

Coping After a Traumatic Event: British Red Cross Staff and Volunteers

Introduction

Those who work in the humanitarian sector are often exposed to actual and potentially traumatic events as part of their work, and the reactions they experience follow the same general patterns as for the population at large. When those incidents at work take place, they may be likely to experience a range of unfamiliar feelings associated with the shock of the event. They may also have some difficulty in collecting their thoughts and handling their emotional reactions about what has happened.

While most staff and volunteers involved in a traumatic event will be shaken by what has happened, some adjust to their experiences with little or no apparent distress; this would be considered a quite common response. Sometimes people may in fact feel satisfied by the way that they have acted when faced with a traumatic event (e.g. if they have been able to help colleagues and others who have been involved).

Others, however, may be shocked and stunned by the event, and have difficulty believing what has happened. In the days following, it is often common to feel confused, distressed and fearful, or experience other emotions or reactions, which can in themselves be unpleasant and worrying. Even though such reactions can seem unfamiliar, it is important to understand that they are also entirely normal and understandable responses to a stressful or traumatic event in the workplace. In most cases the reactions, are short-lived and pass after a few days or weeks.

There is no right or 'normal' response following a traumatic event; everyone will have an experience and response which will be individual to them, and the process of psychological adjustment will be unique to each individual. You may find this leaflet helpful if you have recently been involved in, or affected by, a traumatic incident. It provides information on how you may expect to feel in the days and months ahead, and to help you to understand and have more control over your experience.

Common Psychological Reactions:

Common psychological reactions following a traumatic event include:

- Feelings of fearfulness, nervousness or occasional panic; especially when faced by reminders of the event.



- Sleep disturbance: difficulty in getting off to sleep, restless sleep, vivid dreams, night-sweats or nightmares.
- Hyper-arousal: becoming 'jumpy' or easily startled by sudden noises or movements, e.g. a door slamming, car starting, the phone or doorbell ringing.
- Hyper-vigilance: constantly scanning the environment for cues of dangers or seeing threat in things that would have appeared non-threatening before. This could mean being overly protective of children or loved ones.
- Intrusive thoughts/images/flashbacks: of the incident, which can appear to 'come out of the blue', without any triggers or reminders. Other thoughts, images or feelings may be prompted by something on the media, which have a resonance to your experience.
- Guilt: feelings of regret, about not having acted or coped as well as you would have wished, feeling that you may have let yourself or others down.
- Irritability and anger: at what happened or the injustice of the event. Irritability can often be directed at loved ones, close family friends or colleagues.
- Feeling numb or detached from others or being unable to experience emotions such as love or happiness.
- Sadness: feelings of low mood and tearfulness.
- Mental avoidance: avoiding thoughts to do with the event. People often try to push distressing thoughts out of their head, often unsuccessfully, and in the longer term this can cause further problems.
- Behavioural avoidance: avoiding thoughts, feelings, activities that are reminders of the trauma. These can often be subtle at first, such as avoiding noisy or crowded environments, taking a different route to work and so on.
- Withdrawal: avoiding social and family contact.

It is natural to have any or all these feelings, though they may vary in intensity according to your circumstances.

Common Physical Reactions

Some individuals may also have certain bodily sensations, with or without the psychological reactions described above. Many of these are signs of anxiety, tension, or stress. For example:

- Tension, muscular aches and pain (especially in the head, neck and back)
- Fatigue, tiredness and insomnia
- Memory loss
- Changes in appetite
- Reduced concentration, forgetfulness
- Dizziness
- Abdominal pain/tummy aches
- Menstrual changes
- Shakiness and trembling
- Reduced libido or change in sexual interest
- Palpitations, breathing difficulties
- Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea

Things you can do to Promote Recovery

There is consensus that doing things that make you feel safe and connected and addressing your immediate physical and social needs can help your psychological recovery in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event.

What Should I Do?

- **DO** try to keep your life as normal as possible and keep to a familiar routine; this can help give a sense of order and control.
- **DO** be kind to yourself. Do things that you find relaxing such as a walk in the park, listening to music, a bubble bath, and be with people that you find supportive and avoid those who are not.
- **DO** take time to get enough sleep (your normal amount), rest and relax, and eat regularly and healthily.

- **DO** take care at home or when driving or riding - accidents are more common after a traumatic or stressful event.
- **DO** try to reduce outside demands on you and don't take on extra responsibilities for the time being.
- **DO** talk to people you trust or who have had similar experiences or understand what you have been through.
- **DO** give yourself time. It can take weeks or months to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or who) you have lost. At times you may want to be alone or only with those closest to you.
- **DO** allow yourself time to think and talk about the trauma; don't worry if you cry when you talk, it's natural and usually helpful. Take things at your own pace and don't force yourself to do this if the feelings are too strong now.
- **DO** find out what happened to complete the jigsaw. It is better to face the reality of what has happened rather than wondering about what might have happened.
- **DO** allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care, or who have been through a similar experience. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.
- **DO** some 'normal' things with other people; sometimes you will want to be with other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the healing process.

What Shouldn't I do?

It is important not to reject support by trying to appear strong or trying to cope completely on your own.

- **DON'T** expect too much of yourself. Give yourself time to grieve, to acknowledge what has happened and to heal.
- **DON'T** avoid people you trust.
- **DON'T** bottle up feelings and avoid talking about what has happened.
- **DON'T** be critical of your reactions e.g. crying, being irritable, they are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances.

- **DON'T** make big life changes; try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement and memory may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from those around you that you trust.
- **DON'T** drink alcohol, use illicit substances or recreational drugs. Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.

When to Seek Professional Help?

