



www.working-minds.org.uk

Understanding Trauma

Working Minds UK: Dovey Wilday Consultancy
Contact: 07941 196379

Understanding Your Reaction to Trauma

Following the experience a traumatic event it is common to experience a range of very unpleasant and frightening symptoms. These symptoms in themselves are abnormal to us in respect of our usual daily experience of events but are entirely natural and necessary following a trauma. However without understanding this they can be extremely frightening and lead to us developing ways of coping that may serve to be unhelpful in the long term and delay our recovery.

This leaflet has been designed to explain the natural processes that occur during and following the experience of a traumatic event. It will describe some of the symptoms that you may experience as a result of this and help to direct you in managing your symptoms in a way that will encourage natural recovery from trauma as opposed to coping, that although may help initially is likely to delay your recovery and lead to a prolonging of your symptoms.

We each react to trauma in our own unique way. However, there are ranges of normal and common reactions which many people share.

This hand out will cover the following areas:

- 1. What Happens During A Traumatic Event**
- 2. What Happens After A Traumatic Event**
- 3. Normal Symptoms Following Trauma**
 - a. Re-Experiencing**
 - b. Fight or Flight Arousal**
 - c. Avoidance**
- 4. Other Common Symptoms**
 - a. Low Mood**
 - b. Guilt and Shame**
 - c. Anger**
 - d. Trigger Past Events**
- 5. The Way Forward**

1: What Happens During A Traumatic Event

During a traumatic event the body enters a state of what we call *fight or flight*. This is the body's natural survival mechanism to danger. It is a very primitive and automatic system which triggers a series of physical changes in our body aimed at generating energy for us to be able to flee from danger or fight through danger, with the end result of survival. This is a normal response. During this response adrenaline and other chemicals flood the system to produce a range of changes to allow this to happen.

Because our survival is the most important mechanism driving us during this time other normal processes are suspended. The brain prioritises incoming information that is seen as essential to survival.

2: What Happens After A Traumatic Event

Once we are in a position of safety, the fight or flight mechanism is designed to be switched off again and normal mechanisms of the body and mind are restored.

This leads to the brain revisiting information that was taken in at the time of the traumatic event. This includes all of the sensory information that was incoming during the trauma, for example this can include images, sounds, smells, emotions, thoughts etc. Usually during a non-traumatic experience the brain processes all of this information during the event, this means that the information is pieced together into a coherent story and can then be stored as a memory. However as we have mentioned during a traumatic event the brain prioritises our survival and does not attend to this job until after we are perceived to be out of danger. As such following a traumatic event we commonly experience what is termed as a re-living of the trauma. This will feel very different from remembering an event as the information we experience is like 'raw data' and can often be experienced as a flash back and give us the feeling of being back in the event, often hearing the sounds, sensing the smells and experiencing the fear as if we were back in the event. This is an essential part of allowing the brain to process the event and be able to piece it together and to file away as a memory.

As a result of this process we can experience extremely distressing intrusive flashbacks of the event, which in themselves can trigger the fight or flight response back on even though we are not in actual danger now. As such we experience an overwhelming feeling to want

to escape from “the danger” even though we are not actually in danger. It is this process that can lead to the common symptoms of trauma which will now be discussed in more detail.

3: Normal Symptoms Following Trauma

a) Re-Experiencing

Re-experiencing can be in the form of flashbacks or nightmares. These can cover a range of experiences from visual images to smells, sounds, sensations, emotions and thoughts. These experiences happen whether you want them to or not and can often lead you to feel that you have no control over what you are feeling, thinking or experiencing day or night. You may be able to notice that specific triggers may be responsible for the flashbacks (for example re-visiting the place of the trauma) but because of the nature of trauma memory it is very easily triggered, there may be very subtle triggers that you may be unaware of leading to the experience of these symptoms as if ‘out of the blue’

This can obviously feel very frightening but is actually a normal process that needs to occur to enable the information from the trauma to be processed and stored away in memory. This will then lead to the reduction and cessation of the flashbacks and nightmares. Trying to push flashbacks or memories out of your mind will not stop them from coming back and may in fact make them more persistent.

b) Fight or Flight Arousal

Because you will be experiencing the feeling of being back in the trauma the body can respond by initiating the fight or flight response believing you to be in current danger even though you are not. Your body may remain constantly on the alert, prepared for instant action even though it is no longer necessary. It is as if your body has failed to realise that the danger is past. It continues to react as if you were still under threat and may need at any moment to fight or flight. This can lead to you feeling constantly keyed up, tense and irritable.

This can cause you to have a feeling of always being in danger and under threat, as well as feeling vulnerable. The table below highlights what actually happens in your body when this system is on and explains some of the symptoms you may experience. These are in a sense the side effects you are experiencing from having this system on when you don’t need it to be.

