

Coping with Traumatic Events



Information and Advice for Persons who have been involved in a traumatic incident

Introduction

Traumatic events or serious incidents may occur for anyone in their personal or professional life. While these events may be rare they can be distressing.

The leaflet overviews the impacts one can experience from distressing events, and the independent support PAM are offering witnesses and participants in the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry. This support is free; running sessions with qualified practitioners to give people a safe, independent, completely confidential and supportive space pre and post hearings.

It also gives brief information and advice on how best to look after yourself in the hours, days and weeks following your involvement in a traumatic event.

We hope you will find reading this booklet helpful in understanding the thoughts, emotions and behaviour that are generated during and after such an incident. This booklet is just part of a range of support services available from PAM Assist to support you following such an event.

Get Support



PAM are offering witnesses and participants in the Inquiry sessions to give people a safe, confidential supportive space pre and post hearings. People can have a face to face session, virtual via telephone or Microsoft teams day or evening. These sessions can be a time to reflect on the impact, talk through fears and concerns or even just to look at relaxation and strategies to help people be the best they can while giving evidence. Post hearings it will help debrief and start the natural processing of the event.

Sessions are with qualified experts used to providing emotional and practical support to people with a range of concerns, including anxiety, depression, nervousness, trauma and post traumatic stress disorder to name a few. These sessions may also signpost longer term options for those who take part.

You can book your session by ringing **01925 948012** or by email on **CI@pamwellbeing.co.uk**

There is no charge to witnesses or participants in the inquiry for this support service.

Coping with Traumatic Events Continued



Information and Advice for Persons who have been involved in a Traumatic Incident

Many different reactions may be experienced during and after a traumatic event, and it is important for you to be aware of these. You may not experience all of these emotions as everyone reacts differently to such experiences. The reactions described below are completely normal responses to what was an abnormal event. The most common reactions are:

Fear

Intense fear during and after a traumatic event where you feel personally threatened or overwhelmed is very common. Some people “freeze with fear” during an incident while others remain calm at first but feel very frightened when the immediate danger has passed.

Shock and Numbness

The first reaction to a traumatic event is often a sense of shock and emotional numbness. It may be difficult to feel any emotions about the incident for some time or even remember exactly what happened. There is often a sense of unreality and distance that feels dreamlike. People may experience such things as “I didn’t believe it was happening” and “everything was in slow motion and I went on autopilot.” There can be a disconnection from surroundings and withdrawal from colleagues, friends and family.

Anger

You may at some point feel angry about the incident as anger can be a protective emotion when faced with a threat. Be aware that the anger is caused by the incident and try to avoid expressing this anger in inappropriate ways with colleagues, your family or friends. Irritability with the police, colleagues and close family is very common in the period following such a distressing event but it is not always productive to express this. If you can, tell your family, friends and colleagues about what happened and the reason for your irritability.

Anxiety

It is normal to feel nervous and jumpy after being involved in a traumatic incident, particularly after feeling personally threatened or witnessing someone else being in danger. You may find yourself more nervous in a whole range of situations, familiar and unfamiliar. Loud noises may startle you and you may recall aspects of the event you would rather forget. It may be difficult to return to your normal routine for a few days without getting

The Reactions Experienced During and After a Traumatic Event continued...



Some people feel more safety conscious after a traumatic event and it is not unusual to be more suspicious of strangers generally. You may also find it difficult to be on your own as you feeling safer with others around you. Expect to have some difficulties in sleeping and to be generally more keyed up and less able to relax than is normal for you. Certain “triggers” associated with the incident may increase your anxiety and nervousness. These triggers can be sights, sounds or smells. Sometimes these triggers may not just remind you of the incident but you may “relive” the experience and feel the same emotions you did at the time of the event.

Guilt

You may feel that you should or could have done more during the traumatic event or wished you had behaved differently during the incident. With hindsight, the incident will seem much clearer and more straight forward than it probably was and you may question your own behaviour. You may wonder if you behaved according to any prescribed procedures or if you handled the situation in the best way. You go back over the event and question yourself or your behaviour which is all common to do.

Feeling Tearful and Crying

A traumatic experience can provoke a range of strong emotions and it is quite common to cry or feel tearful at times. Crying is one of the many ways of coping with the experience and you should not view it as abnormal or unusual but as a natural reaction to a powerful emotional experience.

