



Normal Reactions to Abnormal Situations

Issues concerning reaction to traumatic events: Information after the bomb attacks in London¹.

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 the recent events. Reactions are likely to be strongest in those who were closest to the explosions, who directly witnessed the aftermath, and who were involved in the immediate rescue and care of victims and survivors. People who have experienced other traumatic events in the past, especially of a similar nature, may also be particularly affected.

What people may experience

Common reactions 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 are physical tension, insomnia, and irritability. It is also normal to be more alert and 'jumpy' and initially to avoid reminders, such as where the event occurred, or TV and newspaper reports.

What can people do in the first few weeks?

People should be encouraged to use their natural supports such as talk with family, friends and colleagues, with whom they are comfortable, at their own pace. They should follow their own natural inclination with regard to how much and to whom they talk. In addition, people should be encouraged to get back to everyday routines, to continue to take part in activities that they enjoy or are important to them, and to look after themselves generally, eating healthy food, taking exercise and not using alcohol or other drugs to excess.

Should people seek help straight away?

Sometimes people need to seek extra help to deal with a traumatic event. The evidence suggests that talking with a therapist in probing detail about what happened very soon after the event is actually unhelpful. If seeking help in the first weeks after the event the therapist should suggest meeting for 2 to 3 sessions over 2 to 6 weeks by simply providing general support and information so that normal recovery can occur.

When might people need to seek professional help?

A person may need to seek extra help coping if a month after the events he or she: still feels very upset or fearful most of the time; has difficulties managing their day-to-day

¹ The Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma and the Traumatic Stress Service, South London and Maudsley NHS Trust

responsibilities such as going to work or caring for his or her family; feels very jumpy or has nightmares a lot; still can't stop thinking about the event. In these circumstances they should go to their general practitioner who will provide information about their understandable reaction and may refer them on to local or specialist mental health services, which can provide assessment and treatment.

As well as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), other psychological difficulties may persist after the traumatic incident. These may include for example, depression, phobias about using transport and grief reactions in the event of bereavement. Again, assessment by the general practitioner will hopefully be able to diagnose such problems and appropriate referral made if necessary.

What treatments are recommended for treating psychological difficulties after trauma?

The UK's National Centre for Clinical Excellence (NICE) reviews all available treatments for a disorder (both psychological therapies and medication) to establish which are most effective. The treatments for PTSD recommended by NICE are Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Both are structured psychological treatments usually provided weekly for about 10-12 weeks.

For further information the following websites may be helpful:

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov>

This website from the USA includes several fact sheets for the public, for self care, for disaster response workers, and for mental health professionals.