

When you have experienced a traumatic event, even though the crisis is over you may still be experiencing, or may experience it later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, and in fact quite normal, for people to experience reactions to a particularly confronting and traumatic experience.

Sometimes these reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. They may appear a few hours or a few days later; and in some cases it may be weeks or months before any reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer. This may be dependent on the severity of the traumatic event and the support a person has from others. A traumatic event can be so painful that people can need the assistance of a professional counsellor. This does not imply craziness or weakness; it simply means that a particularly traumatic event can be just too powerful for the person to manage alone.

Usually traumatic stress reactions subside with time. There is no need to become overly concerned about any reactions you experience unless:

- You continue to feel numb and empty, or have feelings of helplessness.
- You continually feel tense or confused and your emotions do not return to normal. Perhaps you do not have anyone to talk to about your feelings.
- You continue to re-experience the event in your mind; flashbacks or nightmares, disturbed sleep.
- The physical and emotional symptoms of stress continue and become unmanageable; it's impacting on your work or your relationships.
- You are using alcohol or other drugs as a means to cope.
- You have thoughts of self-harm.

In these cases, it is suggested you seek professional advice. This could be through your own doctor or a professional psychology practice.

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1800 010 630

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

MensLine 1300 789 978

Women' Support 1800 737 7328

SLSSA Chaplain Service via 13SURF (13 78 73)

Kidshelpline.org.au

headspace.org.au

lifeline.org.au

Further advice can be sought through SLSSA Lifesaving Department in relation to professional counselling 8354 6900.



Critical Incident Stress Reactions

As a member of surf lifesaving you may be involved in an incident, or series of incidents, which were probably outside the range of normal surf patrol life experiences. Your surf training and experience may help you cope with the situation but may not protect you from distressing reactions.

This pamphlet contains general information about traumatic stress reactions, some of which you may experience during or after an incident. Some coping methods for your reactions have been outlined.

Common Traumatic Stress Reactions

Physical Reactions

- Tension:** Muscle tremors and twitches, fidgety, aches and pains, unable to relax or rest
- Jumpiness:** Feeling uptight and easily startled by sudden sounds or movement
- Breathing & Heart:** Difficulty breathing, or rapid and shallow breathing, heart pounding, chest pain
- Fatigue:** Tired, drained, light headed, feelings of weakness
- Stomach:** Vomiting, nausea, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, constipation, frequent urination

Mental Reactions

- Problems:** Difficulty learning new information, or/and memory recollection
- Concentration:** Poor attention span
- Difficulty thinking:** Unable to organise thoughts, confusion, make poor decisions, or judgement
- Intrusive thoughts:** Flashbacks, obsessive thoughts, easily reminded of unpleasant experiences, bad dreams

Emotional Reactions

- Anxiety:** Worrying, apprehensive, hyper vigilant
- Depression:** Feeling overwhelmed, pessimistic, helpless, socially withdrawn, uncommunicative
- Irritability:** Intolerant, complaining, easily agitated
- Loss of confidence:** Self-doubt, poor self-esteem, overthinking
- Strong reactions:** Intense anger, fear, guilt, grief

Note: Remember the above reactions are completely natural.

Some coping mechanisms

Physically

- Try and partake in physical exercise, especially during the first 24 – 48 hours. This can have a calming effect.
- Try and get plenty of rest.
- Avoid excessive caffeine and alcohol.
- Eat regular, balanced meals.

Mentally

- Consider mentally relaxing activities, eg. reading, listening to music, yoga
- Appreciate your reactions are normal.
- Recurring thoughts, sleep difficulties and dreams are common; however, they should become less vivid with time.

Emotionally

- If you have been involved in an incident with other team members, discuss your respective involvement and reactions. Talk and spend time with people you trust, particularly those who care and are supportive. Discuss your reactions. Let out some of the anger, frustration, fear, self-doubt and other feelings.
- Settle back into a normal home and work routine as soon as possible. Continue to be involved in life events and make daily decisions which can improve your feelings of control.
- Avoid social media.
- Give yourself a chance to settle down. Things may look better overtime