

# After a Crisis

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## Range of reactions

If you have experienced or witnessed a crisis or traumatic event it is usual to have strong reactions. People respond in a variety of ways and all of these are quite normal: numbness (feeling detached), disbelief, anger, weepiness, shock and confusion. Whatever the crisis was, you are likely to feel in turmoil for a while. You may also have physical symptoms such as sleeplessness, tension headaches, attacks of anxiety etc. You may feel an urge to get away or to bury yourself in busy activity. All this is likely to continue for a few weeks or possibly longer. The thing that may be helpful to hold onto during this period is the awareness that it will get better and you can come through this.

There are ways in which you can help this process. The most important is to share what has happened, to find a way to talk about your shock and distress. You may find it supportive to talk to family or friends. However, it is important to not do this in detail too soon after the event, as you may become re-traumatised. The people in the University who could help you include your doctor or GP, Mental Health Support Team, Counsellor, Hall Warden, a Chaplain or a Personal Tutor. The process of talking about the event and your feelings helps your mind to come to terms with it and to feel less overwhelmed.

It may be tempting to try to blot out the event or your strong feelings by using alcohol, cigarettes and non-prescribed drugs or by keeping excessively busy. This is understandable as they are strategies widely used in our society, however you are probably aware that these things only give temporary respite, at best you will be delaying healing and, at worst, getting drawn into a depressive state. If you are finding this hard, please do contact the Counselling Service or your doctor or the University Medical Centre.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

You may be aware of the possibility of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a traumatic event. This can happen to anyone and it is not a sign of individual weakness. The Armed Forces and Emergency Services such as Firemen and Police recognise that their toughest personnel can be affected by PTSD and now provide trained debriefing/counselling for them.

The symptoms of PTSD are as follows. If you are experiencing some of these symptoms or panic attacks, then please do get in touch straight away with your doctor and/or the University Medical Centre. PTSD is treatable and counselling or debriefing is very effective.

- Avoidance: avoiding anything that reminds you of the trauma e.g. not wanting to get in a car following a car crash. Finding that you cannot remember all or part of the event. Starting to feel distant from others, numb and not being aware of your feelings. Feeling hopeless, apathetic.
- Re-experiencing: having 'flashbacks' or reoccurring memories of the trauma. Having violent dreams, nightmares. Having repeated intrusive memories. Not being able to get it out of your mind.
- Being hyper tense or aroused: finding it hard to sleep or stay asleep. Not being able to concentrate, think clearly or do usual academic tasks. Feeling tense, miserable, jumpy and having angry outbursts. Jumping at sudden loud sounds. Feeling excessively worried about personal safety ('hyper vigilance').

## Helping someone who has had a trauma or crisis

You may want to be supportive to someone who has suffered a traumatic incident but not sure how to go about it. Reading 'After a Crisis' may help you to understand some of the things they are going through. The most important thing you can do is offer to 'be' there with them. Immediately after a trauma, people are likely to be in shock and may not be able to talk about the incident or their feelings. It is important not to push this and instead to comfort them in non-verbal ways - warm sweet drinks are good, holding hands or touch if appropriate - letting them know it's OK to cry or rage or be silent if they need to. You don't have to 'do' anything more than be present or to listen if they do want to talk. Do not attempt to 'debrief' them with endless questions immediately after a trauma, as there is some evidence that this can reinforce the trauma in the memory and make it harder to deal with later. People may need up to 3 weeks or so before they feel ready for talking.

Eventually someone may feel more like talking and this is where offering time and space to listen to them will be very healing. Being specific about the amount of time you have can be helpful to both of you (e.g. I'd like to be here for you, for you to share what you want for an hour and then I need to go and write an essay/collect my car/phone my parents etc.). This means the person can relax, knowing it's OK to share for that hour and that they are not 'burdening' you (a common fear for traumatised people).

Sometimes, hearing what they have to say may be quite harrowing for you. If so, you may need to suggest that someone else may be better able to help them such as a counsellor, doctor or chaplain. They may appreciate your coming with them to make the appointment or they may prefer to do this on their own. You may need to make it clear that you are not rejecting them and that it is the circumstances that make it hard for you to continue as a listener in that way - that you'd like to continue to support in other ways (meeting them for coffee, cooking their supper, continuing to socialise etc.).

## Useful Tips

### Do Not

- Tell them to stop crying/raging/feeling whatever they are feeling.
- Try to make them cheer up.
- Tell them someone else is worse off.
- Be afraid to mention the trauma for fear of upsetting them.
- Pretend nothing has happened.
- Ask them lots of questions about the trauma directly after the event.

### Do

- Be there for them.
- Ask them if they want to talk about it.
- Respect their decision if they are not ready to talk yet.
- Offer comfort in practical ways (shopping, cooking etc.).
- Encourage them to be gentle with themselves - they will need time.
- Encourage others to be patient.

## Useful contact details

**Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team:** 01509 228338

[studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk)

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).

**Loughborough Nightline:** (For students only) 01509 227650

EVERY Monday, Wednesday & Friday during University Term Time: 20.00hrs - 08.00hrs

**NHS Direct:** 111

**Samaritans:** 116 123

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Call 999 if you have a genuine emergency