

Fact Sheet

Mental health – common reactions after a potentially traumatic experience

First Reactions

In the first days and weeks following a traumatic event, many people experience strong feelings of which some are listed below.

- Fear
- Shock
- Denial
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Guilt
- Blame
- Anger
- Lowered self esteem
- Isolation
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Lowered confidence
- Lowered trust
- Relationship issues
- Loss of appetite
- Intimacy difficulties
- Increased drug and alcohol use

Most people recover on their own and return to their normal lives and routine with the support of family and friends, and without professional assistance. However, people who do not recover on their own may need professional help and is best to seek this as soon as possible.

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health <http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/>

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault <http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/>

Depression

Sadness and grief are normal reactions after a traumatic experience. People can also develop negative thoughts about themselves, other people and the world they live in. These thoughts and feelings usually lift as people start to adjust to the potentially traumatising event. However, for some, these thoughts and feelings persist and they find it hard to participate in everyday activities. These people may have developed depression and would benefit from talking to a health practitioner.

Depression is a common mental health issue, with one in five Australians experiencing it at least once in their lives. It is common after exposure to a potentially traumatising event. Some of the signs are:

- Little or no interest and pleasure in normal activities
- Being tearful
- Feeling low and miserable
- Feeling tired all the time
- Changes in appetite, sleep or weight
- Feeling worthless, helpless and hopeless
- Poor concentration
- Suicidal thoughts

Depression can get in the way of everyday life: getting out of bed, going to work, seeing friends – these everyday activities may feel very difficult. Depression can also make it difficult for people to work through their experiences.

If you have been experiencing a number of these problems, then you should talk to your local doctor or a mental health professional.

Anxiety

Many people experience fear and anxiety during and after exposure to a potentially traumatising event. They may feel terrified, stressed or on edge. Some may also feel disoriented or as if things are unreal. If these feelings persist or the level of anxiety becomes so severe that it significantly interferes with someone's ability to cope with daily life, they may have an anxiety disorder and should seek assistance from a suitably qualified mental health practitioner.

One in ten Australians experiences an anxiety disorder at any one time. People with anxiety may experience:

- Breathlessness
- Racing heart
- Sweating
- Shaking, trembling or dizziness
- Nausea
- Feeling restless or on edge

If you have been experiencing a number of these, you should talk to your local doctor or a mental health professional.

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Nightmares/ Sleep Disturbances

Survivors of potentially traumatising events such as sexual assault can often experience nightmares or sleep disturbances. These are a common impact of sexual assault and a normal reaction to stress. Nightmares can leave a person with feelings of terror, fear, distress and/or anxiety. Unfortunately there is no 'cure' for nightmares, they are a common response to a potentially traumatising event and will decrease as issues are resolved. The following are a number of practical activities a person can try to help relax before sleep:

- Get into a routine, go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time every morning
- Allow wind-down time prior to sleep; take a bath, listen to music, or read a book
- Turn off television and computer and don't take them to bed
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol
- Avoid sleeping pills
- Avoid exercise three hours before bed

Strategies for calming after waking in distress:

- Grounding techniques require a person to touch things around them, look at objects in the room and name what can be seen out loud
- Be aware of the location, consider safety and that dreams cannot cause physical hurt
- Breathe slowly, visualise the air moving throughout the body
- Do not stay in bed when awake; if sleep does not return in about 20 minutes get up and go to another room until ready to try again

- Have a herbal tea
- Take a shower
- Listen to relaxing music

Flashbacks

Flashbacks can occur with no warning and it is not always clear what triggers them. These can sometimes be so vivid that a person feels they have relived the experience. Like nightmares they are a common response to a potentially traumatising event and will decrease as issues are resolved.

Strategies for calming after flashbacks are similar to after waking in distress:

- Grounding techniques require a person to touch things around them, look at objects in the room and name what can be seen out loud
- Be aware of the location, consider safety and that dreams cannot cause physical hurt
- Breathe slowly, visualise the air moving throughout the body
- Have a herbal tea
- Take a shower
- Listen to relaxing music
- Go for a walk / exercise

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South East Centre against Sexual Assault