

Accidents happen all the time, but a trauma is something that 'pierces or wounds our psychological defences'. People might say, 'it really got through to me'. Events that create trauma might range from witnessing an armed robbery, being involved in an assault, a road traffic accident, experiencing physical or sexual abuse, or other disasters. People can experience trauma by being directly or indirectly involved.

Traumas do not occur in isolation, but normally when the person already has an existing agenda of stress to deal with. They also have the habit of triggering past traumatic, frozen memories, which adds further stress and makes the situation worse.

A trauma is something that has challenged a basic fundamental belief that a person holds. The greater the contradiction between what has happened and the belief, the more likely the trauma. If the person strongly believes for example that the world is an orderly, predictable and safe place, or that life is meaningful, or that he or she is a strong, competent person, and this belief is challenged by a catastrophic event, then traumatic stress is likely to ensue.

■ Normal reactions to trauma

Tearful: Tired and lack of energy . . . poor concentration and memory . . . sleeping difficulties . . . numbness and loss of feeling . . . irritability and lowered tolerance . . . increased muscle tension and arousal . . . nightmares and flashbacks . . . loss of interest . . . headaches . . .

Fear: of similar events happening again, of breaking down or losing control, of being alone, of damage to oneself and loved ones.

Guilt: for surviving or being better off than others, regrets for things not done.

Shame: for not having acted as you would have wished, for having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needy.

Anger: at what happened or who caused it or at the lack of understanding in others.

Disappointed: for all the plans that can never be fulfilled.

Strained relationships: the good feelings may be replaced by conflict, you may not have as much to give, others may not understand or give you what you want.

■ Ways of coping

- ① **Accept feelings of numbness:** your mind allows the misfortune to be felt only slowly.
- ② **Keep active:** helping others may give some relief, however overactivity is often detrimental if it is a way of not thinking about the event – maintain a balance.
- ③ **Confront reality:** confront the reality, attend funerals, return to the scene of the event.
- ④ **Seek support:** share with others, allow others to offer physical and emotional support.
- ⑤ **Maintain privacy:** in order to deal with feelings you will find it necessary, at times, to be alone, or just with family and close friends.
- ⑥ **Process your feelings:** it helps to **think, talk and dream** about it over and over again. The more you can do this the better the processing and the quicker you can move forward with your life.
- ⑦ **Understand the meaning of the trauma:** Discuss how it might link up with earlier events in your life.
- ⑧ **Examine and alter unhelpful thinking attributions:** eg, 'I should have done more'.

■ Some DO'S and DON'TS

DO express your emotions – cry if possible.

DO take every opportunity to review the experience with yourself and others.

DO take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with those important to you.

DO try to keep your life as normal as possible, let children keep up with their activities and stay at school.

DO try to go along with situations or triggers that bring back painful memories of the event, rather than avoiding.

DON'T bottle up feelings.

DON'T avoid talking about what happened.

DON'T expect the memories to go away – the feelings will stay for a long time to come.