Cognitive Effects

Intrusive thoughts about the incident either when awake or sleeping (nightmares) are very common in the immediate period after an event. Although you may worry about this, it is perfectly normal. It is not usually a good idea to dwell on these thoughts, or to imagine what might have happened if the situation had been different, but more important to accept things as they are. This “what if” thinking can often add to your distress so it is helpful to focus on what did happen rather than what could have happened as “what if” thinking tends to imagine an even worse experience.

It is common for people to experience cognitive difficulties following a traumatic incident such as finding it difficult to make decisions, being more forgetful than usual and finding it difficult to concentrate or focus on anything for long. People describe feeling fatigued and a lack of motivation.

Physical Effects

After being involved in a traumatic incident you are likely to experience a range of physical reactions.

These may include:

- ✓ Headaches
- ✓ Neck and back pain
- ✓ Nausea
- ✓ Breathlessness
- ✓ Heart palpitations
- ✓ Tiredness and exhaustion, both physical and emotional

Behavioural Effects

Following being involved in a traumatic event, there are a range of common behavioural changes which you may experience. Sleeping difficulties are very common immediately after being involved in a traumatic event, the appetite is often impacted with either a loss of appetite or a tendency to overeat. You may find it difficult to be alone and you may be more concerned about your security and physical safety.

A very common reaction to a traumatic experience is to avoid any situation that may remind you of the incident and potentially trigger strong emotional reactions. For example, you may find it difficult to return to the place where the event happened. And sometimes avoid others that were also present.

Coping After a

Traumatic Event

After being involved in a traumatic event, it may take some time to fully recover and you need to **give yourself time** to come to terms with the experience and recover.

There is a myth that the best way to cope with a traumatic event is to face it fully immediately. This myth is often summarised with the expression “if you have fallen off your bike the best thing to do is get straight back on the bike”. This approach works with minor incidents, but with serious incidents you must do the opposite and give yourself time to deal with the event’s impact. Although just giving yourself time to recover is important, there are some activities you can do to help your recovery and other activities to avoid.

Listed right are some common dos and don'ts that you will find helpful.



Do:

- ✓ When you feel ready, talk about the experience and your feelings to colleagues, family and friends.
- ✓ Make use of the support provided by external organisations and PAM Assist and ask for extra help if you need it. Contact Trauma support on or CI@pamwellbeing.co.uk or **01925 948012** and reach out.
- ✓ Be easy on yourself in the days and weeks after the event. Where possible avoid stressful situations and be aware that it will take time to process and come to terms with the incident. Be gentle on yourself and take time to find ways to enjoy yourself.
- ✓ Try to lead as normal a life as possible by maintaining your routines.
- ✓ Be especially careful when driving as your concentration may not be as good for a few days/weeks after the event. If in doubt do not drive.
- ✓ Return to normal working routines as soon as you feel able. Returning to work can be helpful even if you are not able to work your normal role, or normal shift pattern.
- ✓ Physically look after yourself. Exercise is really helpful in recovering from a traumatic event. Walking, swimming and running are all useful ways of managing the difficult emotions experienced after an incident. Going to a gym can be helpful if this is part of your normal routine. Try to return to your normal sleep routine and eat as healthily as possible.
- ✓ Maintain your interests and hobbies and socialise.
- ✓ Avoid television programmes and other media that will remind you of the incident and upset you.

Don't:

- ✓ Behave as though the incident has not affected you and bottle up your feelings. Share your experience and feelings with colleagues, family and friends when you are ready.
- ✓ Dwell on what you might have done or what might have happened, concentrate on what did happen rather than what could have happened.
- ✓ Blame yourself for anything you did or didn't do during the incident or the feelings you have had since. It is very important to avoid being self critical.
- ✓ Forget that there may be others who shared your experience or have had similar experiences in the past and will be having similar feelings to yourself.
- ✓ Use non-prescribed drugs or alcohol to help you cope with the experience. If you have been in contact with your GP and have been prescribed medication as a result of the incident, discuss with your doctor about waiting a few days before taking this medication to see if your reactions subside naturally.
- ✓ Put yourself under pressure too soon. It can take a few weeks until you are back to normal.
- ✓ Make any major decisions or lifestyle changes until you feel back to normal.