

STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow

Coping with Trauma

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Who this booklet is for:

This handout is for people who have had something traumatic happen to them over the last few days or weeks. This could be when:

- Something serious happens to you, e.g. being attacked, being in a car crash.
- You felt that you could die or be badly hurt
- You see something serious happen to another person, e.g. dying or badly assaulted.

What this booklet will do:

- It will explain why you feel the way you do
- It will give you ideas on coping
- It will help you stop other problems

Part 1

Finding out about trauma

“I saw the car coming towards me. The next thing I know I’m sitting at the side of the road looking at the wreck of my car. There is blood all over me. How I’m still here I don’t know. It’s like a bad dream”

“My first thought was surprise – I gave him my money but then he stabbed me. I felt the pain and I saw my shirt turn red. I thought he was going to do it again. I thought ‘This is it. I’m going to die’. Yet I felt pretty numb about this – you know – detached from it all. Like it was happening to someone else. It was only after I got patched up and got home that I went to pieces. I was in floods of tears and I felt so helpless and scared. I’m getting worse each day”

“My house was gutted. The fire destroyed the lot. Thank God we all got out safe but I will never forget waking up, smelling the smoke. I prayed that the twins were OK. Even now, I keep on saying ‘What if.....’ and thinking about what might have happened”

“I was just about to lock up the shop when they grabbed me. I wouldn’t let go the money but they kicked and punched me. They were screaming at me that they would kill me. I have never been so scared in all my life. I don’t know why they ran off. I was so angry after it. I didn’t give in and I kept the money but I’m a nervous wreck now”

“I’ve never seen anyone die before so when that old man keeled over next to me in the bus, I went to pieces. He just died right in front of me. I screamed and puked my guts up. Then I think I passed out. I keep seeing him in my mind’s eye. I’m scared to go to sleep as I have nightmares about it. In truth, I’m drinking to try to forget it”

These five people have all been involved in a traumatic event. While the events were different, the way they react is often much the same.

Common reactions during or just after the event:

- Intense fear
- Helpless
- Horrified
- Numb
- That you are in a daze
- Detached 'It's like I'm here but not here'
- You can't recall all that happened

The most important thing to bear in mind about these reactions is that they are ***normal***. You are designed to act and feel the way you do. This is due to:

Fight / flight

This is the part of our bodies that helps protect us from danger. Now that something bad has happened to you, your Fight/Flight system is switched on. Part of your brain is saying – 'I must protect myself in case it happens again'. So it is keeping you on red alert in case it does happen again no matter how unlikely this is.

How people react to trauma

In the first few days after a trauma, Fight / Flight often causes problems in four areas:

- Problems shutting out the trauma
- Avoidance
- Feeling numb
- Feeling uptight

1) Problems shutting out the trauma

After an event like this, your mind tries to make sense of it. This can cause:

You might find thoughts of what happened to you coming into your mind no matter how hard you try to stop them.

They might appear for no reason. They might be triggered by seeing something that reminds you of what happened, e.g. watching 'the Bill' if you were attacked.

Some people have 'flashbacks'. This is when you feel that you are back in the middle of the event *as if* it is happening.

You might find yourself thinking 'could I have handled it better? What if I had did this instead of that?...and so on.

You might have nightmares about the event. You might dread going to sleep in case you have these dreams.

2) Avoidance

You might avoid going back to the place where it happened or places like it. So if you were in a car crash, you avoid driving. If you were attacked by a drunk outside a pub, you avoid going anywhere where you think you will meet drunks.

You may not want to talk about what happened as you think this will lead you to feel upset.

You might find it hard to recall exactly what happened

You may try not to think about what happened. You may try to distract your mind when these thoughts come into your head.

3) Feeling numb

You may lose interest in the things you used to like, e.g. the football, your job, sex life.

You feel cut off from those close to you

You might see your future as more bleak than before

You may feel depressed

4) Feeling uptight

You may find it hard to relax. You might find that, at the times when you should relax, thoughts of the event come into your mind. So you may try to keep yourself on the go all the time to stop this.

You might feel on edge all the time – if the phone rings, you jump through the roof.

