

HealthQuest

A workplace wellness update... from your EAP



Coping with Trauma

It comes in many forms; often when we least expect it. From a violent workplace incident or natural disaster, to the loss of a loved one or a terminal diagnosis: a trauma can leave you feeling unsafe and vulnerable.

It's not uncommon for a traumatic event to cause strong emotional reactions that interfere with your ability to carry out day-to-day activities. You may find you have trouble concentrating, remembering things, or even trusting people.

Whether you're coping with a personal trauma, a workplace-related incident, or the aftermath of a natural disaster, it's important to deal with the effects of trauma before they become more devastating than the traumatic event itself.

Common Signs of Trauma

Everyone reacts to trauma in different ways. It can stir up a range of emotions - such as denial, anger or guilt - and can also have destructive effects on day-to-day life. Depending on the person, these can include substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, or withdrawal from family and friends.

How can you spot some of the common signs of trauma? While reactions vary, they usually include the physical, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive responses described below.

Physical

Whether you were injured in the event or not, a trauma can really take its toll on your body, causing:

- tension;
- aches and pains;
- fatigue; low energy;
- difficulty sleeping/insomnia; and/or
- increase in, or loss of appetite.

Emotional

Trauma can bring about a range of emotional responses that can leave you feeling overwhelmed. These include:

- shock/disbelief
- fear or anxiety
- guilt
- sadness/grief
- panic attacks
- irritability
- depression
- irritability
- mood swings
- outbursts of anger or rage
- nightmares/flashbacks.

Behavioural

The emotional stress of working through the aftermath of a trauma can change your behaviour and negatively impact your interactions with co-workers and loved ones. You may find that you:

- withdraw or isolate yourself from others;
- show distrust;
- become less tolerant of others;
- lash out;
- move erratically;
- are easily startled by noises or unexpected touch; and/or
- increase use of alcohol or drugs

Cognitive

The way you think and process information can even be affected after a traumatic incident. Cognitive symptoms of trauma include:

- decreased ability to focus or concentrate;
- forgetfulness;
- suspiciousness;
- confusion;
- difficulty making decisions; and/or
- heightened or lowered alertness.

These signs sometimes appear immediately after the traumatic event, or may develop hours or even days later. They can also endure: it may take weeks, months, or even years to fully recover from traumatic events and establish a new 'normal' for yourself.

Steps You Can Take To Overcome Trauma

While overcoming a traumatic event and getting on with your life is never easy, the suggestions below can help you cope with trauma and restore physical and emotional balance to your life.

Mobilize a support system. Connect with others, especially those who may have experienced the same, or a similar traumatic experience. Talking about your fears, concerns and feelings is an important step in the healing process. Verbalizing your thoughts will help you understand your emotions and identify which ones need immediate attention.

Take care of your body. Eat regular, nutritious meals, get a good night's sleep, and exercise regularly to help keep your body and mind in good shape. Studies show

that physical activity, like jogging, walking or bicycling, releases mood-enhancing endorphins that can help lift your spirits and your heart rate. And eating healthy food, especially fruits and vegetables, can also boost your mood.

Avoid over-use of nicotine, caffeine and sugar.

While they may seem tempting, especially when you're feeling stressed, these stimulants can leave you feeling on edge and actually interfere with your ability to cope.

Maintain a normal schedule. Return to regular activities like exercise, work and social events as quickly as possible to re-establish a routine and sense of order in your life. Avoid making big life changes, however, such as moving, as this will only add to your stress levels.

Do things you enjoy. Engage in fun, creative activities like gardening, cooking, painting, music or photography. Pursue your interests and take pleasure in the little things as a way of restoring joy in your life.

Get help. Get support from a qualified professional who can provide the direction you need to help you through this difficult time.

Other helpful coping strategies:

Prayer or meditation. Seeking spiritual inspiration may help you find answers to some of your deeper questions surrounding the trauma and find meaning in your experience.

Journal writing. Recording your thoughts and feelings encourages the healing process.

Relaxation. Take a warm, soothing bath, listen to music, or go for a walk in the park to clear your mind and lift your mood.

Spending quality time with people you love. Share a meal with family or friends; play with your children, grandchildren, nieces/nephews. Social interaction can infuse energy, and fresh perspectives back into your life.

Laughter. Even in the middle of the most stressful situations, humour can lighten your mood and help you stay positive.

Helping a Loved One After a Traumatic Event

It can be challenging to reach out and help a loved one who's coping with the after effects of a trauma, especially if the person is in denial or is taking his or her anger out on you.

You might feel powerless to help change your loved one's feelings or outlook on life. The suggestions below can help you provide meaningful support as your friend or relative works through the healing process in the wake of a trauma.

Listen. Don't be too quick to offer solutions or advice;

take time to understand and appreciate what the person is going through. Simply listening to your loved one's feelings and ideas is one of the most effective ways to show you care.

Be patient. Give your loved one time to come to terms with his or her feelings. Remember, recovery from a trauma takes time.

Don't take anger or emotional outbursts personally. These feelings are normal, and are not likely directed at you.

Validate your loved one's feelings and experiences. You may not understand exactly what your friend or relative is going through, but do your best to put yourself in your loved one's shoes.

Offer practical help. Cook a meal, wash the dishes or baby-sit the kids to give your loved one a needed break.

Encourage the person to seek additional support. While you can help with the steps above, you can't expect to 'fix' the situation all by yourself. Gently suggest to your loved one that he or she would benefit from support through a counsellor, spiritual leader, or another trusted advisor.

There is life after trauma. By recognizing the signs and following the coping strategies above, you can take steps to reduce its effects and get on with your life. In fact, overcoming a trauma can help you discover a greater compassion for others, a sense of peace and a renewed inner strength: a transformed confidence in knowing you have the personal power to handle and triumph over life's hurdles.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). All contact between you and your EAP is completely confidential.

English Service: 1.800.387.4765

French Service: 1.800.361.5676

HealthQuest is produced four times a year for employees and their families. Any comments? E-mail us at info@warrenshepell.com