

## TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS AND THE EFFECTS

In one violent or traumatic moment the world can become unpredictable, dangerous and frightening. Injuries and accidents leave a traumatic impression on those injured and the people closest to them.

People respond differently in, during and after a crisis or a dangerous situation. But everyone is changed in ways they may not realize at the time. Some feel the brunt of the experience immediately. Others appear to be strong or even numb to their experience. People who are friends or co-workers of those directly affected can be affected as well by what is known as secondary trauma.

It is important for people who are affected to share what they think and feel. Discussing the events help ensure that people recover and don't end up becoming permanent psychological casualties.

### For survivors and their family

- Take time to talk about the events, especially when your thoughts and feelings arise.
- Talk with people who care about you.
- Contact friends when you need support.
- Be with someone, or if needed, have someone stay with you a few hours a day.
- Maintain a normal schedule and routine as much as possible.
- Recognize that many people will feel guilty and that listening is more important than telling people to stop feeling that way.

### For friends

- Listen carefully.
- Ask if they need your advice.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Show that you understand and you care.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear.
- Reassure them that they are okay and just be with them.
- Don't avoid regular activities, or spending time with people impacted by traumatic events, but respect their need to be alone sometimes.

### Common stress reactions following a traumatic event

- ◆ Anxiety, fear, panic or anger
- ◆ Depression, or worsening fear, panic or depression
- ◆ Emotional numbing
- ◆ Difficulty sleeping

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### Enquiries

**Student Counselling Career and  
Development Centre  
Nelson Mandela University**

<http://counselling.mandela.ac.za>

[counselling@mandela.ac.za](mailto:counselling@mandela.ac.za)



[mandela.ac.za](http://mandela.ac.za)

## Coping with a traumatic incident

- ◆ Waking throughout the night
- ◆ Nightmares or daydreaming
- ◆ Exhaustion or mental fatigue
- ◆ Change in appetite
- ◆ Disbelief or denial of events
- ◆ Reliving images of traumatic events
- ◆ Dwelling on the event
- ◆ Easily angered or upset
- ◆ Accident proneness or problems concentrating

### Symptoms of fear and panic

- ◆ Rapid heartbeat
- ◆ Rapid breathing
- ◆ Indigestion or stomach aches
- ◆ Increased energy
- ◆ Dizziness or feeling faint
- ◆ Frightening images
- ◆ Restlessness
- ◆ Weakness

### Symptoms of depression

- ◆ Too much or too little sleep.
- ◆ Significant increase or decrease in appetite.
- ◆ Loss of interest or pleasure in others or most activities.
- ◆ Feeling discouraged or worthless.
- ◆ A significant drop in performance in school or at work.
- ◆ Suicidal thoughts, feelings or self-harming behaviour.
- ◆ Fatigue or loss of energy most of the time.
- ◆ Restlessness, fidgeting or pacing.
- ◆ Uncontrolled outbursts of crying.
- ◆ Feeling sad, helpless or hopeless most of the time.
- ◆ Episodes of fear, tension or anxiety.
- ◆ Frustration, irritability, emotional outbursts.
- ◆ Repeated physical complaints.
- ◆ Abuse or increased use of alcohol or drugs.

### Steps you need to take if symptoms are significant

**Symptoms are usually significant when they interfere with usual activities, change behavior in significant ways, or they persist for more than two weeks.**

- Seek medical advice for any physical symptoms that are new, especially if you are having health problems and have not had a medical evaluation for these symptoms.
- If you are unable to escape feelings of panic, guilt, depression or stress, or these symptoms are extreme or prolonged, contact a counsellor for advice.
- Seek help or advice from a qualified counsellor if you begin feeling guilty or suicidal.

### Helpful hints to recovery

- ✦ **Set a Healthy Example:** Taking care of yourself is a very important part of helping others.
- ✦ **Physical Activity:** Maintaining regular exercise greatly increases resistance to the stress reactions associated with traumatic events and relieves the immediate symptoms of stress.
- ✦ **Nutrition:** By moderating fats, sugar, caffeine, alcohol and smoking you can greatly improve your resistance to stress reactions and promote recovery.
- ✦ **Adequate Sleep:** Try not to nap when you would normally be awake. Go to bed when you are sleepy and when you would normally sleep.
- ✦ **Time Management:** Try to schedule your time and meet as many of your usual commitments and activities as possible, don't withdraw for an extended period of time.
- ✦ **Remember Breathing:** People under stress or in a panic unconsciously change their pattern of breathing. When you feel stressed or panicked, take 4 to 5 slow deep breaths this will allow you to inhale and exhale completely. Relax your muscles as you exhale.
- ✦ **Talk About It:** Reaching out to friends or potential friends as a means of establishing supportive relationships. Talk about your feelings and stress reactions with someone who is a good listener, who may have experience in dealing with similar problems, and is most of all, supportive.
- ✦ **Be Assertive:** Use healthy and effective communication skills that will let people know what you need or want. When you deliberately ask for what you need, you are less likely to resort to blaming; becoming frustrated or disappointed when people don't know what you need.
- ✦ **Take Time To Be Alone:** Try to spend some time or plan some time to be alone. Sometimes it helps to imagine quiet places or pleasurable activities like vacations, relaxing or enjoying a hobby.
- ✦ **Forgiveness:** Forgiving yourself for any perceived responsibility for what happened is a key to recovery. Forgiving others does not mean that you condone or excuse what happened but means a change in your internal response: a willful act that may benefit you as a coping strategy to improve your psychological functioning.

- ✦ **Be Open To Change Or Obtaining Assistance:** If your behavior or emotional state is significantly changed by a traumatic event and does not improve after a significant time (usually two weeks), seek help from a qualified mental health professional.
- ✦ **Help Others:** Helping others can be a good way to feel better and recover. We all feel a need to be useful and to help others, but don't help others all the time to avoid dealing with your own feelings.
- ✦ **Play:** Spend time in a few simple activities that are fun or entertaining. Grieving takes time.

### Emergency contact details

#### SCCDC (Office hours 08:00 to 16:30)

South Campus: **041 504 2511**  
 North Campus: **041 504 3222**  
 Missionvale Campus: **041 504 1106**  
 Second Avenue Campus: **041 504 3854**

#### Campus Health

South Campus: **041 504 2174**  
 North Campus: **041 504 3364**  
 Missionvale Campus: **041 504 1374**  
 Second Avenue Campus: **041 504 3762**

#### For after hours emergencies contact

PE campuses emergency number: **0800 504911**  
 Mandela University Protection Service: **041 504 2009 or 041 504 3483**  
 Provincial Hospital Casualty Department: **041 392 3911**  
 Greenacres Hospital Casualty Department: **041 390 7000**  
 Livingstone Hospital: **041 405 9111**  
 Suicide Emergency Line: **0800 567 567 or SMS 31393 for a call back**  
 Life Line (24/7 counselling): **0861 322 322**  
 Ambulance: **10177** or Police: **10111**

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