

Understanding... Trauma

What is Trauma?

A trauma is a stressful event or incident of a threatening nature, which is likely to have a pervasive impact on anyone experiencing it. Examples include events like serious accidents, rape, crime, natural and man-made disasters, witnessing a violent death, etc. Less dramatic events and incidents can have a similar effect if they exceed a person's capacity to cope, or if they are perceived by the person as a threat to their physical or psychological integrity.

Common Reactions

People involved in overwhelming disasters and incidents often report typical reactions. Knowing about these reactions can be useful, because it can help us see that we aren't going crazy or that we aren't weak and inadequate. Such experience is a normal reaction to an abnormal event. Also, it's important to realise that each person deals with trauma in a slightly different way, because each situation is unique. You may experience episodes of repeated reliving of some aspects of the trauma in the form of intense memories (called flashbacks), nightmares and frightening thoughts. You may also experience physical reactions to situations that remind you of the traumatic event. This repeated reliving of the traumatic event could disturb your day-to-day activities and functioning, and result in a lack of interest in normal activities. At other times you may experience a sense of numbness, emotional blunting, perhaps even a feeling that you don't care about anything. You may feel detached from other people and then frustrated that they don't seem to understand how you feel.

You are likely to experience a wide range of different emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt, etc. In the immediate aftermath you may feel vulnerable, the world might seem threatening, and the future uncertain. Therefore, fear and panic are very understandable emotional responses. Anger is another common response. You may feel angry because of what has happened to you, angry because you don't feel in control of your life any more, angry with others for making you suffer either deliberately or unwittingly. Some people may start blaming themselves for what happened and feel guilty about the event. Some may experience survivor guilt (guilt over surviving while others did not), although they aren't responsible for it in any way.

The experience could trigger physical symptoms such as palpitations, patchy sleep, poor concentration, agitation, dizziness, etc. Traumatic events or incidents could rekindle feelings of previous trauma and loss, which has perhaps been buried or denied for many years. Trauma may lead to a reassessment of your vulnerability and the meaning of life, because it can overturn so much that was previously held dear. It is important to realise that all of the above and perhaps other reactions as well, are understandable and normal responses to an abnormal and overwhelming event.

Continued overleaf

Recovery

Recovery takes time. A psychological wound cannot be forced to heal quickly. It is no different from a physical wound. Flowing with the healing process is better than fighting it. This process can be described as moving from victim to survivor. There are some common elements in this period of healing:

- You acquire more control in remembering the event. Memory and emotions are joined. The memory is re-examined and then filed away.
- The trauma may still affect you, but it is no longer overwhelming.
- The troublesome symptoms recede, become more tolerable and predictable and gradually fade away.
- You are able to reconnect with others and move on with your life.
- You are able to give some new meaning to both the trauma and yourself as a trauma survivor.
- For some it can lead to a re-appraisal of their basic priorities and values, which may result in important positive life changes.
- Still others are able to transform their experience, through adversity and suffering, into a gift enabling them to help others in similar circumstances.

Helping your Recovery

- Talk to someone you trust, such as a family member or a friend, about how you feel. If you want to talk about it again and again that is fine. Talking about your feelings and the experience many times will help you to make sense of what has happened. It will also help you to contain it and make it less overwhelming.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings. It can serve as a coping mechanism and a way of expressing your emotions.
- Re-establish, if possible, familiar routines and activities. This will help you to restore order into your life and allow you to feel more in control.
- Try to access positive memories to counterbalance the negative ones. Trauma can make this difficult, but your health depends on balancing negative memories with positive ones.
- List your priorities and deal with them one at a time.
- Leave important decisions till later.
- Seek professional help if you are struggling

Helping a Friend who has had a Trauma or Crisis

You may want to be supportive to a friend who has suffered a traumatic incident but be unsure about how to go about it. The most important thing you can do is offer to 'be' there with them. Immediately after a trauma, people are likely to be in shock and may not be able to talk about the incident or their feelings. Be gentle. Comfort them in non-verbal ways - warm sweet drinks are good, holding hands or touch if appropriate - letting them know it's OK to cry or rage or be silent if they need to. You don't have to 'do' anything other than be present or to listen if they want to talk. Do not attempt to 'debrief' them with endless questions, as there is some evidence that this can reinforce the trauma and make it harder to deal with later. Be specific about the amount of time you have (e.g. I want to spend the next hour with you, but then I need to go and write an essay/ go to the Library/ phone my parents etc.). This allows your friend to relax, knowing it's OK to share for that hour and that they are not 'burdening' you (an understandable worry between friends).

Sometimes, it may be quite harrowing to hear what they have to say. If so, it might be helpful for your friend to see the Dean of Student Affairs or other members of the Student Support Team. You can still continue to show support in other ways: e.g. going along with them to make an appointment, meeting them for coffee, cooking their supper, continuing to socialise etc.

Do

- Be there for them
- Ask them if they want to talk about it
- Respect their decision if they are not ready to
- Offer comfort in practical ways (shopping, note taking etc.)
- Encourage them to be gentle with themselves - they will need time
- Encourage others to be patient

Do Not

- Tell them to stop crying/raging/feeling whatever they are feeling
- Try to make them cheer up
- Tell them someone else is worse off
- Be afraid to mention the trauma for fear of upsetting them
- Pretend nothing has happened
- Ask them lots of questions about the trauma directly after the event

If you are worried that your friend needs help from someone else but they are reluctant to go along with this idea, you can contact the Dean of Student Affairs.

GETTING SUPPORT

In the University:

You can talk confidentially to the Dean of Student Affairs or other members of the Student Support Team.

Email: student.support@ncl.edu.my

Webform: studentsupport.newcastle.edu.my

Or make an appointment at the Student Office.

Outside the University:

Your GP or family doctor can be a useful first point of contact. In some cases, your doctor will refer you for more specialised help and support. Sometimes it is easier to talk to someone over the phone.

The Befrienders Johor Bahru

The Befrienders offers confidential emotional support through a helpline and email service.

Helpline (1pm to 12am): 07 33 123 00

Email: sam@befriendersjb.org

Website: <http://www.befriendersjb.org/>

Hospital Permai

Trunk Line/Operator: 07 231 1000

Emergency (BDM): 07 231 1170

URGENT HELP OR SUPPORT

Emergency Services

If you are worried about your safety or feel at risk of harming yourself, or if you are worried about the safety of a fellow student, you need to access help immediately.

If you feel your life is in imminent danger, you should call 999 or go to Accident and Emergency at the nearest hospital.

For emergencies on campus, call NUMed Security. NUMed Security (24/7): 07 555 3881/3984/3985

Out-of-Hours Help

Out-of-hours on weekdays and on week-ends, you may call the NUMed Senior Officer-of-the-Day emergency number.

NUMed Senior Officer-of-the-Day: 011 1231 1276

