Emotional Responses Following Traumatic Experiences:
A Self Help Guide for Frontline NHS Staff

This booklet is designed to be an informative resource regarding the nature of traumatic experiences and our common reactions to traumatic events.

The booklet also offers some practical suggestions to team members in helping themselves (or their colleagues) to cope following a traumatic incident at an event.
**What is a traumatic event?**

A traumatic event is a situation where you are (or feel you have been) put at serious risk or harm, or when you witness an event where other people are put at serious risk or harm. Common examples of traumatic events include serious accidents, falls, attacks/assaults or medical emergencies.

Traumatic events can trigger strong levels of emotional arousal or distress within us. Sometimes this is an immediate response; sometimes there is a delayed response once the initial shock and adrenaline surge wears off. These responses might be triggered by a single incident, or the cumulative effect of multiple, consecutive challenges.

People react in different ways following a traumatic event. It is normal to experience mixed feelings over the first few days and weeks. Sometimes these emotions can be very intense and volatile; sometimes we might feel ‘numb’. Sometimes emotions can feel out of control, provoking further anxiety and worry.

Common feelings after a serious incident can include:

**Feeling frightened, anxious or worried**

- Worried that the same thing will happen again, or that you may lose control of your feelings and break down
- Feeling tense, uptight, on edge or unsettled
- Feeling strange or detached
- Feeling dizzy or light headed
- Feeling easily startled or frightened
- Feeling panicky
- Feeling unable to concentrate or focus

Our feelings have an impact on the way our body works. Therefore, common physical reactions to anxiety include:

- Heart racing/pounding
- Tightness of chest
- Tense or stiff muscles
- Sweating
- Breathing changes
- Dizziness or light-headed
- Disturbed sleep

These changes in our body’s arousal level in the time after a traumatic event commonly lead to changes in the way we think and act. For example, people commonly experience thoughts such as:
• “I’m not safe anymore”
• “I’m going to die”
• “I’m cracking up”
• “I can’t cope”
• “Was it all my fault?”
• “If I hadn’t done…(X)…..it wouldn’t have happened”

It is also common (and normal) for your mind to bring up and revisit what has happened over the course of the event witnessed or experienced in the aftermath of the event. This is a normal process that can lead to reduced levels of associated emotional arousal over time, under common patterns of ongoing adjustment.

In response to such anxious thinking patterns, it is natural to adopt safety seeking behaviours in the aim of limiting further distress (whether physical behaviours e.g. situational/ environmental avoidance or cognitive behaviours e.g. burying distressing thoughts and feelings). If the urge to avoid situations (or internal stimulus) goes unrecognised, unchecked or un-managed, these behaviours can then drive ongoing anxious cognition and anxiety patterns.

After a traumatic event it is normal to feel like you want to avoid:

• Things that may remind you of the traumatic event
• Going out and doing ‘normal’ activities
• Talking or being in contact with other people (or maybe being alone)

Common (and understandable) feelings after a serious incident can include:

• **Feeling helpless or vulnerable**... that you could do nothing to stop the event from happening
• **Feeling angry**... about what has happened and with whoever might hold some responsibility for events occurring (as you see it)
• **Feeling ashamed or embarrassed**... that you have these strong feelings that you can’t control, especially if you need others to support you and if you feel, due to your family or event role, that you should be the one supporting others
• **Feeling detached and emotionally numb**, as if in a state of ‘shock’; feeling confused; and not ‘you’
• **Feeling tired, fatigued or emotionally and physically exhausted**
• **Feeling you could have done differently (or better)** in how you responded to the situation

It is common to feel **low in mood** or **down** following a traumatic event. Common thoughts may include:

• “It was all my fault”
• “Why did this have to happen?”
• “Why me?”

Again, feeling low or down can lead to physical changes; we might feel more tired than usual and have less energy, our appetite may be lower or higher than usual, and sleep patterns are often affected. Such mood changes can also fuel avoidance and withdrawal patterns, both physically and emotionally (which, again, if left unrecognised and unchecked can lead to growing difficulties).

