



Psychosocial Response Group

Coping with the Coronavirus Recovering from Trauma

Introduction

This leaflet is one of a series about Coronavirus and mental health. It contains information on how the Coronavirus outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Coronavirus key features:

- This is a widespread outbreak, not limited to one area
- It can occur at any time, rather than being concentrated in wintertime
- For some people who are older or have pre-existing physical health conditions it is likely to be more severe, and may even be fatal, whereas for others it may be a relatively mild condition.

The Coronavirus outbreak, and its consequences, is a difficult and stressful experience for everyone. Some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences of the Coronavirus outbreak for you and those close to you can take some time.

This leaflet focuses on coping with trauma; others cover bereavement, fatigue, depression and coping with worry and uncertainty.

What is trauma?

Traumatic experiences (such as being involved in or witnessing assaults, serious accidents, fires, acts of terrorism, experiencing multiple deaths and natural disasters) can happen to anyone. Afterwards many people understandably feel distressed, have bad dreams and cannot get memories of the trauma out of their mind.

This can last a few days or weeks. Allowing time to heal physically and mentally is important, as is support from friends and family.

Some people find it helpful to talk about what has happened; others prefer not to discuss it. Either strategy is fine, provided you feel able to choose what you do.

Early reactions following trauma

Within the first few weeks it is not unusual to experience one or more of the following:

- upsetting memories such as images or thoughts about the trauma
- feeling as if the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)
- bad dreams and nightmares
- getting upset when reminded about the trauma (by something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes)
- feeling frightened
- feeling tearful
- loss of interest
- trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger, or upset

Common physical reactions to trauma reminders

- trouble falling or staying asleep
- feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- getting very startled by loud noises or something or someone coming up on you from behind when you don't expect it
- feeling shaky and sweaty
- Having your heart pound

Because trauma survivors have these upsetting feelings when they feel stress or are reminded of their trauma, they often act as if they are in danger again. They might get overly concerned about staying safe in situations that are not truly dangerous. For example, a person living in a safe neighbourhood might still feel that an alarm system, double locks on the door and a guard dog are all necessary to keep safe.

Common emotional reactions

Most people will experience strong feelings following a traumatic event including:

- **fear and anxiety** in case a similar event happens again, or feeling frightened of losing control over physical feelings or emotions
- **self blame or guilt** for actions taken or not taken at the time of the traumatic event
- **anger** about what has happened and why, actions taken (or not taken) by others and at the senselessness and injustice of the event
- **shame** caused by a sense that they did not react in the way they would have wanted to, or because they feel degraded by the event

These reactions are likely to decrease over the first few weeks for most people. Whilst healing takes place it is important people look after themselves physically and emotionally.

How can you make yourself feel better?

Talk to others, tell others how you are feeling. This may have to be by phone or online - if you are self-isolating or travel is difficult.

Help yourself through activity

You may find yourself becoming less active, or avoiding

certain activities possibly because you feel tired and do not have the energy and motivation to do things you used to do. If you can, try to increase positive, engaging activities. By doing things you enjoy or find satisfaction in, you will improve your mood and have less time to keep going over things in your mind. The day does not have to be crammed with distracting activities, but everyone needs some sense of satisfaction and achievement, however small.

Do something relaxing

This can be anything as long as it helps to unwind such as having a bath, or listening to music.

Set yourself realistic goals

If people try to behave as they did before the traumatic event, they might begin to feel overwhelmed. Allowing a bit of space to come to terms with the traumatic event is important.

How interpretations of events affect emotions

How we think about things is crucial to how we feel about them. If we notice a friend walking past without greeting or recognition, we might conclude that we have been snubbed and feel hurt or offended. If we saw the very same event as evidence of our friend's frequent absent mindedness we might feel amused. Similarly, the interpretations we make during and after a traumatic event are a very important part of how we cope with and feel about what has happened.

People who have survived a traumatic event can take excessive responsibility for what happened and might blame themselves for things outside of their control. Test the validity of your negative thoughts by examining all the evidence that supports or does not support each of your thoughts. Taking into account this evidence will allow you to develop a more balanced alternative.

Below are some specific questions that might help you to arrive at a more balanced view:

- what other explanations might there be?
- how much power did I have to influence what happened?
- what understandable factors might have made me act the way I did?
- how could I have known what would happen?
- how might a friend see things?
- how much time did I have for thinking through my reactions at the time of the trauma?
- if this was another person, what would I expect of them?
- how did my emotional state at the time influence my feelings and behaviour?

Look after yourself

Emotional as well as physical healing is helped by maintaining a reasonable diet, not drinking too much alcohol and by getting a little exercise if possible.

Key points

people who experience a traumatic event in their lives often experience distressing symptoms. For many these will gradually disappear after a few weeks.

- talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling, and remember to look after yourself.
- consider the sense you are making of your experiences.
- seek help if your symptoms are not improving after a month.

When should you seek professional help?

If your memories of the events remain very vivid and distressing for more than a month after the traumatic events, see your GP.

Further reading

- Overcoming Traumatic Stress by Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore (1999) Publisher: Constable & Robinson
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The invisible injury by David Kinchin (2004) Publisher: Success Unlimited
- Recovering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (2007) by Martina Mueller, www.octc.co.uk
- Manage Your Mind by Gillian Butler, Nick Grey and Tony Hope (2018).

Internet & other sources of information

- www.nhs.uk
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression
- www.ptsd.va.gov National Centre for PTSD in the USA
- <https://web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp> self-help leaflets by Northumberland, Tyne & Wear NHS Foundation Trust
- www.samaritans.org support for people who are despairing or suicidal.
- www.talkingspaceplus.org.uk TalkingSpace Plus including access to self-referral to services for people in Oxfordshire suffering from mild to moderate anxiety, depression and stress.
- Healthy Minds in Buckinghamshire: <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/healthyminds/>
- Oxfordshire Mind <https://www.oxfordshiremind.org.uk/> – provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- Buckinghamshire Mind <https://www.bucksmind.org.uk/> – provides information on all aspects of mental health.

About Coronavirus:

- Go to www.nhs.uk or <https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/nhs-111/>

If you would like to have information translated into a different language, please contact the Equality and Diversity Team at: EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk

Arabic يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسويق مختلف.

Bengali আপনি এই তথ্য অন্য ভাষায় বা আলাদা আকারে পেতে চাইলে অনুগ্রহ করে আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।
Urdu اگر آپ یہ معلومات دیگر زبان یا مختلف فارمیٹ میں چاہتے ہیں تو برائے مہربانی ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

Chinese 若要以其他語言或格式提供這些資訊，請與我們聯繫

Polish Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku lub w innym formacie, skontaktuj się z nami.

Portuguese Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutra idioma ou num formato diferente.

Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust
Trust Headquarters
Warneford Hospital, Warneford Lane
Headington, Oxford OX3 7JX

Switchboard 01865 901 000
Email EqualityandInclusion@oxfordhealth.nhs.uk
Website www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk

OHFT Psychosocial Response Group, 2020

Become a member of our Foundation Trust
www.ohftnhs.uk/membership