

## Trauma and serious injury

More than 300,000 Australians are admitted to hospital each year with a serious injury as a result of an accident or assault. They face an often long, painful and stressful road to recovery. Not only do they have to deal with the trauma of going through such an event, but they also have to deal with pain, uncertainty about their future health, disability and potential financial difficulties. The whole new set of problems they may face once they are discharged from hospital can create high levels of stress. They may face or face weeks of rehabilitation or not be able to return to work immediately.

Most people who are seriously injured recover emotionally but up to 30 per cent develop mental health problems such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders.

### Emotional recovery from serious injury

In the first days and weeks following a serious injury from a traumatic event, many people experience strong feelings such as fear, sadness, guilt and anger. Most people recover on their own with the help of family and friends. In the weeks following a seriously injury, and especially once discharged from hospital people should:

#### Do's

- Spend time with people who care
- Give themselves time
- Find out what to expect emotionally
- Try to keep a routine going – within the confines of their injuries
- Return to as many normal activities as is possible with their injuries
- Talk about how they feel or what happened when ready
- Do things that help them relax
- Do things that they enjoy

#### Don'ts

- Use alcohol or drugs to cope
- Keep themselves busy and work too much
- Engage in stressful family or work situations
- Withdraw from family and friends
- Stop themselves from doing things that they enjoy
- Avoid talking about what happened at all cost
- Take risks

### Mental health problems

People who find it difficult to adjust after injury may develop mental health problems and may need professional help to recover. Their problems may include: anxiety; depression; posttraumatic stress disorder; risky alcohol and drug use, difficulty

managing pain, together with difficulties with relationships, work and daily life. A person's mental health problems can also have a significant impact on their family and friends. People should not be afraid to ask for help; a doctor is a good place to start. They can determine if there is a problem and what the best approach might be. Mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers can also help.

### **Getting help**

There are many ways to get help to manage any mental health difficulties. In the weeks following injury, it is important to get support from family and friends. Ask a doctor about effective ways to manage pain, and find out information about the kinds of emotional responses that are normal after injury. After a couple of weeks if people find that they still feel very sad or anxious, can't engage in usual activities or have started to use alcohol or other drugs to manage their feelings, then it is probably useful for them to talk to a doctor. They should talk about how they are feeling and that they're having difficulty coping. A doctor will discuss the options available.

### **Recovery from traumatic events**

Recovery from injury may take time and how long it takes varies with everyone. There will be good days where it seems like things are moving forwards to recovery and others when things feel like they are going backwards.

The way people adapt to stressful life events and the support they receive are an important part of recovery. Emotional support following serious injury does not have to come from a health professional – the answers are often found within ourselves and with the help of others. Following injury people should be encouraged to rely on family, friends and workmates.

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

Recovery after injury can be a long process. It does not happen 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.

### **Treatment works**

There are effective treatments to help people recover or manage mental health problems resulting from injury. Effective treatments for mental health problems include psychological and medical interventions.

### **Injury checklist**

- ✓ Most people recover emotionally following serious injury
- ✓ It is important to get practical support, information and get the support of others to help manage initial distress
- ✓ Treatment: if people are having mental health problems following injury, there are effective medical and psychological treatments that work
- ✓ It's never too late to ask for help
- ✓ If people do seek professional help, it's OK to ask the health practitioner questions about their treatment
- ✓ If something is not working, its important to tell the health practitioner and ask them to change it if necessary
- ✓ A doctor is a good place to start

### **Promoting recovery**

Psychological recovery is as important as physical recovery, yet most people with traumatic injuries are currently offered little in the way of targeted mental health care during their stay in hospital or following discharge. ACPMH is exploring the best ways to promote emotional recovery for people with serious injuries through our world leading Traumatic Injury Research program. More information is available on our website [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/services/research-community.html](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/services/research-community.html).

For more information about trauma and mental health please see the following resources on our website, [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au):

- [Information for People with ASD and PTSD](#)
- [Trauma and mental health: frequently asked questions](#)
- [About PTSD](#)