

Trauma

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a severely disturbing or threatening experience that leads to psychological or emotional distress.

There is no defined level of seriousness required for an event to be traumatic. The event may be extremely serious i.e. rape or a natural disaster or a traumatic response can arise from an event we experience when our capacity to cope is limited.

Initially the shock of what has happened can make you feel; dazed and possibly cut off from feelings. It can be hard to believe or accept that it has happened so you can behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think that you are being strong, or that you don't care about what has happened.

There is no right way to feel after a traumatic event and everyone's experience is different.

For some people it can take time for emotions to surface, for others powerful feelings of sadness and distress are immediate. Whatever you experience, it is important not to try and block feelings out as this can make things more problematic. Powerful images, memories and feelings are best helped by being kind and supportive to yourself, sharing with others and taking the time to recover.

Hours, days or weeks later you may feel:

- Frightened that the same thing will happen again, or that you might lose control of your feelings and break down.
- Angry about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.
- Guilty that you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it.
- Sad, particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
- Ashamed or embarrassed that you have these strong feelings you can't control.
- Relieved that the threat is over and the danger has gone.
- Hopeful that your life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.
- Helpless that something really bad happened and you could do nothing about it. You feel helpless, vulnerable and overwhelmed.

What physical changes might you notice?

- sleeplessness
- tiredness
- dreams and nightmares
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- difficulty thinking clearly
- headaches
- changes in appetite
- changes in sex-drive or libido
- aches and pains
- heart beating faster

What can help?

- Giving 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.
- Family and friends can really help. Talking about your feelings and the experience will help you to make sense of what has happened.
- Find out what happened. It is better to face the reality of what happened rather than wondering about what might have happened.
- Talking through or writing down your experience can help you to express and contain your feelings.
- Getting back to your usual routines and activities will enable you to gain a sense of order and allow you to feel more in control.
- Remembering positive experiences can be difficult but it is important to find a way of balancing your negative memories with positive ones.
- Get in touch with other survivors. If you go to funerals or memorial services, this may help you to come to terms with what has happened. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.
- Take some time for yourself. At times you may want to be alone or just with those close to you.
- Do some "normal" things with other people. Sometimes you will want to be with other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the healing process.
- Take care. After a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful around the home and when you are driving

When should I seek professional help?

Recovering from a traumatic event takes time, and everyone heals at his or her own pace. However, if months have passed and your symptoms are not letting up, you may need professional help.

It is a good idea to seek help if you are:

- Having trouble functioning at home or work
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety, or depression
- Unable to form close, satisfying relationships
- Experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding more and more things that remind you of the trauma
- Emotionally numb and disconnected from others
- Using alcohol or drugs to feel better

What Help is available at University?

Students may find it particularly difficult if they are away from friends and family. It can be difficult to talk with new friends or academic staff following a traumatic event. The Student Counselling Service can offer the opportunity to talk through past or recent experiences of trauma in a safe, confidential environment with a professional trained counsellor.

Personal tutors should be informed if you are concerned that your academic work will be affected.

Going home for a visit, rest, and to gain support might be an option.

Talking to fellow students can be away of gaining support from your peers.

Resources:

A valuable website: *'How to cope after a traumatic event'* by the Royal College of Psychiatrists:

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event>

'Overcoming Traumatic Stress' by Claudia Herbert and Ann Westmore – self help book

Further details about the service can be obtained through our web site.

www.bangor.ac.uk/studentservices/counselling/ or contact our Administrators Tel: 01248 388520 or e-mail counselling@bangor.ac.uk for appointments for support sessions and assessments.

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