

# Coping after a potentially traumatic experience

It is not unusual, following a challenging or potentially traumatic event (PTE), for most people to experience some form of psychological distress, for example strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, or anger. In the days (and perhaps weeks) following the event, these feelings may be intense.

However, in most cases, these reactions will lessen over time, and most of us will gradually start to feel better, especially if we are able to use healthy and helpful ways of coping and we receive support from those close to us in our families and communities. (Note: A stress reaction can happen right away or there can often be a delay of days/weeks/months).

A potentially traumatic event might involve either a direct threat (eg major incidents / emergencies, hazardous environments, assault/injury to self and/or colleagues, accidents involving self and/or colleagues) or indirect threats such as exposure to the suffering of others, especially the vulnerable (eg young or old). It might involve deaths by suicides; performing or witnessing CPR; dealing with anxious/upset/angry families/friends/bystanders; or perhaps very high media interest.

## How long will I feel this way?

In most cases, these difficult and distressing feelings may last a few days or weeks and will begin to lessen over time. There is no timescale for getting over a traumatic experience.

If you are continuing to feel some of these feelings after a month but they are improving and you are beginning to feel better, then it is likely that natural healing is taking place, and you are on the path to recovery.

However, if things aren't improving, are getting worse, and/or you are continuing to feel significant distress it is worth seeking professional advice and support as you may be developing a post traumatic injury.



## How might I feel?

There is no right or wrong way to feel in the face of a challenging or potentially traumatic incident, and those involved, whether directly or indirectly may experience a whole range of emotions and reactions. You may experience none, some, or all of these but that is OK.

- You may feel **anxious and afraid**, and these feelings might be triggered when you are reminded of what has happened even if you and your colleagues are now safe.
- You may feel **sad and upset** or be grieving. Especially if you have experienced loss.
- You may **feel cut off and distant** from others and the world around you and notice that you feel **numb and disconnected**. Things may feel **unreal**, and it may be difficult to accept what has happened.
- You may notice that you feel **shame or guilt** about what you did or did not do or **elated** at the fact that you survived if the incident involved significant risk to yourself.
- You may notice that you feel **angry or have feelings of aggression** towards other people or may find yourself **acting recklessly** or in **self-destructive** ways.
- You may notice that during the day you are thinking a lot and experiencing **vivid memories (eg visual, sounds, smells)** about what happened or are having distressing and **frightening dreams** at night.
- You may find that your **sleep is disturbed** and that you find it **difficult to concentrate** and/or have become **forgetful**.
- You may **notice changes** in appetite, energy, and irritability.
- You may experience **physical body symptoms** such as sweating, racing heart, shaking, churning stomach, headaches.
- You may notice that you are trying to **avoid people, places or situations** that remind you of what happened, and this is interfering with your normal day-to-day life. Alternatively, that you are trying not to think about it.
- **You may not experience any of the above**, and whilst you accept you have been through something difficult and distressing, **you are doing fine**.



## What can I do to help myself?

Traumatic experiences can disrupt the things that keep us well. It is important to be patient with yourself and give yourself time to heal. It is also important to recognise that we can take steps to help ourselves to heal by maintaining or reconnecting with helpful resources and supports.

### 1. Seek out social support.

Seek out support from friends, family, colleagues or other people in your world with whom you feel safe, and you can trust. You may not want to talk, but being amongst others will help you to feel supported and connected, rather than alone and isolated. If you do feel able to talk about what has happened this can help your brain to begin to make sense of what you have been through and should help to reduce distressing thoughts, memories, and dreams.

### 2. Try to maintain structure and routine to your day.

This includes routines around eating, sleeping, and your everyday activities. It can help to get back into routine around work and leisure activities too when you feel able.

### 3. Take gentle exercise.

We know it helps our bodies if we can stay active through regular exercise. This is especially important after we have experienced a trauma, to help our system use up the stress hormone, adrenalin.

