

# Psychological and Emotional Reactions to Traumatic Events

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please speak to a member of staff who can arrange it for you.

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Jeśli niniejsza ulotka ma być dostępna w innym języku lub formacie,  
proszę skontaktować się z członkiem personelu, który ją dla Państwa przygotowuje.

Dacă aveți nevoie de această broșură într-o altă limbă sau într-un format accesibil,  
vă rog să discutați cu un membru al personalului să se ocupe  
de acest lucru pentru dumneavoastră

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إذا احتجت إلى هذه النشرة بلغة أخرى، أو بتنسيق  
يسهل الوصول إليه، يرجى التحدث إلى أحد الموظفين لترتيب ذلك لك.

## What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is any experience in which your safety, or the safety of others, is seriously threatened. This includes situations such as accidents, fires, assaults, sudden illnesses or medical emergencies. These events are usually unexpected and highly stressful. These types of situations can be traumatic for those witnessing the event as well as those who may sustain an injury.

## What might I notice immediately after a traumatic event?

The human body naturally responds to threats or danger, by going into 'fight or flight' mode. This is an automatic response and is our body's way of getting ready to either 'run away' or 'fight'. This leads to physical symptoms in the body such as:

- A faster heartbeat
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Nausea
- Numbness or shock
- Feelings of fear and anxiety.

The body can often remain in this mode after the threat has gone, for example, when in hospital after the traumatic event. It can take some time for your body to return to normal and you may notice these symptoms for several weeks.

## What emotional and psychological reactions might I notice in the weeks following a traumatic event?

For the first few weeks after a traumatic event people can experience a number of physical, emotional and behavioural changes. This is nothing to worry about, and is to be expected. You may notice:

- Feelings such as fear, grief, anger, panic, anxiety, irritability and low mood
- Flashbacks and nightmares – this is feeling like you are going through the traumatic event again. People often see images and sometimes experience smells, sounds and physical sensations such as pain from the traumatic event
- Avoidance – people often avoid places, people, objects and activities that remind them about what happened
- Hypervigilance or feeling on edge (hyperarousal) – this is when you may be more aware of danger than usual
- Difficulty with sleeping
- Not wanting to talk to friends and family about what happened
- Not thinking about what happened or thinking about it all the time and going over and over it in your mind
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering things.

## What will happen over time?

Most people will experience physical, emotional and behavioural changes straight after the event. Some people may not experience these changes until months or even years after the event. Every person and their family will cope differently. However, for most people their psychological symptoms will begin to improve over the first 4 weeks following a traumatic event.

## What can help?

- Gradually getting back into your normal routine
- If possible, try to talk about what happened with someone you trust, but remember to do this at your own pace
- Allowing yourself to feel sad, upset, or fearful. These feelings are normal and natural
- Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help you to process them, and come to terms with what has happened
- Reminding yourself that you are safe and that the traumatic event is in the past
- Getting back to activities that you would usually enjoy.

## How do I get help?

- If it has been over a month after the traumatic event, and you continue to feel concerned about how you are feeling and coping, it may be useful to ask for further support.
- If you are still in hospital, talk to the doctors, nurse, therapists or anyone else involved in your care. They can speak with you further, and make a referral to Clinical Psychology if required.
- If you have been discharged from hospital, you can visit your GP. Or if you are regularly coming to the hospital for dressing changes or clinics, you can talk to the doctors, nurses or therapists. They can refer you for psychological support. Some people may begin to experience distress or difficulty with coping several months or years after the traumatic event. If this happens you can get help in the same ways listed above.

**Contact details:**

Department of Clinical Psychology  
St Helens Hospital  
Telephone: 01744 646864

**Other useful contacts:**

Changing Faces – charity supporting people with disfigurements:

[www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk) telephone: 0300 0120275

St Helens Hospital  
Marshalls Cross Road,  
St Helens, Merseyside, WA9 3DA  
Telephone: 01744 26633