

After a Distressing or Frightening Event - Information and Advice for Staff & Managers

For the first few weeks after experiencing a distressing, frightening or traumatic event, it is normal to notice a range of reactions. In the early stages following such an event, psychological professional help is **not** usually necessary, in fact it can be unhelpful to act too soon.

A normal range of reactions might include:

- Emotional reactions such as feeling afraid, sad, tearful, horrified, helpless, overwhelmed, angry, confused, numb or disorientated
- Having distressing thoughts and images of the incident
- Nightmares, disturbed sleep or insomnia
- Feeling anxious
- Low mood
- Fatigue
- Feeling “jumpy” or on edge

These reactions are part of a natural process of making sense of events after something difficult has happened. Not everyone experiences this, but a great many people do.

What to do

The most important things to do during the initial days and weeks afterwards are to look after yourself, and each other. This should start with meeting basic human needs:

- eat and hydrate
- sleep and rest
- avoid drugs & alcohol
- be kind to yourself - take pressure off yourself in whatever way you can
- try to do normal things with other people
- get support from those you trust and would usually go to for support
- talk about the incident if you feel you would like to, but if it doesn't feel like the right time yet, don't force yourself

Things to for managers to consider

- For the first few weeks, it may **not** be helpful to arrange debriefing sessions about the incident. NICE guidance suggests that psychologically-focussed debriefing sessions can interfere with the natural process of making sense of an incident, which in some cases leads to an increased risk of distress and ongoing difficulties.
- Some processes need to happen after a difficult or traumatic event according to local policy and procedures, including serious incident investigations. Investigation processes can understandably be distressing at times, and care should be taken to support staff as far as possible.
- If you are a manager, it will be important to take time to think about how you can support your staff and yourself.
 - Check in with your staff, reassure them that you will support any needs they might have going forwards.
 - Offer supportive one to one time for anyone who would like to talk about the incident. This can be facilitated by you as a manager OR by someone separate as appropriate.
 - Seek your own support or supervision if you feel you need it.

Where can I go if I want to talk about this in the early stages?

If it has been less than 4 weeks since the incident, it might be most helpful to talk things through with trusted family, friends or work colleagues, as much or as little as you feel comfortable with. If you would prefer to talk to someone separate, a listening service might be helpful.

Dedicated national support line for health and social care staff : (7am-11pm 7 days): 0800 0696222

Samaritans (24/7): 116 123

When Should I Seek More Help?

Most people will notice the impacts of the event gradually normalising over the coming weeks. Experiencing waves of emotion for a little while is normal. It is recommended that you seek professional support (e.g., speak to GP, consider a self-referral to talking therapies) if one month after the event you are still experiencing the following difficulties:

- Feeling upset and fearful
- Finding it difficult to stop thinking about the incident
- Having nightmares
- Feeling more irritable
- Feeling more jumpy
- Struggling to work or look after your home and family
- Starting to have relationship difficulties
- Using drugs or drinking alcohol more than usual
- Acting very differently to before the trauma
- Struggling to enjoy life
- Feeling emotionally numb

If at any time you are feeling unable to keep yourself safe, please contact crisis services on one of the numbers below.

Useful contacts:

- **Urgent care or crisis support:**
 - Mersey Care footprint: freephone number **0800 145 6570**
 - Halton /Knowsley / St Helens/ Warrington **0800 051 1508**
 - Wigan: **0800 051 3253**
 - Cheshire and Wirral footprint: **0800 145 6485**
 - Lancashire and South Cumbria: **0800 953 0110**

If you live outside these areas, please visit <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline>

- **Cheshire and Merseyside Resilience Hub:** <https://www.cheshiremerseyresiliencehub.nhs.uk/> click to self refer for psychological support.
- **Local primary care psychological services (IAPT):** <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/>
- **NHS Practitioner Health:** 0300 0303 300 <https://www.practitionerhealth.nhs.uk/>
- **Doctors in Distress:** www.doctors-in-distress.org.uk/

I want to know more...

If you would like to read more about what to expect after a difficult or traumatic incident, please follow this link:

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event>