### 4. Calming strategies.

It can take time to recover from a traumatic event. Help yourself by knowing what it is that helps you feel calm and try to practise this regularly. This may be using breathing or relaxation exercises, or it may be about listening to music, getting out in nature or sitting down with a book or box set. Notice what works for you and aim to practise it regularly.

### 5. Connecting with others who have been through the same or a similar experience.

It can be really helpful to connect with others who have experienced the same event, who you can relate to, and with whom you can access mutual support.

### 6. Try to avoid too much media.

Try to avoid watching too much TV or accessing too much social media around the event. Whilst some information may be helpful, this can also leave us/people feeling overwhelmed, leading to an increase in distress and making it difficult to soothe ourselves and turn our alarm system down.



## Post Traumatic Growth

People who have been through periods of trauma and adversity sometimes experience something called Post Traumatic Growth. Post Traumatic Growth is when people who have suffered adversity go on to experience

positive outcomes such as a renewed appreciation for life, improved relationships with others, or a sense of personal strength, new opportunities or spiritual change.

## What might be unhelpful?

Because of the strong and painful feelings that may be experienced following trauma, it makes sense that people may try to find ways to lessen the pain and dull or block the feelings. However, this can lead to less helpful ways of coping.

### 1. Try to avoid using alcohol or substances.

It can be tempting to use of alcohol or drugs to lessen or block out painful feelings. These may bring relief in the short-term, but they tend to create more problems in the long term. Using alcohol or drugs to push down your thoughts and feelings means that once you stop using substances, the thoughts and

feelings are likely to bounce back, meaning the pain and distress lasts longer. Be cautious about using substances and consider whether an alternative strategy like seeking out support, or getting out for some exercise and fresh air might be more helpful.

### 2. Notice if you are withdrawing/avoiding.

Again, it may feel like it is helpful to withdraw from others or to avoid places or situations that might remind you of what happened. However, this can leave you feeling isolated and alone and can make your thoughts and feelings harder to manage in the long term.

## When might I need to reach out for professional support?

Look out for warning signs:

- If after a month you are continuing to experience distressing memories and nightmares that are not improving, or are getting worse, you may benefit from professional support.
- If you continue to feel anxious, on edge or easily startled and this is interfering with how you function day to day, then this too can be a sign that you may need some extra help.

- If you have started to avoid people, places or situations, for fear that they will trigger painful memories and feelings, then some additional support may be beneficial.

If you are noticing any of the above “warning signs” then reach out for help sooner rather than later. Support is available and there are effective treatments to help you to heal and recover.



## Where to access support

### Scottish Mountain Rescue

[www.scottishmountainrescue.org/scottish-mountain-rescue-wellbeing-information/](http://www.scottishmountainrescue.org/scottish-mountain-rescue-wellbeing-information/)

### Lifelines Scotland

[www.lifelines.scot](http://www.lifelines.scot)

Including service specific help pages

[www.lifelines.scot/volunteers](http://www.lifelines.scot/volunteers)

[www.lifelines.scot/understanding-responses](http://www.lifelines.scot/understanding-responses)

### Contacting the Police Scotland Employee Assistance Programme

Call: 0800 046 5593

[policescotland.yourcareeap.co.uk/](http://policescotland.yourcareeap.co.uk/)

(Note: if the EAP link does not work/open, then copy and paste the link into your browser)

### Post Incident Support Process (NHS Rivers Centre)

Please see details on the **Scottish Mountain Rescue** wellbeing information link.

### NHS Inform

[www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/dealing-with-traumatic-events/support-for-people-who-have-experienced-a-traumatic-event/](http://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/mental-wellbeing/dealing-with-traumatic-events/support-for-people-who-have-experienced-a-traumatic-event/)

Mind to Mind – NHS inform

[www.nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind](http://www.nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind)

### NHS Scotland

Contact your GP

For further information, please email: [wellbeingofficer@scottishmountainrescue.org](mailto:wellbeingofficer@scottishmountainrescue.org)



The material in this leaflet was supplied by staff at the Rivers Centre, NHS Lothian (developers of the Lifelines Scotland project).

