

HOW TO COPE WITH TRAUMA

By

Gladeana McMahon

Most people are so accustomed to hearing media accounts of major events such as the recent Asian Tsunami, the 7/11 Twin Towers attack or the Iraq War that they forget that traumatic incidents don't necessarily have to be associated with disasters. Being mugged or being involved in even a minor car accident are also considered traumatic events and can still have a similar effect on an individual as a large scale disaster.

Sometimes a person may experience a number of life events that seem to happen in a short space of time and these taken together can lead an individual to suffer all the signs and symptoms associated with trauma.

For example, you may have a parent die the same week your partner walks out and your child is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness while at the same time your employers tells you that a downsizing exercise is taking place and you are to be made redundant.

Recent studies have estimated the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress as approximately 5 - 10% of the general population. It would also seem as if some 20 - 40% of individuals exposed to traumatic events experience

problems lasting for more than one year, and 15 - 20% for more than two years.

Dealing with trauma gets in the way of living your everyday life and the sooner you know what is wrong and can do something about it the sooner you can get back to living your life.

What are the key psychological signs of a trauma?

You know you may be suffering from post trauma stress if you:

- Have intrusive and distressing recollections of the event in the form of thoughts and images.
- Have dreams or nightmares about a particular event
- Feel as if the trauma is actually happening again (this is known as a flashback).
- Experience intense distress when you are exposed to any kind of reminder of the original incident

Very often people have a range of physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea and tummy problems, breakouts of eczema and acne if the person is already prone to such ailments and a general sense of feeling under the

weather physically. In addition, a person may find that she is behaving out of character – for example, opening the oven to find the milk in it and not remembering putting it there. Concentration becomes more difficult and a tendency to jump at the least noise is also common. Sleeping difficulties and mood swings also play a part.

Sometimes when a physical injury has taken place, the person does not develop an emotional or psychological reaction to the trauma till they are fully cured. The late Adam Faith was once interviewed by Professor Anthony Clare and talked about a near fatal car crash that had him hospitalised for some five months and how it was only after he was able to walk again that the emotional effects kicked in. It's as if the body knows that it has to heal before it can allow the mind to take centre stage.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

There is a condition called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and this term is used to describe the longer term psychological effects when an individual does not recover from a traumatic event within a 4-6 week period. After all, if you have experienced an event that has left you shaken to the core it is normal for your mind, body and soul to need a little time to get over the shock and make sense of what has happened.

Many people return to normal within 4-6 weeks but some people continue to develop symptoms such as panic attacks or an inability to leave the house or depression and, in such cases, when seen by a trauma specialist a diagnosis of PTSD may be made.

Visit www.babcp.com the Website of the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies where you can download a really useful leaflet on PTSD.

Some dos and don'ts

The following are some general *dos and don'ts* designed to help you cope with trauma in general.

Do

- Express your emotions – the more you can talk out what has happened to you the less likely you are to store up problems.

Talk about what has happened as often as you need to.

- Look to friends and colleagues for support. People care about you and will be happy to offer a shoulder. You would

want to do the same if the situation were reversed so make sure you use your support systems.

- Try to keep your life as normal as possible by keeping to daily routines as this helps the mind realise that life does go on and will help you recover more quickly.
- Drive more carefully and be more careful around the home as you may be a little more accident prone than usual because you have been shaken up.

Don't

- Use alcohol, nicotine or other drugs to hide your feelings. You may think drinking will help you cope but alcohol is a depressant and can make things worse. Obviously the odd drink will do not harm but when you find yourself wanting 3/4/5 then this is likely to make you worse and not better.
- Simply stay away from work – seek help and support instead. If your traumatic incident happened at work the sooner you go back the better. The longer you stay away the

harder it will be to go back.

- Allow anger and irritability to mask your feelings. Some people find that they do not like expressing fear or sadness and cover-up these feelings with anger instead. When you use anger this way you avoid dealing with the real problem.

When to seek help

You need to seek help if:

- You feel you cannot handle intense feelings or bodily sensations.
- After six weeks you continue to feel numb
- You continue to have nightmares and poor sleep
- You have no-one with whom to share your feelings
- Your relationships suffers or sexual difficulties develop
- You become clumsy or accident-prone.
- You find yourself smoking, drinking or taking drugs to excess
- Your work performance suffers
- You are tired all the time

- You feel that life has no purpose
- Your behaviour towards your friends and family changes,
e.g. you become withdrawn, overly protective or aggressive

Recommended Reading

Coping with Life's Traumas, Gladeana McMahon, Gill and Macmillan,
£8.99

Overcoming Traumatic Stress, Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore,
Robinsons Publications, £7.99

Gladeana McMahon

www.gladeanamcmahon.com

Listed as one of the UK's Top Coaches by the *Independent on Sunday*.

Author of a range of self help books and TV Coach/Therapist.