Summary of Fight/Flight Response

What Happens?	Why?	Side Effects?
Breathing Rate Increases	To pull in oxygen for energy for the muscles to enable you to fight/run	Short, shallow breathing
Heart Rate Increases	To pump the oxygenated blood around to the muscles	Heart pumping faster
Blood Flow Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gorge more blood in the blood vessels in the neck/ shoulders and back/legs to get ready for fight/flight To pull blood away from the extremities (e.g. hands and feet, to help survival as extremities are more vulnerable to loss and this can reduce blood loss) To bring blood into the trunk of the body to protect vital organs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tension in neck/shoulders. Headaches. Tension in legs and back Numb/cold extremities, tingling in them as blood returns
Digestion shuts down	To save energy for the survival mechanism	Dry mouth Difficulty swallowing Churning stomach
Impulse to remove weight and obstruction from body	To prevent choking by intense activity in case you have just eaten. To reduce weight to assist with running/fighting	Feeling sick Feeling like you need to go to the toilet
Shut Down Sleep Centre	To maintain alertness during danger	Unable to sleep Delayed onset of sleep Broken Sleep. Light/un-refreshing sleep
Move Brain activity to more primitive region	The priority in an immediate physical danger is speed. Our logic is slow and would put us in danger. The move to the more primitive area of the brain enables speedier although more rudimentary decisions	Poor concentration Poor memory Poor higher motor skills Poor reasoning and problem solving Difficulty with new learning
Restores Body Temperature Return of blood to extremities	To enable bodily functions within the body to function normally	Sweating, pins and needles, Tiredness (as a result of energy being produced but unable to be utilised as not needed now)

A common perception people report is a feeling of going mad or losing control. This is as a direct result of the fight or flight response. The brain reverts back to the more primitive area to assist you in being more alert to danger and has the effect of dampening our more logical processing powers and can present as poor concentration, forgetfulness, not feeling that you are thinking straight, feeling overly emotional and not in control. Another element of this is having less tolerance with others and being snappy and irritable.

c) Avoidance

You may find that you are avoiding things that remind you of the trauma, for example the site where it happened. You may also avoid thinking of the trauma and may be blocking off or avoiding the feelings that are triggered by reminders. Avoidance is a strategy to protect yourself from things that you feel have become dangerous, and from thoughts and feelings that seem overwhelmingly distressing. Sometimes the desire to avoid memories and feelings about the trauma may be so intense that you can find that you have forgotten aspects of what happened. Or you may find yourself blanking out or switching off when reminders of what happened occur. Emotional numbness (the loss of the ability to feel anything very much, including affection and pleasure) is another common way of trying to cope with painful feelings and thoughts about the trauma. It may include feeling alienated by from people you care about. Because they have not experienced what you have, it is as if they cannot possibly understand what you are going through. It can also take the form of blocking and numbing through the use of alcohol, which will provide a short term relief from distress but bring with it further complications.

As we have already said, avoidance is often a good way of reducing distress in the short term. But it is not always the best longer-term strategy of dealing with trauma. Firstly it is difficult to avoid ones' own feelings and thoughts successfully. They keep coming back and indeed trying to avoid them actually makes them more frequent and persistent and increases the sense of being out of control. Secondly avoidance is usually a result of predictions that if you face what you fear disaster will occur, for example your feelings will overwhelm you or that you will get attacked again. It makes perfect sense to avoid things that you believe will harm you. But avoidance stops you

from discovering that that your fears may be exaggerated and that the world is not as dangerous as it seems, As a result your life may become more and more restricted. Thirdly avoidance prevents the processing of the trauma memory and will keep you in a state of heightened fear.

3: Other Common Emotions

a) Low Mood

Another common reaction to trauma is sadness or feeling down or depressed. You may have feelings of hopelessness and despair; frequent crying spells, and sometimes even thoughts of hurting yourself and suicide. Loss of interest in people and activities you used to enjoy often follows trauma. Nothing may seem much fun anymore. You may also feel that life is no longer worth living and that plans you had made for the future no longer seem important and meaningful. These can be related to the experience of re-experiencing, heightened fight or flight arousal and/or avoidance and hence the loss of your normal levels of functioning and lifestyle.

b) Guilt and Shame

Trauma often leads to feelings of guilt and shame. These may be related to something you did or did not do, in order to survive or cope with the situation. It is common for people to go over and over what happened in their minds. You may find yourself going over the steps that you might have taken to prevent the trauma from occurring or different ways you might have reacted. It is as if you are trying to put things right in your mind after the event.

You might also blame yourself for not having put the trauma behind you and get back to normal. Perhaps you see this as a sign of weakness or inadequacy in you rather than understanding your symptoms are normal human reactions. Others may not understand the nature of normal response to trauma and give you the message that you should be getting on with life now.

c) Anger

Anger is also a common reaction to trauma. The anger is often directed at the person who is responsible for causing you the physical injury, abusing you or disrupting your life. But feelings of anger may also be stirred up by the presence of people or circumstances that remind you of the trauma even though they had nothing to do with it.

Many people also find they are they are experiencing anger towards those they love most, family, friends their partners and their children. This may be confusing but it is a normal response after trauma. There are several possible reasons. High arousal and poor sleep may make you more irritable than usual so you may react more strongly to small things than before the trauma. You may also feel that nobody really understands what you are going through. Finally, being close to others may feel good but it can also lead to feelings of dependency, vulnerability and helplessness. Having those feelings may make you feel angry and irritable because they remind you of the trauma

d) Trigger Past Events

Finally the trauma may remind you of similar experiences in the past. You may suddenly recall incidents that previously you had forgotten and which may be as disturbing to you as the memory of the recent trauma.

5: The Way Forward

The main message in this hand out is the feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations that you have been experiencing are entirely normal. They are natural human reactions following a traumatic experience. By allowing this natural process to occur you will find that you will naturally recover from this experience and your symptoms will reduce. Be aware of any forms of coping that may prevent this natural recovery process. Attempting to avoid this process, emotionally, behaviourally or cognitively can hinder your recovery.