



# Managing after a Traumatic Event

## WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

A traumatic event is defined as one that threatens the safety or survival of self or others. Witnessing or experiencing such an event has the potential to create significant distress and overwhelm typical coping mechanisms.

## WHAT ARE SOME COMMON RESPONSES TO A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

All of the reactions listed below can be part of a normal response to a traumatic event. Some reactions may occur immediately, while others may occur much later. Most often the symptoms will resolve on their own in the days and weeks following the event. If you have experienced previous trauma you are vulnerable to having a more intense or persistent reaction.

## SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IF...

- You have thoughts of suicide.
- You haven't slept for three or four days (see your doctor).
- You are using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- You are struggling to meet your academic demands.
- Your reactions feel overwhelming and too difficult to cope with on your own.
- Your reactions are still interfering significantly with your life a month after the traumatic event occurred.

## RESOURCES:

- **Student Counselling Services**  
966-4920
- **Student Health Services**  
966-5768
- **Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service**  
933-6200

### EMOTIONAL

Shock, denial  
Panic, anxiety  
Anger, resentment  
Sadness, depression  
Worry  
Guilt  
Numbness  
Irritability  
Suspiciousness  
Hopelessness

### COGNITIVE

Poor concentration  
Confusion  
Difficulty with decisions  
Disorientation  
Flashbacks  
Nightmares, bad dreams  
Difficulty problem-solving  
Memory problems  
Self-blame, blaming others  
Decreased attention span

### BEHAVIORAL

Social withdrawal  
Increased vigilance  
Pacing  
Increased alcohol/drug use  
Reliance on humour  
Increased aggressiveness  
Restlessness  
Change in sexual functioning  
Emotional outbursts  
Avoidance of anything that reminds one of the trauma

### PHYSICAL

Changed appetite  
Disturbed sleep  
Easily startled  
Fatigue  
Nausea  
Sweating or chills  
Chest pain  
Muscle tension  
Headaches  
Teeth grinding

## HOW CAN FAMILY AND FRIENDS HELP?

- Offer to listen and spend time with the person who has been traumatized.
- Re-telling the details of the trauma in the days or weeks following the event can be quite distressing and unhelpful for the individual whose system has been overwhelmed. Let the individual decide what they want to share. Invite them to talk about the reactions they are experiencing and support them in finding ways to cope.
- Provide reassurance that the person is safe.
- Help out with everyday tasks (e.g., laundry).
- Don't take his/her angry or intense feelings personally.
- Tell the person you are sorry about what happened and want to understand and help. Avoid saying, "you're lucky it wasn't worse." As well, let him/her decide how much to share about the event.
- If you are struggling with how to support a person who has experienced a trauma, call one of the support services listed on the first page for suggestions.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO COPE?

Witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event often overwhelms the body and causes a significant stress reaction. Most often, the body will recover and the symptoms will resolve over time, but there are several things you can do to speed this process. Consider trying the following:

- Focus on coping with your reactions to the event. Accept them as a natural response to what has happened. Avoid labelling yourself as "crazy."
- Remember that recurring thoughts, images or dreams about the trauma are natural and will decrease in frequency and intensity over time.
- Use coping strategies that have worked for you in the past.
- In the first few days after experiencing a trauma, make an effort to be physically active (even a walk is helpful). This may help alleviate some of the intense physical responses.
- Try to maintain most of your regular routine, but limit demands where possible.
- Choose healthy meals and eat regularly, even if you don't feel like it.
- Limit caffeine as it can contribute to feelings of anxiety.
- Avoid using substances as a way to cope.
- Follow a regular sleep schedule as much as possible. If sleep troubles persist, see your doctor.
- If you are having trouble functioning at school, get help right away. Talk to your professors or advisor.
- Reach out and ask for the support you need. Be specific (e.g., someone to listen to you without giving advice, an extension of a due date for a paper).
- Talk with others about your current symptoms and reactions, but don't feel like you have to re-tell the details of the traumatic event. In the days and weeks following the event this is likely too distressing for your already overwhelmed system.
- Accept support when it is offered (e.g., being granted some time off work).
- Balance spending time alone and being with others.
- Continue to make day-to-day decisions so that you have some sense of control in your life. Delay major life decisions for another time.
- Engage in relaxing activities.
- Give yourself permission to laugh and have fun.
- Give yourself credit for coping.