

Dealing with the effects of a traumatic event

Working in the Emergency Department can expose staff to stressful and traumatic events.

Individuals will have a very personal response to this, but it can be useful to know how others have reacted in similar situations. Although the event may be over, it is quite natural to experience further reactions after such a stressful event.

Some people may wish to cope by themselves, whilst others may find help and support from colleagues, friends and family.

Most people are affected by these events to some degree. Some will have little apparent distress and take satisfaction from their professional role in the event. Others may experience a strong emotional reaction which interferes with normal coping mechanisms.

Stress is the normal mental and physical response to demands and pressures on our lives. For most people the acute stress response will pass after a few days or weeks.

There is no right or wrong way to react after a traumatic event. Everyone will have a personal response with a range of thoughts and feelings.

Stress may show itself in different ways:

- Sleep disturbance – feeling exhausted but unable to get restful sleep
- Tension headaches and muscle aches
- Chest pain
- Nausea and loss of appetite
- Poor concentration and forgetfulness
- Irritability – snapping at colleagues, friends and family
- Intrusive memories – thoughts and images remain in your short-term memory for days and weeks, and can dominate your mind.
- Sadness – low mood and tearful
- Guilt – shame or embarrassment about not acting how you would have expected, about letting yourself or others down
- Disappointment – that others don't understand how you are feeling

Some things that can help

In the first 24-48 hours;

- Alternate gentle exercise with rest
- Acknowledge how you feel
- Reach out - people do care
- Do things that you enjoy
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Consider a debrief or intervention

Do;

- Take more care e.g. when driving
- Talk about what has happened as often as you need to.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten – it's ok to be upset
- Take time to sleep, eat well, rest, and spend time with those important to you
- Take exercise that is appropriate for you

Don't;

- Be afraid to ask for help
- Use alcohol, nicotine or other substances to hide your feeling, cope or relieve stress

Where to find help

- Friends, colleagues, supervisors – sharing with others who have had similar experiences
- Peer supporters – well informed colleagues who can discuss your response to what has happened
- Chaplaincy – experienced staff trained in offering support
- NHS Inform & NHS 24
- Occupational health – can provide support to staff needing more clinical intervention
- GP
- Child Bereavement UK – independent charity contracted by NHS GGC for staff support after paediatric deaths.
www.childbereavementuk.org
- Glasgow Psychological Trauma Service – NHS clinical psychology service which is available for individuals in distress
GlasgowPsychological.TraumaService
@ggc.scot.nhs.uk

When to seek professional help

If some of the common reactions are particularly intense, or if they persist for a long time (more than 6-8 weeks), it is advisable to seek professional help. Some pointers which suggest you should consider asking for help include;

- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope
- If you have no one to share your emotions with and feel the need to do so

Or, if 6 months after the incident;

- Continuing to feel numb and empty
- Persistent tension, confusion, exhaustion
- Continuing to have intrusive thoughts or recollections
- Continuing to have nightmares or poor sleep
- Your relationships seem to be suffering badly
- You are drinking to excess
- Your work performance suffers, you make mistakes or have accidents associated with poor concentration



Dealing With The Effects of Traumatic Events

CLYDE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT
PEER SUPPORT GROUP