, meaning that the incident left the person in an extreme psychological state. Events such as accidents, losing a job, fire, natural disasters, war, rape, violence (abuse, assault, bullying, murder, suicide), falling from a height, oppression, torture, homelessness, bitter divorce, death of a loved one, chaotic childhood and poverty are examples of events that can render a person to feel terrified, distressed, helpless, unable to cope. Many traumatic events are extraordinary, some are not (eg oppression in tyrannical regimes), and their impact on a person leads to extreme emotional reactions which, under the circumstances, are normal reactions. Trauma can occur when the event happens to a person (eg they are injured) or because they witness the event (eg a loved one dies) or when they cause the event (eg a soldier in war).

### Impacts of trauma:

Exposure to trauma affects the autonomic nervous system by gearing up the person to deal with threats to survival triggering the fight, flight or freeze response. This response involves a huge release of hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol into the bloodstream which produce hyperarousal of body systems and hypervigilant alertness preparing the person to fight or run. Freezing occurs when the person knows they cannot escape the danger no matter what they do. Psychologically a person may dissociate as part of the freezing process. People talk of having out of body experiences watching themselves be raped or beaten when they cannot fight off their assailant and cannot run away. Soldiers may talk of being taken over by something and acting robotically doing what they were trained to do.

Prolonged exposure or one exposure to shocking, unexpected events can lead a person to have too much or too frequent release of adrenalin and cortisol even when the danger is past, causing the person to feel there is constant danger requiring constant vigilance. A vicious cycle can ensue with emotional sensitivity triggering fight or flight responses and fight and flight responses feeding emotional sensitivity, seemingly outside of a person's control. Over time this can affect health significantly, impair memory and concentration, evoke emotional over-sensitivity and reactivity. Anxiety disorders including post traumatic stress disorder can result. Psychosis and dissociation is also a possibility for some.

Children who experience long term exposure to traumatic events as occurs in prolonged child abuse, war zones and chaotic lifestyles develop brains that are wired differently to the brains of children who have not had these experiences. This is due to the production of excessive amounts of stress hormones and can result in the child and the adult the child becomes to experience states of hyper arousal, dissociation, anxiety, possibly learned helplessness that impacts on her/his daily life.

Some people recover from trauma and develop greater resilience to help them cope with life's challenges. Some suffer chronically from a range of symptoms such as flash backs, nightmares, fear about lots of things, stress, hypersensitivity, chronic irritability or anger, depersonalisation, physical ailments and find it hard to maintain their jobs, relationships and interest in the world.

### Reactions to trauma:

Each person's reaction to traumatic events is different. The reactions are normal. You are not losing your mind. Common responses to trauma include:

#### Emotional reactions:

Shock – disbelief about what happened; numb, things don't seem real; feel different from other people

Fear it may happen again – fear for your own or loved ones' safety; fear of things going wrong; feelings of panic, feeling unsafe

Distress - about what was lost, security gone; helplessness, out of control, too sad, lots of crying, feeling alone and separated from other people, life has lost its sparkle

Shame – for being powerless, helpless, too emotional; for not coping; blaming oneself for not stopping the traumatic incident(s)

Anger – at why it happened and who caused it; blaming others for feeling out of control; not finding a way of understanding or accepting what happened; finding fault in others, being overly sensitive; trying to control people and things to feel in control; irritability; violent revenge fantasies; distrust of authority, cynicism

#### Physical reactions:

Sleep problems – hard to fall asleep; early waking wracked by intrusive thoughts; restless; nightmares of all kinds including about what happened

Changed appetite – decreased or increased eating which impacts on weight and health

Anxiety symptoms – elevated heart and respiration rates; shaking, startled by certain sounds, sweating, restless, on the go

Tired / fatigued / worn down – may be unable to work or do much

Headaches and other aches and pains

Stomach complaints – digestive problems, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation

Frequent illnesses – colds, flu, feeling unwell

#### Mental reactions:

Bad memories – frequently thinking about what happened, flashbacks of the traumatic event; thinking about all kinds of frightening incidents that could occur; can't shut out the painful memories; nothing else seems to matter

Confusion – difficulty concentrating and making simple decisions; problem solving ability is compromised; everything seems overwhelming; dread about one's capabilities, judging self to be inadequate, weak, bad, wrong

Psychosis – not connected with reality, experiencing everything as awry, hearing or seeing things that aren't there

Depersonalisation – feeling unreal and the world outside you as dreamlike, inexplicable, strange; watching yourself do things as if you have no control over what is happening

#### Changes in behaviour:

Social withdrawal – preference to be alone even though this can lead to depression; avoid difficult interactions; dismiss people; believe no one understands or can help; express irritation at others so

they withdraw; can be aggressive causing people to be wary around you; believing you're different from others; problems with sex or emotional intimacy and so avoid these

Loss of interests – inability to work or study; low motivation to do things even previously enjoyed hobbies or sports;

Use intoxicants or medicines inappropriately – increased use of alcohol or other drugs to blot out bad memories, overdose on prescription medications to fall asleep or avoid anxiety.