You may worry a lot more. You will fear that something else might happen to you. Even though you might feel you are making too much of this, you will find it hard to stop doing so.

You may lose your temper a lot more.

You might find it hard to concentrate on the TV or a book. You might feel your memory is poor.

You might have a lot of symptoms of stress: heart rate quickens, breathe more quickly, tense muscles, headaches.

You might have problems falling or staying asleep. So you feel you are going about like a half-shut knife during the day.

You might find yourself scanning for danger all the time. If you were in a car crash, you might find yourself (as a passenger) telling the driver to watch for this and watch for that. If you were attacked, you might focus on, e.g. groups of boys you fear might get you.

Part 2

What you can do about it

These tips can help get you back in control

- Accept what is happening
- Keep your life as normal as you can
- Face your fears
- Be more active
- Watch what you drink
- Learn to relax
- Stop the nightmares

1) **Accept this is normal**

First (and most important): these feelings are normal – very unpleasant but normal.

This is what happens to ***normal*** people when something ***abnormal*** happens to them.

These feelings will die down once your system settles

You can speed this up by doing these things:

2) Keep your life as normal as you can.

Try to do all the usual things you do ***even if you do not feel like doing this, e.g.:***

- Stay at work if you are up to it
- Keep up your social life
- Go to the shops
- Visit your family and friends
- Take the children here and there

The more you can keep the usual routine going, the sooner you will come out the other end.

3) Face your fears

This is hard to do. But the more you face your fears, the more you control your stress. The message is:

The more you avoid, the more problems you build up in the future

The more you face up, the more you improve

So if you were in a crash, get back driving as soon as you can. If you were attacked, try to go back to the area where it happened (if it is safe to do so)

Try to allow the thoughts about the event to stay in your mind. If you can, and even though this is hard to do, try to go over the event in great detail again and again and again. This will make you stressed in the short term. In the long term, the stress will die down and you will feel more in control.

4) Be more active

Make sure you get out and about as much as you can.

Exercise can help you feel less stressed.

Give yourself one goal a day. Something that will stretch you but not too far. So don't bite off more than you can chew. And pat yourself on the back when you reach the goal.

5) Watch what you drink

It is common for people to drink more after a trauma. Do not do this. It will make you a lot worse.

So do keep going to the pub if this is a normal part of your life. But don't drink more than usual.

Don't drink alone at home

6) Learn to relax

Find somewhere quiet. Take the phone off the hook, lie back:

Take a breath in and think "**1**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Take a breath in and think "**2**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Repeat up to **10** and then back down to **1**

Think only about your breathing and on the number and "**relax**" in the minds eye

Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute). Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out slowly through your mouth

Use the diaphragm - as you breathe in, your stomach should push out while your chest should not move

As you breathe out, your stomach should pull in. Your chest should not move when you breathe out

Practise twice a day in different places

You can also download relaxation to a CD or mp3, free of charge, on our www.glasgowsteps.com site

7) Controlling nightmares

If you have a nightmare:

Keep a pen and paper at your bedside

Write down all you can recall in as much detail as you can

Read through what you have written as often as you can. This will make you tense at first. The more you do it, the less tense you will be. The less tense you are, the less likely you are to have more nightmares.

Useful contacts, books and websites

Understanding your reactions to Trauma (book)

Claudia Herbert, Blue Stallion Publications (2002)

Victim Support

www.victimsupportsco.demon.co.uk

www.vssdirectory.org.uk

Scottish Helpline 0845 60 39 213

(Mon to Thurs 9 - 4.30pm; Friday 9 – 4)

British Helpline 0845 30 30 900

(Mon to Frid 9am – 9pm; Sat and Sun 9am – 7pm)

Victim support provides advice about criminal justice procedures, personal safety and information about appropriate agencies. Also provides a listening service and can give support to victims of crime.

ASSIST

www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk

01788 560800

ASSIST offers confidential, emotional and practical support to individuals and families affected by trauma. It also extends its support and counselling provision to family members and loved ones.

Tackling other problems

Many people find that having a problem with trauma is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, depression, panic, low self-confidence, etc., then STEPS might be able to help.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our website (www.glasgowsteps.com) to find out more.