

## Trauma: first response and recovery

**Initial assistance involves practical and emotional support, information and ongoing monitoring, tailored to individual needs. This is sometimes referred to as psychological first aid.**

**Structured psychological debriefing should not be offered on a routine basis.**

**Health practitioners should encourage people affected by traumatic events to seek the support of family, friends and community groups.**

**Most people recover on their own or with the help of family and friend, but if someone is very distressed or their reactions are interfering with work and relationships, it is important that they talk to a doctor.**

There is no standard recipe for how people cope with trauma. Each person has a unique way of recovering. They should be supported in using strategies and resources that suit them, and that are readily available. If people seek professional support immediately following a traumatic event, it is likely that a health practitioner will take a practical approach that meets the person's immediate needs and helps them cope with their distress. For example, someone who has just been in a severe car accident might need:

- Encouragement to ask help from, and spend time with, family and friends
- Information about the right pain relief
- Information about possible emotional reactions to traumatic events
- Gentle encouragement and support to get back into a car

[The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#) recommend against routine debriefing. While no one should be forced to talk about what they have been through or seen, those who wish to discuss the experience and can manage their distress should be supported in doing so.

It is important to monitor people at risk of developing mental health problems following a traumatic event. For example, people may be at risk if they have experienced:

- Physical or sexual assault
- Repeated traumatic experiences
- Mental health problems after past traumatic events

The guidelines recommend that screening for high risk individuals should be considered when planning services following major disasters or incidents.

### **Recovery from traumatic events**

Immediately following a traumatic event, people are likely to experience strong reactions. They may experience feelings such as fear, sadness, guilt and anger, and question their beliefs – about their safety, how much control they have over their life and how predictable the world really is. For most, these reactions will gradually decrease over time.

The way people adapt to stressful life events and the support they receive from others are important for recovery. Help following a traumatic event does not have to come from a health professional – the answers are often found within ourselves and with the help of trusted friends and family. It is important that people involved in traumatic events use the resources and support systems most readily available to them. For example, if someone tends to use exercise to deal with stress, it might also help them to manage tension following a traumatic event. Spending time with people that have been supportive in the past might be another way of coping with what is happening.

### **Self-help tips for someone who has gone through a traumatic experience:**

- | <b>Do's</b>   | <b>Don'ts</b>  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Spend time with people who care</li><li>• Give yourself time</li><li>• Find out about impact of trauma and what to expect</li><li>• Try to keep a routine going – work, study</li><li>• Return to normal activities</li><li>• Talk about how you feel or what happened when ready</li><li>• What can you do right now....?</li><li>• Do things that help you relax</li><li>• Do things that you enjoy</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use alcohol or drugs to cope</li><li>• Keep yourself busy and work too much</li><li>• Engage in stressful family or work situations</li><li>• Withdraw from family and friends</li><li>• Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy</li><li>• Avoid talking about what happened at all cost</li><li>• Take risks</li></ul> |

### **Recovery from posttraumatic mental health problems**

While many people recover from traumatic experience in the days and weeks following a traumatic event, some go on to develop mental health problems such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. A doctor or a mental health professional can help people whose reactions are interfering with their day-to-day activities and relationships

identify what the problem is and what to do about it.

Emotional recovery is different from being cured from a physical illness. It does not mean that all the pain and questions that followed the traumatic event will disappear. Rather, it may mean having less intense reactions to stress and reminders of the trauma, an improved ability to manage problems and more confidence in one's ability to cope.

Recovery is not something that happens all at once, nor is it straightforward. Mental health problems can be manageable for a while, then return at times of stress. Anniversary dates, news coverage of similar events or going through a major change like a new job or divorce, can lead to problems coming back or getting worse for a time.

Recovering from mental health problems following a traumatic experience usually involves using more than one strategy. It can include trying to make sense of what happened, learning to manage strong feelings or finding ways to get back to day-to-day routines, enjoyable activities or work.

Here are some things that can promote recovery:

- Set realistic goals — don't take on too much and find goals that maintain motivation
- Review and reward progress — noticing even the small steps
- Talk about the ups and downs of recovery with friends, family and health professionals
- Have a plan to maintain positive changes and contingencies to deal with times of stress or reminders of the trauma

### **Information, training and service development**

ACPMH educates organisations and the community about the factors and processes which may protect people in the face of a traumatic event or stressful situation, as well as what may make them vulnerable to not coping. It also provides service development advice to organisations that would like to improve their immediate response to traumatic events

More information is available from our website, [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au), including:

- [Fact sheets](#): Helping yourself and Helping family and friends
- [Information for health professionals](#)
- [Service development](#)