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

This is a psychological condition caused by traumatic experiences that includes some of the following symptoms that persist for months or years:

Nightmares

Flashbacks – re experience the traumatic event over and over as if it is happening now

Anxiety – constantly worrying and believing something bad is about to happen. Some people experience panic attacks and believe they are dying or something terrible will happen to them

Insomnia – constantly going over the traumatic incident(s) or events of the day that proved too challenging to manage well

Hypervigilance – on the alert anticipating danger at every turn

Avoiding – running away from anything that may trigger feelings of being overwhelmed or trauma images or sounds. Shying away from people to dodge difficult interactions. Finding emotional and sexual intimacy too challenging and so shunning closeness. Using intoxicants (alcohol or drugs) to make the bad feelings go away. Using too much prescription medication to blot out the experiences.

Out of control emotions – irritability and anger that isn't managed properly, creating havoc with loved ones or others, sometimes resorting to violence. Not being able to handle stress and feeling overwhelmed much of the time. Feeling out of control.

Shut off emotions – unable to feel close or get close to others and so missing out on support that may be available in one's family or social circle; feeling numb

Depression – wondering why you had the experience, feeling guilty if you caused the trauma, angry at yourself, blaming yourself, believing there is no end in sight. Believing you have nothing to offer the world. Some people become suicidal. Some kill themselves, others self harm.

## How to cope with trauma?

Recognise that what you've been through is outside the range of normal human experience and your reaction is normal under the circumstances. You are human and will react in the ways described above. It doesn't mean you're going crazy or that there is something wrong with you.

It may be hard to talk with anyone about what you experienced. This too is normal. If you cannot shake off the symptoms described above think about what steps you can take to be able to talk about what happened. Take those steps and talk to someone. Get professional help if you cannot resolve the trauma. You've been through enough. Find someone who can help you so you don't have to live with trauma symptoms for any longer.

It isn't weak or wrong to get help. If you broke your leg would you think it weak or wrong to get help? Trauma is out of the ordinary and may require out of the ordinary assistance. You may be surprised

how quickly some trauma can be resolved. Sometimes trauma symptoms take a long time to resolve. Everyone is different. If you're having self harming or suicidal thought please seek professional help right away. Don't go it alone.

### Some tips to help yourself

Be kind to yourself – would you treat a friend the way you treat yourself, insisting they get over it? Acknowledge that you've been through something out of the ordinary and that your reaction is normal in the face of the extraordinary. Allow yourself to feel whatever you feel, express your feelings in a way that is safe for you and others.

If you have flashbacks or a panic attack – tell yourself the incident is over now and the feelings and images you have are only memories or feelings of dread. There is nothing happening in reality apart from your images and feelings. You survived the event(s) and will survive the flashbacks.

Ground yourself by telling yourself 5 things you can see: eg "I can see the blue sky. I can see the buildings. I can see my feet. I can see people over there. I can see a car". Tell yourself 5 things you can hear: eg "I can hear the traffic. I can hear the people over there talking. I can hear the aeroplane overhead. I can hear footsteps. I can hear my heart beating." Tell yourself 5 things you can feel when you touch things: eg "I feel my shirt has a smooth fabric. I feel pressure in my feet on the ground. I feel the rough texture of my wallet. I feel the coldness of the wall. I feel the clamminess of my arm." Tell yourself you are here now in this place and not at the site of the traumatic event. That is in the past.

If you're troubled by nightmares, get up, put on the light, draw the images or write about your dream. Read a happy book, inspiring poetry till you feel you can go back to sleep. Refocus your attention from troubling thoughts, sounds or images to calming ones.

Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to blot out the memories as this creates more problems over time. Getting out of it may feel good but takes you further away from resolving trauma. Minimise caffeine intake (reduce intake of coffee, tea, cola). Your body needs calming not more hyping up.

Get enough rest each day, even if you can't sleep properly – find ways to chill eg meditation, deep muscle relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, tai chi, yoga, swimming, walking, reading, playing music.

Exercise daily – moderately. When angry jog, run, cycle – let that energy flow out of your body. Exercise is good for calming restlessness and quelling frustration.

Connect with loved ones, friends or anyone who likes you and you could hang out with. Connecting with other people and focussing on their interests and concerns can take you away from your troubles for a time to give your mind and emotions a chance to calm down. Keep your chilling out and dealing with difficult emotions in balance - rest some of the time, express your feelings at other times. You can also meet up with other people who've experienced trauma. It can help to be part of a group to talk about what happened and to learn from each other good ways to cope.

Be alone sometime to allow yourself to process the traumatic events, to get centred in your feelings and to feel neutral.

Make sure you do something that gives you pleasure or joy each day, no matter how small eg notice how nice it feels to have a shower, see the dawn or sunset, to take a walk etc. Recall what you used to like and do those things again.

Resume your normal routines as soon as possible but avoid working too hard to stave off the challenging, unpleasant feelings.

Put on hold any long term, life changing decisions till you are through the trauma reactions. People make better decisions when emotionally neutral or positive. Do make decisions about day to day things as this will give you a sense of regaining control over your life.

Remind yourself of the strengths you have displayed throughout your life. They are still there waiting to be used. Remind yourself of the good things you've done in life and list your achievements no matter how small. The more you care about who you are and have a sense of what an amazing person you are the closer to move towards resolving trauma.

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