

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Patient Information Sheet

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From: Andrews G, Crino R, Hunt C, Lampe L, Page A. (1994) The Treatment of Anxiety Disorders. New York: Cambridge University Press.

1. Psychological Responses Traumatic Stress

1.1 What Expect

Much has been learned in recent years about the effects of events that seriously threaten the safety of individuals, their family, or friends. The effects of trauma are all normal responses to severe stress. Realizing that everyone has a difficult time following a shock can help to reduce feelings of isolation and further anxieties about the feelings experienced. Remember that although these responses are to be expected, it is usually helpful to have somebody to discuss them with when they occur.

1.2 Common Reactions During the Trauma

When we experience a threatening event, our bodies automatically respond in a way that allows us to protect ourselves or to escape from the situation. This flight or fight response involves an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and breathing rate. During an extremely traumatic event this reaction will be very strong. Common reactions may include: intense fear; disbelief; numbness; anger; confusion; pounding heart; trembling or shaking; fast breathing; sweating; nausea.

1.3 Common Reactions During the Days Following the Trauma

It is also common for individuals to continue to react for some days, or even weeks, following the trauma. Again, these are normal and are signs that your body is recovering from a severe stress.

The most commonly reported reactions include:

- *Anxiety or fear* of being alone or other frightening situations; of danger to ourselves or those we love; or of a similar event happening again
- *Avoidance* of situations or thoughts that remind you of the traumatic event
- *Being easily startled* by loud noises or sudden movements
- *Flashbacks* where images of the traumatic event come suddenly into your mind for no apparent reason, or where you mentally reexperience the event
- Physical symptoms such as tense muscles, trembling or shaking, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, headaches, sweating, tiredness
- *Lack of interest* in usual activities, including loss of appetite or sexual interest
- *Sadness* or feelings of loss or aloneness
- *Shock* or disbelief at what has happened, feeling numb or unreal, or feeling isolated or detached from other people
- *Sleep problems* including getting to sleep, waking in the middle of the night, dreams or nightmares
- *Problems with thinking* , in concentrating or remembering things
- *Preoccupation* with the trauma

- *Guilt and self-doubt* for not having acted in some way during the trauma, or for being better off than others, or feeling “responsible” for another person’s death
- *Anger* or irritability at what has happened; at the senselessness of it all; at what caused the event to happen, often asking, “Why me?”

Not everyone will experience all of these reactions to the same degree, and there may also be other reactions to add to the list. However, in most cases these symptoms will subside over a short period of time, over a few hours, days, or weeks.

2. Psychological Responses to Traumatic Stress

2.1 What to Do

2.2 Immediately After the Event

- Make sure that you are with people. Do not go home to an empty house, get a friend or relative to stay with you.
- Talk about the incident with others. Talking will help you to get over the reactions.
- Remind yourself that the event is over and that you are now safe.
- Get some physical exercise to help “burn off” tension and anxiety.
- Avoid alcohol, sedatives, or sleeping pills (they will only dull the experience and not allow you to deal properly with your feelings).
- Restrict stimulants (such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola, or cigarettes), as you do not want to make your body even more agitated than it is already.
- Try to eat something even if you do not feel like eating.
- If you cannot sleep, do not lie in bed tossing and turning get up and do something relaxing until you feel tired.

2.1.2 How Handle the Next Few Days

- Remind yourself that your reactions are a normal result of trauma and will pass in time.
- Try to get back into your normal routine as soon as possible. You may need to gradually introduce yourself to tasks that seem difficult.
- If you feel uncomfortable, afraid, or anxious, take some long, slow breaths and remind yourself that you are safe and that the trauma is over.
- Make sure that you are doing things that are relaxing and enjoyable.
- Continue to talk to your family, friends, and colleagues about the trauma, as this will help you to get over your feelings. Even if you feel a bit detached from other people, do not reject their support.

- Work on your general stress levels by ensuring that you have adequate sleep, a good diet, and regular exercise. Practice relaxation to help reduce nervous tension.
- Drive more carefully and be more careful around the home and with machinery. Because accidents are more common after severe stress, take extra care.
- Allow yourself time to deal with the memories. There may be some aspects of the experience that will be difficult to forget.

If these experiences continue to disrupt your life, seek professional advice.