

Psychosocial Reactions to a Major Incident

If you, a family member or friend has been involved in a major incident or event, you may experience a reaction that affects your feelings and behaviour. The Department of Health information and advice here describes how you might feel in the days and months after the incident and where to go if you feel you need further help and support.

How you might be affected

People and communities are remarkably resilient but major events are shocking and some of them can be overwhelming. People react differently and feelings can be very powerful and difficult to live with, but they do usually become less intense with time.

People who are directly involved are the people who are most likely to be affected, but witnesses to events where people have lost their lives may also have strong feelings. Friends and relatives not directly involved will be worried about those who are.

Immediately afterwards, you might feel:

- stunned, dazed or numb
- cut off from what is going on around you
- unable to accept what has happened
- that it hasn't really happened

Usually, these feelings fade and others may take their place in the hours or days afterwards.

In the following few weeks, you might experience:

- tears and sadness
- fear
- anxiety
- feeling angry or irritable
- elation about surviving
- unpleasant memories or guilt about the event
- problems with your concentration and/or memory
- difficulties with sleeping, nightmares and tiredness
- reduced appetite or energy
- reluctance to discuss the event or you wish to talk about it all the time
- wanting to avoid people, places or activities that remind you of the event (this might include travelling on public transport)

How you might be affected in the longer term

The thoughts, feelings and behaviours described above are common reactions to a major incident. Sometimes these reactions last longer than several weeks and, in a small proportion of people, feelings may become more intense. In these circumstances, you may find it useful to contact your GP or you can seek advice from NHS Direct. There are also a number of agencies that are set up to help people after bereavement and after their involvement in major incidents. You will find links to a selection of these at the end of this page.

Occasionally a person's reactions may indicate that they are developing a problem with their mental health such as anxiety, depression or a post traumatic stress condition. If this occurs your GP should be able to make arrangements for assessment of your needs. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) have produced a leaflet that gives further information on PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and its treatment.

Sometimes major events result in death. Grief is a normal reaction to the death of someone close to you. When that death is sudden and unexpected, normal grief reactions often become more intense, and the feelings of shock, anger and distress can feel quite overwhelming. Many of the reactions to a major incident are similar to grief reactions, and if you have survived an event and also been bereaved by the same incident, you may find it particularly hard. The sources of help listed at the bottom of this page should help you.

How you can help yourself

Everybody can benefit from support from relatives and friends after a major incident, but there are also things that you can do for yourself and things you should avoid.

What is usually helpful?

- do things that make you feel safe and secure
- try to re-establish your usual routines such as going to work or school
- take good care of yourself physically; eat well, exercise regularly
- take each day at a time
- be patient with yourself; it may take weeks or months to feel that you and your life are back to normal
- allow your friends and relatives to be supportive
- try to get enough sleep
- talk it over when you are ready, but don't worry if you get upset or cry
- take extra care; after a major incident or event, people are more likely to have accidents

What is unlikely to help?

- alcohol and drugs; while they can numb your feelings, they can also stop you from coming to terms with what has happened or cause more problems later
- bottling up your feelings; let yourself talk when you feel ready
- isolating yourself from others, although finding time to reflect on your own might be useful

Getting further help

Most people who have encountered a major incident find that they get better over time. However, if you are still having difficulties after a fortnight, you might find your GP's advice helpful.

NHS Direct offers a 24 hour health advice and information service. Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647.

Support groups and caring organisations you may find helpful include:

- **Samaritans** offers a 24-hour helpline for those in crisis. Telephone 08457 909090
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** offers counselling, advice and support throughout the UK. Telephone 0844 477 9400 (Monday - Friday 9.30 am - 5.00 pm)
- **Disaster Action** provides support and guidance to those people who are affected by disasters. Telephone 01483 799 066
- **Assist Trauma Care** offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma. Telephone 01788 560800 (Helpline)