

What will I feel after a traumatic event?



Immediately after

Immediately after a traumatic event, it is common for people to feel shocked, or numb, or unable to accept what has happened.

Shock - When in shock you feel:

- stunned or dazed or numb
- cut off from your feelings, or from what is going on around you.

Denial - when in denial, you can't accept that it has happened, so you behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think that you are being strong or that you don't care about what has happened.

Over several hours or days, the feelings of shock and denial gradually fade, and other thoughts and feelings take their place.

What happens next?

People react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. Even so, you may be surprised by the strength of your feelings. It is normal to experience a mix of feelings. You may feel:

- **Frightened** ... that the same thing will happen again, or that you might lose control of your feelings and break down.
- **Helpless** ... that something really bad happened and you could do nothing about it. You feel helpless, vulnerable and overwhelmed.
- **Angry** ... about what has happened and with whoever was responsible.
- **Guilty** ... that you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it.
- **Sad** ... particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
- **Ashamed or embarrassed** ... that you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you.
- **Relieved** ... that the danger is over and that the danger has gone.
- **Hopeful** ... that your life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma.



What else might I notice?

Strong feelings affect your physical health. In the weeks after a trauma, you may find that you:

- cannot sleep
- feel very tired
- dream a lot and have nightmares
- have poor concentration
- have memory problems
- have difficulty thinking clearly
- suffer from headaches
- experience changes in appetite
- experience changes in sex-drive or libido
- have aches and pains
- feel that your heart is beating faster.

What should I do?

Give yourself time

It takes time - weeks or months - to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it.

Find out what happened

It is better to face the reality of what happened rather than wondering about what might have happened.

Be involved with other people that were at the incident

If you speak to other people involved in the incident this may help you to come to terms with what has happened. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.

Ask for support

It can be a relief to talk about what happened. You may need to ask your friends and family for the time to do this - at first they will probably not know what to say or do.

Take some time for yourself

At times you may want to be alone or just with those close to you.

Talk it over

Bit by bit, let yourself think about the trauma and talk about it with others. Don't worry if you cry when you talk, it's natural and usually helpful. Take things at a pace that you feel comfortable with.

Get into a routine

Even if you don't feel much like eating, try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help - but start gently.



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.

Take care

After a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful around the home and when you are driving.

What should I not do?

Don't bottle up your feelings

Strong feelings are natural. Don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel, and don't worry if you cry.

Don't take on too much

Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think to go over what happened so you can come to terms with it. Take some time to get back to your old routine.

Don't drink or use 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.

Don't make any major life changes

Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from people you trust.