Even humanitarian staff or volunteers are not immune to these common feelings, emotions and behaviours which can be experienced or displayed by survivors, witnesses, relatives and first responder/emergency workers, in the hours, days and some weeks following an extremely stressful or traumatic event. Many people find that the feelings that they experience after a traumatic event gradually reduce after about a month. However, you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you or go on for too long (for more than about 6 to 8 weeks from the time of the event). Some other examples of when it is advisable to seek professional help.

- You are experiencing overwhelming emotions that you feel unable to cope with or experience changes in mood for no obvious reason.
- You are experiencing breathing difficulties or a choking feeling in your throat and chest.
- You feel emotionally numb.
- Your relationships seem to be suffering since the incident.
- You are worried about your alcohol or drug use since the incident.
- Your performance at work has suffered since the incident.
- Someone who you are close to tells you they are concerned.
- You have no-one to share your emotions with and you feel the need to do so.

Where to seek Professional Help

You should in the first instance approach your own GP, who will be able to advise you on options and put you in touch with someone who can help. This may be:

- A counsellor in your GP surgery (if available)
- Self-referral to local mental health services e.g. IAPT
- Local specialist trauma and bereavement services which can be accessed by your GP

Other Support Options Within the British Red Cross

- **The British Red Cross Occupational Health Team (staff only):** The BRC's OH service is provided by Medigold Health and provides advice on reasonable adjustments and support to return to work following sickness absence. Access to the service is by referral only and if you feel that you would benefit from a referral please discuss this with your manager.
- **Able futures:** Able Futures is a programme run on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions to support employees with mental health difficulties to remain at work. It is available to staff only. You can contact Able Futures for more information on:
 - > Freephone 0800 321 3137 8am to 10.30pm Monday to Friday
 - > hello@able-futures.co.uk
 - > www.able-futures.co.uk
- **Employee Assistance Programme – Health Assured:** Health Assured are available to provide support through many challenging circumstances including relationship difficulties, financial challenges as well as wellbeing, and they are available for both staff and volunteers. They can be contacted 24/7 and their details are:
 - > Tel no: 0800 030 5182 (Outside UK - +44 161 836 9498)
 - > Online: www.healthassuredeap.com.
 - > Login - Your username and password: BRC
- **Peer Supporters:** Due to the nature of their role, some teams within the British Red Cross have access to trained Peer Supporters. The Peer Supporter's role is to work with the Psychosocial and Mental Health Team to support local staff and volunteers in dealing with some of the emotional demands of their various roles. They will talk to you for 20-30 minutes initially, face to face or over the phone (depending on availability), and then if you find that you need further support, they can support with signposting including to the Psychosocial and Mental Health Team.
- **The Psychosocial and Mental Health Team:** Your Psychosocial and Mental Health Team provides a range of guidance, professional, and enhanced

support to promote wellbeing and manage challenging situations across the organisation, including defusing after a difficult event. For further information on the PMHT see the [Emotional Support](#) section in Red Room.

For more information on the above services, contact the People Support team on 0141 847 5330 or **PeopleSupport@redcross.org.uk**. Alternatively you can look on Red Room under [Wellbeing](#).

For Further Information about Post-Trauma Support Options for Adults

Age UK

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Tel No: 0800 678 1602

Age UK is the country's largest charity dedicated to helping older people who need it most; including companionship, advice and support.

CRUSE Bereavement

Website: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Tel No: 0808 808 1677

CRUSE offer support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

Debt and Finance

Citizen Advice Bureau

Website: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>

Citizen Advice is a network of 316 independent charities throughout the United Kingdom that give free, confidential information and advice to assist people with money, legal, consumer and other problems.

Debt Advice Foundation

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

Debt Advice Foundation is a registered national debt advice and education charity offering free, confidential support and advice to anyone worried about loans, credit and debt.

National Debtline

Website: <https://www.nationaldebtline.org/>

Tel No: 0808 808 4000

National Debtline is a charity who provide free and independent advice over the phone and online.

General Practitioner

If you find that your reactions are continuing to impact on your ability to cope with daily life and your relationships with others, your GP will be able to review your wellbeing and signpost onto organisations who can help.

MIND

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

MIND is a charity providing information and support to people facing mental health difficulties.

NHS England

Website: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/london/our-work/help-and-support/>

NHS England shares information on how you may expect to feel in the days and months ahead following a traumatic event, and to help you understand and have more control over your experience.

NHS

The NHS have compiled a helpful list of helplines for support and expert advice relating to mental health, violence, addictions, relationships or crime.

Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

The NHS have also created an interactive quiz where you answer 5 questions to get top tips and advice for you. Now tailored for the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, too.

Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/your-mind-plan-quiz/>

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Website: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/coping-after-a-traumatic-event>

The Royal College of Psychiatrists describes the kind of feelings that people have after a trauma, what to expect as time goes on, and mentions some ways of coping and coming to terms with what has happened.

Samaritans

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Tel No: 116 123

Whatever you may be going through, a Samaritan will listen and face it with you. They are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Peace Foundation: Survivors Assistance Network

Website: <https://www.peace-foundation.org.uk/support/survivors-assistance-network/>

Tel No: 01925 581231

The 'Survivors Assistance Network' run by the Peace Foundation, provides free practical and emotional support to individuals and families affected by a terrorist incident.

Victim Support

Website: www.victimsupport.org.uk

Tel No: 08081 689111

An independent charity for people affected by crime and traumatic events in England and Wales. Provides emotional and practical help to enable people to cope and recover from the effects of crime.

Other Support Local to me:

Author: British Red Cross, Psychosocial and Mental Health Team
Created: 02nd June 2020

Disclaimer

This information reflects the best available evidence at the time of writing.