

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS SYNDROME

Anyone who experiences or witnesses a terrible accident or event which injures or kills, or severely threatens physical safety, is likely to experience some degree of post-traumatic stress (PTS). Examples would be car crashes, accidents at work, sexual assault, or being violently mugged. This PTS is normal and is part of the natural human repertoire of responses in such circumstances. In most cases it will pass. What follows is a list of symptoms to watch out for; with time and adequate psychological/emotional support, they will fade away and the incident will stay at the back of your mind. People close to you, if they are supporting you to work through your experience, may also suffer from some of these symptoms – this is called vicarious traumatisation. They need support too, but probably from other people rather than from yourself.

SYMPTOMS YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

- Constant alertness, “on edge” feeling, anxious
- Hyper-vigilance, always “on the look out” for threat or danger
- Startle easily
- Irritability, snappiness
- Sudden bursts of anger
- Sleep disturbances (difficulty getting to sleep, waking during the night or earlier than usual)
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks (where you momentarily feel like you are re-living a part of the experience)
- Intrusive images of what you saw popping into your mind repeatedly and with no warning
- Going over and over the sequence of events in your mind (this is your psyche trying to assimilate the experience)
- Numbness, lack of emotions
- Loss of the memories (partially or totally)
- Feelings of unreality, e.g. “like I’m in a book or a film, not really here”
- Problems concentrating (studies, TV, conversations)
- Feelings of guilt (survivor guilt and/or witness guilt)
- Preoccupation with existential questions and issues e.g. the fragility of human life, is there life after death, meaning of life
- Examination of pre-existing religious faith
- Feeling disconnected from the rest of the world which is carrying on as usual, feeling alienated, “behind a glass wall” which separates you off
- Getting upset or angry, or having images/flashbacks/nightmares when you see something that reminds you of your own experience in a film or on TV etc

SO WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

- **TALK** about what you saw, what you went through, how you felt then, how you feel now. And then talk about it some more. Don't worry about boring people – you are talking and going over it for you, not them. Talking helps you to digest what you experienced. Family, friends, counsellors, helpline staff, elders, people from your faith community, others involved in the incident (if appropriate, eg support groups) can all be useful here.
- Don't blame yourself for any of the above reactions - they are normal, human responses.
- Be extra-kind to yourself and don't ask the impossible of yourself – you need time to recuperate.
- If you can't talk, write it down, as it comes, prose, poetry, song lyrics, whatever.
- Cry. You are entitled to cry about what you went through and how you feel.
- Ask someone you trust for a hug. As often as you feel the need.
- Give yourself time out to do things that you enjoy and help you to lighten up, when you are ready. Distraction can sometimes be a relief.
- Don't use drink/drugs to help you out of your reactions – they will not help in the long run, merely make your recovery process longer.
- Try to keep your usual sleep routine, despite disturbances.
- Make use of any “official” support available.
- Read books or websites about PTS and how to work through a traumatic event. Seeing the stories of others who have coped and got their lives back together can be reassuring and inspiring.

Helpful Book

Overcoming Traumatic Stress - Herbert & Wetmore (1999 Constable & Robinson)