

***Occupational Health***

**Reacting to a Traumatic Event at Work**

When something happens that is distressing and unexpected, most people will experience a reaction that can be unpleasant, disturbing and potentially overwhelming. Just as, if you are physically hit, you bruise, so an emotional or psychological shock can have an impact that takes time to fade. This is called a post-traumatic stress reaction. In most cases, this reaction will subside over time as you gradually come to terms with the experience and its effects.

Understanding the reaction and how you can help yourself at such a difficult time means that you are more likely to recover quickly and fully. It also helps you, if necessary, to get professional help at any early stage when this recovery is hampered, for whatever reason.

**It is important to remember that Post Traumatic Stress is a natural reaction to an abnormal event.**

People sometimes wonder why they have been affected when others around them seem fine. They feel as though they are weak and should be able to “pull themselves together.” The important thing to remember is that we are all affected by different things at different times in our lives.

You may feel particularly vulnerable if you

* • Were very close to the person or situation
* • Have suffered other losses or bereavement recently, or unresolved ones in the past
* • Were already depressed, anxious or stressed
* • Can identify with the person or situation, for example the person is/was the same age as yourself / a significant other

There are a range of reactions that people have, and these will vary in how frequent, long-lasting or strong they are. However, the symptoms themselves fall into common themes and will usually include a combination of some of the following:

**Physical reactions:**

Your body undergoes many changes when reacting to the traumatic incident and these changes result in physical symptoms that can take time to settle.

* • Sleep disturbances, nightmares and bad dreams
* • Sweats or feeling clammy
* • Trembling
* • Headaches
* • Digestive complaints
* • Skin rashes
* • Accelerated heart rate and respiration

**How you think is often affected**

* • Poor concentration and difficulty focusing and remembering things
* • You may have intrusive images related to the incident
* • Thinking about the event when you don’t mean to
* • Going through the “what ifs?”

**You may find your emotions are changed and you are feeling:**

* “Wired” / high and ready for something to happen/ excessively anxious.
* Helpless / Numb/ Tearful
* Irritable, angry, like a volcano about to erupt.

**You may have noticed changes in how you are behaving or the people around you may tell you about these changes.**

* • Avoiding anything to do with the event or conversely compulsively looking for reminders
* • Having an exaggerated startle response – an overreaction to loud noises or sudden movements
* • Withdrawing from relationships
* • Unable to have loving feelings Unable to enjoy social activities Increasing the use of alcohol and cigarettes

All of these reactions are normal and, short term, will not cause lasting harm. It is important to give yourself time to recover and accept that you may not be as efficient and effective as normal. Traumatic events can cause a great deal of shock - then emotional disturbance that may take time to subside.

However, the reaction you have can lead to you feeling out of control and confused and this is one of the reasons that it is important to understand how and why your body and mind are reacting as they are.

**Ways you can help yourself**

The following simple steps can go a long way to helping the psychological “bruise” fade away

* • Talking things through with a good listener
* • Avoiding alcohol
* • Reducing stimulants such as caffeine
* • Limiting your exposure to distressing media coverage
* • Taking regular exercise
* • Keeping a diary of your thoughts and feelings
* • Eating regular, well-balanced meals
* • Setting yourself small, realistic goals

**When to seek professional help**

Sometimes, a Post-Traumatic Stress is so intense or chronic that you may benefit from speaking to a professional who understands trauma. Generally, the earlier this happens, the better but there are effective treatments for trauma even if it is many years since the incident(s) happened.

Mental health professionals agreed that there are two effective treatments for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (a particularly severe and long-lasting trauma response) and these are Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR).

Always get medical advice if, you are finding it difficult to manage any of the reactions you are experiencing, however long it is since the incident. You should also seek advice if

* • You do not have someone to share your thoughts, feelings and experience with and you think this would be helpful
* • You feel despair or have thoughts of harming yourself
* • You have any concerns about how you are reacting
* • If, after a month, you don’t feel that you have improved

**!!! Please Remember!!!**

**Professional help is usually available from your employer, your doctor or local Community Health Centre.**

**Don’t suffer in silence.**

**Gloucestershire County Council Occupational Health team 08/08/2023**

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