

# Emotional reactions after an accident or trauma

Information for  
patients



Leeds Major Trauma  
Centre

# For patients who have been involved in an accident or traumatic event.

## Introduction

Traumatic experiences, such as accidents, are of course, very distressing to those involved. Most of us rarely have to deal with them. When we do, we often get emotional and physical reactions to what has happened that can be confusing and frightening.

This is a short guide to the reactions that often follow a traumatic event. It is based on what others who have been through similar traumatic experiences have said about how they feel afterwards. Not all of this may apply to you but if any does; remember, that this is all part of a natural process of recovery after your traumatic experiences.

What follows, is a description of the feelings and thoughts you might have, and how you might feel physically. Your mind and body need time to adjust to what you have been through. Your mind may need to go over what happened many times to help it fade into memory and your body might feel as if it is on alert for a while, until it realises that the danger has passed. There are some things that you can do that may help this process and these are described on the following pages.

## What you may feel after an accident

### Sadness

Deep feelings of sadness are common, particularly when someone has died or been badly injured.

## Helplessness

Accidents can be overwhelming and leave you feeling quite powerless.

## Re-experiencing

If an accident has had a big effect on you, you may find yourself re-experiencing it long after it is over. Sometimes, you may re-experience it in dreams or flashbacks; sometimes, you may just get the feelings back that you had during or after the event. Sometimes, you may feel as if the original event is about to happen again. All this can be very distressing and frightening but it is a normal reaction.

## Numbness

The shock of an accident can leave you feeling numb and emotionally exhausted. Sometimes, this can give you time to get your feelings sorted; sometimes, it can leave you feeling less able to cope with other problems and feeling quite strange. It may make you feel like withdrawing from the company of others and lose interest in enjoyable activities.

## Let down

Sometimes, accidents can fundamentally change a person's outlook on life. Hopes may feel dashed and you may feel disillusioned or disappointed, or feel you are living on borrowed time.

## Nervousness

Your body may feel full of energy, making it difficult to rest, fall asleep, or have peace of mind. You may find that you become a little forgetful or find it hard to concentrate. Sometimes, your distress and discomfort find an outlet in

crying. You may find yourself crying over the smallest things and this can be confusing or embarrassing, though it is a good way to let your feelings out.

### **Anger**

Quite intense feelings of anger are quite common. This may be over something trivial or may be felt about the injustice of the accident, or those who appear to have let it happen. This anger may feel “out of character”.

### **Fear**

New fears and anxieties may emerge, perhaps about leaving the house, perhaps a fear of leaving loved ones, perhaps a fear of “losing control” or “not coping”. You may worry that the original accident may happen again. You may be very scared about going back to the place where the accident happened or feel “jumpy” in circumstances similar to the accident.

### **Guilt**

If others were killed or badly injured in the accident, a common reaction is to feel guilty at surviving rather than relief. You may wonder why you deserve to have survived, rather than others.

## **How you might be affected physically**

### **Tiredness**

Events, such as accidents, place the body under intense stress, and this does not necessarily stop when it is over. You may continue to be tense leading to tiredness and, later, exhaustion.

## **Muscle tension**

The strain you may be under expresses itself in tensing muscles in different parts of the body and this can produce symptoms, such as stiffness, headache, pains, choking sensations in the throat, dizziness and chest pains.

## **Palpitations**

All strong emotional reactions are associated with changes in the body, such as palpitations of the heart, sweating, mild tremors (and, perhaps shaking), stomach pains and indigestion.

**Remember, you may experience some or all of these reactions at different times. They are part of the natural process of healing. Typically, they will diminish fairly soon before fading away eventually. If they do not, it is important to help them by talking to someone about it.**

## **How you can help yourself**

In the weeks just after an incident, you may not want to talk about it. It's important you don't feel pressured into talking when you are not ready. Ultimately though, it's important to try to avoid bottling up feelings you have about what happened; however, shocked or surprised you may be. Remember, letting your feelings show is not a sign of weakness, it is the only way to deal with them. Talking really does help. You may also find it helpful to do the following at different times:

- You may need to think and talk about the accident over and over again, to come to terms with it. Let yourself experience the feelings you have about what happened and talk to others about it.

- Don't forget that your family and friends may have similar feelings to yourself - share your feelings with each other
- You may find yourself thinking about the meaning of life following the accident. Let yourself do this and continue to make plans for the future
- Concentrate on other things and try to keep busy, though not to the extent where you try to avoid thinking about the accident at all
- Don't expect your memories to go away overnight but try and get on with your life as soon as you can
- Remember too, that following severe stress, people are likely to be a little more distracted, so be extra careful for a while

## When you need further help

These reactions to a traumatic event usually fade away over time. Sometimes, for whatever reason, they do not, and you may need to talk to someone trained to help in such situations such as a Clinical Psychologist. If you feel that you would benefit from this, please speak to someone involved in your care such as your Surgeon, Nurse or GP, who will then be able to arrange this for you.

It is worthwhile thinking about doing this if:

- Your intense feelings or bodily sensations continue to be overwhelming
- Your feelings are not falling into place
- Memories, dreams and images of the accident continue to come back
- You have nightmares or cannot sleep

- You can't find relief from tension, confusion, or a sense of emptiness or exhaustion
- You still have problems concentrating
- You feel that you have to keep active; otherwise, you'll get upset
- You find yourself getting uncontrollably angry
- You have no one to share your feelings with
- Your relationships are suffering, or others comment on "how much you've changed"
- You find yourself prone to accidents
- Your smoking, eating or drinking habits are getting worse
- You feel you are relying more on medication
- You find that you are avoiding activities and this is disrupting your daily life; for example, avoiding travelling in a car after being involved in a car accident

## Helpful resources

Herbert C. & Wetmore A. (1999) *Overcoming Traumatic Stress: a self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural techniques*. Constable & Robinson Ltd: London, UK. ISBN:1-84119-016-0

Herbert C. (1996) *Understanding your reactions to trauma: a booklet for survivors of trauma and their families*. Available only from: The Psychology Department, Warneford Hospital, Oxford, OX3 7JX.

Further professional self-help material on a mail-order basis available from the Oxford Stress and Trauma Centre:

Website: [www.oxdev.co.uk](http://www.oxdev.co.uk)

For information about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the recommendations for treatment, go to the NHS National Institute for Clinical Excellence:

Website: [www.nice.org.uk/pdf/CG026publicinfo.pdf](http://www.nice.org.uk/pdf/CG026publicinfo.pdf)

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## Compliments and Complaints

We hope that you have been happy with all the care you have received. We are dedicated to providing you with a high standard of care; however, if you feel unhappy about something that has happened, please speak to a member of the team who will discuss the complaints procedure with you and provide you with the documentation.



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