

Bridgetown Community Response

“It is not what man sees that upsets him but rather how he interprets it.” Epictetus

Responses to Trauma

There are many and varied responses to being exposed to trauma and these may range from none to extreme. These reactions depend on a variety of factors a few of which are proximity to the trauma, age, personality traits, personal resilience, experience of similar situations and threat to safety. Trauma is a personal experience. Two people may be exposed to the same situation and have completely different responses. There is no right or wrong reaction.

The main message about dealing with trauma is to notice any changes in your day to day life, allow yourself to have the feelings and changes and monitor them. In 99% of the population who experience changes after exposure to a traumatic event the changes dissipate over time. There is no rule or timeline but rather one is looking for a gradual return to normal feelings, routines and behaviours.

People involved in a traumatic event or events may experience a variety of mental, emotional, physical and behavioural reactions.

Mental reactions may include struggling with concentration, memory lapses, thoughts about the event, frequently replaying the event and spending time reflecting on one's own life situation.

Emotional reactions may include worry, fear, anxiety, shock, feeling numb, emotional sensitivity, avoidance and withdrawal from people, tasks and usual routines.

Physical reactions to trauma may include feeling tired and exhausted, sleep disturbance including getting to and staying asleep as well as feeling physically unwell.

Behavioural reactions to trauma may include avoiding reminders of the event including the location and people who were also present, withdrawing from others and usual routines, increase use of substances and appetite changes.

Making sense of the traumatic event

After the event it is quite natural to try and make sense of the event by asking oneself: how, why, why not me, why do I feel the way I do and spending time reflecting on your role in the event, anything you could have done differently as well what kind of person you are and how the experience has changed you and your view of your world.

Helping resolve traumatic reactions to trauma

To help a person resolve traumatic reactions there are several strategies that can be put in place and these include:

- Recognising that reactions to a distressing event are normal.
- Accept that you will not feel your normal self for a period of time, but it will eventually pass.
- Try not to get angry or frustrated with yourself if you are not able to do things as well or efficiently as you did before.
- Avoid overuse of alcohol or drugs to help you cope.
- Delay making major decisions or big life changes until you feel better.
- Start by writing down your feelings
- Then talk with others about what has happened when you are ready – don't try to block it out.
- Use your normal routine as a base but don't worry if you struggle to stick with it.
- Don't let the trauma confine your life, don't avoid places and people, but give yourself the time to work through the experience.
- Rest when you need but exercise by walking or using any relaxation technique.
- Use family and friends for support as they will be there for you now and into the future.
- When the trauma brings up memories or feelings, try to confront them. Think about them, then put them aside. If it brings up other memories, try to keep them separate from the current problem and deal with them separately.

Healing and recovery process after trauma

Most people only stay in trauma reaction mode for a short period of time. The normal healing and recovery process involves the body coming down out of a state of heightened arousal. In other words, the internal reactions gradually begin to turn off, and the body and the person gradually begin to return to the pre trauma state. Typically, this should occur within approximately one month of the event.

Seeking help from a health professional after a traumatic event

Traumatic stress can cause strong reactions in some people and may not settle, they may linger longer than a month and in very few cases get worse over time.

Seek professional help if you:

- are struggling with the intense feelings or physical sensations
- feel that you are not beginning to function as you were before after three or four weeks
- continue to have disturbed sleep, nightmares or physical stress symptoms
- keep reliving the traumatic experience
- continue to avoid anything that reminds you of the traumatic experience
- feel you have no one you can share your feelings with including family and friends
- using more alcohol or drugs
- cannot return to work or manage responsibilities
- feel very much on edge and can be easily startled.

Crisis Support Services

If you are struggling with any of the above and feeling that you need immediate support, you can also contact one of the following support lines:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14 (support for people in crisis)
- Crisis Care: 1800 199 008 (telephone information and referral for people experiencing crisis)
- Rurallink: 1800 552 002 (Rurallink is a specialist after hours mental health telephone service for people in rural communities of Western Australia)

Mental Health Care Plan

If you continue to struggle under the Medicare Better Health plan all Australians are now able to receive up to 20 therapy sessions. These sessions include telehealth sessions which some people may prefer because of the additional anonymity. To receive the sessions, attend your General Practitioner, describe your struggles and seek a referral under the Better Health Plan. Note there may be a gap fee so please discuss the fees with the provider when making an appointment.

Local Psychologists:

Psychologists Specializing in Trauma Response and who provide Telehealth:

Ms Poh Geok Gan 08 6248 5946

Dr David Cockram 0402 833545

The Department of Communities coordinates responses to disaster emergency welfare situations and liaises with emergency service organisations and partnering welfare agencies to support the community & individuals affected.

The Department can refer you to qualified people who can help you take charge of your recovery. For counselling and support contact:

Disaster Response Hotline

Tel: 1800 032 965 (country free call)

For more information go to:

www.communities.wa.gov.au