What to Expect if you Have been involved in a difficult or traumatic event at work

Over recent years we have come to recognise and understand the impact of trauma and that people working in health services can be traumatise by adverse events in their work. We also understand that many people will have experience events in their lives outside of work that were or were potentially traumatic.

However, while this awareness is increasing, what actually happens during a potentially traumatic event and afterwards is perhaps less know by many people. You have been given this leaflet because you have been involved in an incident at work in some way. We thought it would be helpful to explain a little bit about the brain and bodies normal response to threat.

When we experience a traumatic event that is out of the ordinary for us, our minds may struggle to make sense of it. If we feel frightened or threatened, we may experience one or more of the recognised trauma responses: Fight (or control), Flight (avoid or get out of the way), Freeze (not know what to do, not able to think or know what to say or do), Flop (close down or faint), Friend (try to accommodate, even if this is unreasonable, eg saying “yes”). All of these responses are part of an automatic response to real or perceived danger.

When this happens our mind and bodies experience physiological changes which enable us to dealt with the threat or incident, but will also have an impact on our emotions and memories.

**What happens when we feel threatened?**

* During the event, our minds and bodies are in a state of alert and so work differently to the rest of the time. We pay more attention to the here and now; to our senses (sounds, sights, smells, tastes and touch) rather than history or context or things going on around us.
* After the event, our memories are initially a mixture of the sensory, emotional, and bodily reactions to what we experienced in the moment. These are often jumbled up and it can be difficult to remember what happened clearly or in the right order.
* Our mind then attempts to sort these into verbal memories, which help us to remember events from our life in a structured way, and are often like a story.
* For most people, over the days, weeks and sometimes months following a traumatic event, their memories get sorted in a way they can make sense of, and are stored just like non-traumatic memories.
* When this happens people are able to remember the event as something that happened in the past. It may still be upsetting, but over time becomes less overwhelming or intrusive in people’s day to day lives.

**Afterwards:**

It is normal to feel unsettled, shocked, anxious or angry. Sometimes, what you’ve experienced before and how you’ve made sense of that will influence how you feel about what has just happened. Often information leaflets may list common emotions following a traumatic event, however many of these can be caused by other things and do not in themselves means that you are not coping or need psychological therapy. Most of the time unpleasant or difficult feelings and experiences will reduce as the brain and body do their job of processing the event and healing themselves.

If it is new or unusual, it may take you longer to get back to normal than you might expect or hope. This leaflet explains some of the process that are completely normal part of responding to and overcoming awful things that are generally not normal or at least are difficult for us.

In the days and weeks after an incident, your brain begins to process the sensory bodily and emotional memories that were “dumped” while the incident was occurring. At this stage, the memories are still jumbled up, and they may pop back into your mind when you don’t want them to. This might be while you are asleep, or images and memories of the event may come to mind during the day. You might also re-experience the physical sensations you experienced while the event was taking place, or the emotions that you felt during this time. This might be if something reminds you of the event, or when you go back into the place where it happened.

When this happens, people can feel strong emotions, perhaps fear or anger (or other emotions that were tied to the memory) and may feel as if the traumatic event is happening again right now.

***Some people worry that they are “going mad” when this happens, or that they are not coping like “other professionals would” however, it is just a normal reaction to an extreme experience.***

It is just the sensory, emotional and bodily memories popping back into your head so that they can be processed and neatly stored.

What should I do?

* The main thing that you should do is remember that your mind is trying to sort out the traumatic memories and for many people part of the normal healing process involves feeling a range of strong emotions and experiencing vivid memories of the event.
* You probably know what works best for you, so do use those ways. However, it is best not to use alcohol, sleeping pills, or drugs (such as cannabis) to numb or as a way of coping, as this may increase the amount of time it takes for your traumatic memories to be processed.
* After a few days, if you notice that the memories are popping into your mind, you might find the experience frightening or very unpleasant. However, ***it is not harmful*** so it can be useful for you to allow the thoughts to flow and not try to stop them (by distracting yourself, etc.). This way they can get sorted out and stored as normal.
* Don’t avoid the places or people linked to the event. We support people to take time away from work if that might be helpful in the immediate aftermath of the event. However, the longer you avoid places and people, the harder it will be to get back.
* Do try to talk to someone you trust and feel safe with about what happened and how you feel.

It is really important to understand that everyone responds differently and have different ways of coping. It ok if you don’t have any of these reactions. Don’t assume what’s right for you will be right for someone else and feel like you have to respond in the same way as other people affected by the same event.

While we no longer routinely offer formal debriefing following incidents at work, we do want to ensure staff are physically and psychologically safe/secure in the immediate aftermath. We do offer post incident support and your manager will be able to arrange this for the whole team. We also would advise you to make use of any reflective practice spaces and supervision. Try to get back into your usual routine as soon as you possible as this will help you to move on from what happened.

Most people find that after a few days or weeks, they stop getting nightmares, or emotional memories of the event and their life returns to normal. If you find that this does not happen after a month or so speak to your supervisor or you can contact the Trust’s employee assistance programme. If you continue to experience nightmares, intrusive thoughts etc. speak to you GP, who will be best placed to advise on the next steps that will be most helpful you.

**Should I seek help straight away?**

The evidence suggests that talking with a therapist in probing detail about what happened very soon after the event is actually unhelpful. Most people with traumatic stress symptoms in the first couple of weeks will recover naturally without professional help. In the first month NICE recommends a period of **‘watchful waiting’** for those with mild to moderate symptoms following a traumatic event. If you have severe symptoms in the first month after the event then a referral to mental health services for early intervention may be of benefit.