

CISS Psychoeducation Leaflet | Normal Reactions to Distressing Events

Staff working in mental health are inevitably exposed to significantly distressing events from time to time. Overall people are resilient when traumatic events occur and most people will recover without long-term problems. However it is normal to have strong reactions to traumatic events. Reactions are likely to be strongest in those who were closest to the incident, in those who directly witnessed or were involved in the distressing event. People who have experienced other traumatic events in the past, especially of a similar nature, may also be particularly affected by strong reactions.

What reactions might I experience?

Common reactions after a significantly distressing event include feeling frightened, horrified, helpless, sad, angry, confused, and overwhelmed. People may also have nightmares or upsetting thoughts and images of the events. These are normal and not a sign of 'going mad' or weakness. Further common reactions include, physical tension, insomnia, and irritability. It is also normal to be more alert or 'jumpy' and initially to avoid reminders, such as where the event occurred.

What can I do in the first few weeks?

You should use your usual social support such as, talking with family, friends and colleagues, with whom you are comfortable and at your own pace. You should follow your own natural inclination with regard to how much and to whom you talk. In addition, it is beneficial to get back to everyday routines and to continue to take part in activities that you enjoy or are important to you. It is also important to look after yourself generally, eating healthy food, taking exercise and not using alcohol or other drugs to excess.

Should I seek help straight away?

It is normal to feel a bit more anxious than usual following a distressing event. Most people will recover naturally, without professional help, within the first few weeks. In these cases NICE recommends a period of 'Active Monitoring' for the first month. The CISS Team can provide you with a self-screen questionnaire to support the active monitoring process. Some people experience high levels of traumatic stress symptoms within the first month of an incident. These difficulties are highly treatable with short term psychological therapies, therefore, please contact CISS or your local IAPT service to discuss.

When should I seek help?

A referral to IAPT for an assessment is recommended if **a month after the event** you continue to:

- feel upset or fearful most of the time
- feel jumpy most of the time
- have nightmares
- frequent memories of the event are intruding on your day-to-day life
- have difficulties managing day-to-day responsibilities, such as going to work or caring for family

Other psychological difficulties may persist after a traumatic incident, for example, depression and grief reactions in the event of bereavement. It is important for you to monitor your symptoms and if they are not improving over time then you need to seek help.

In addition to the above, if you experience any of the following then a referral to IAPT is recommended:

- experience high levels of anger/aggressive impulses
- have thoughts about harming self or others
- increase in alcohol consumption/recreational drug use

Do not wait to seek help if the difficulties you are experiencing are troublesome. These difficulties are highly treatable with short term psychological therapies, therefore, please contact CISS or your local IAPT service to discuss at your earliest convenience.