These feelings can affect the way we behave in a general sense – we may feel less able to handle going to work or doing things we enjoy (e.g. volunteering at events, seeing friends, hobbies). The way we communicate with those closest to us can also be affected. Again, this can make our mood even lower.

Any or all of these responses might happen immediately, or in the days and weeks that follow. Often, we operate in ‘crisis’ mode during a traumatic event and the immediate aftermath – people often start to notice these feelings when the immediate crisis has passed and things start to settle down.

**Flashbacks & Nightmares**

Following a traumatic event it is common to experience “flashbacks” – these can be images, thoughts or experiences in which our mind takes us back to the traumatic event. This might involve misinterpreting things you see or hear, or seeing/hearing things that aren’t really there. This can sometimes feel like we are “reliving” the experience, or that it is happening all over again. This can be extremely difficult and understandably adds to the distress you might already be experiencing.

It can also be very common to experience vivid dreams or nightmares, as our brain is trying to process and make sense of the experience.

**Why am I feeling like this?**

After experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, our assumptions about the world being a safe and secure place can become understandably shattered. Consequently, you may feel as though any situation or place is potentially dangerous. Places or situations you once felt secure in may now feel threatening, provoking anxiety and fear. In this section of the booklet, we will explain why traumatic events can lead to the psychological responses we have talked about.

Anxiety is the feeling that we get when our body responds to a frightening or threatening experience. Commonly known as the **fight or flight** response, it is your body preparing for action; either to fight danger or run away from it as fast as possible. Adrenaline is released, and the physical symptoms that we experience as a result are our body’s response to cope
with threat. For example, we breathe quickly to get more oxygen into our bodies. Our body tenses as our muscles get primed to react.

Because of this fight or flight response, it is common to experience **hypervigilance** or **hyper-arousal** following a traumatic event.

**Hypervigilance** - Feeling more on-guard and aware of your surroundings after a traumatic event. Your body is attempting to keep you safe by making you more aware of potential sources of threat and danger. This natural safety mechanism can be more sensitive after a traumatic event, and any fight or flight responses are likely to be much more easily triggered. This can make it very difficult to relax and “switch off”.

**Hyper-arousal** - Just as you are going to likely be more on-guard, you are also likely to feel more “keyed-up” and on edge following a traumatic event. This is again part of our body’s natural fight or flight protection system. Following a traumatic event, your body’s alarm system is going to be more sensitive in an automatic attempt to protect you from future traumatic events.

A good way to think about these systems is like a burglar alarm. If a burglar got into our house, we might reset the sensors to keep our house safe and reduce the chance of it happening again. Our fight or flight system is an important and helpful evolutionary response to danger.

However, if the sensors on a burglar alarm are too easily triggered, the alarm would go off at inappropriate times; perhaps when a friendly cat wanders into our garden. Even though there is no direct threat, the alarm system has been conditioned to be “better safe than sorry” and the alarm sounds when we don’t need it to. This is understandable; but not very helpful once the danger has passed. The same can happen with our fight or flight system – it can continue to trigger long after the acute need for such responses has passed.
The vicious cycle of anxiety (and its effects)

After a traumatic event, our body’s alarm system - the ‘fight or flight’ response – is primed to be triggered easily, and this can lead to symptoms we know as anxiety. The bodily symptoms of anxiety can be frightening, unusual and unpleasant; people often react by thinking that there is something physically wrong, or that something truly awful is going to happen.

Hypervigilance and hyper-arousal can mean we focus more on these physical sensations, which can make them even stronger. Our attention can also be drawn to unpleasant physical symptoms that may be provoked by the associated stress (e.g. headaches, bodily pains etc.), which can then provoke further stress and worry, if not properly understood.

When we feel anxious, it can make us feel like we have to escape the situation. It is natural to avoid something that we think is dangerous; and this can provide some short-term relief. However, the sorts of things that people tend to avoid when they suffer from anxiety are most often not real dangers. People might avoid situations that remind them of the trauma (e.g. getting into a car, returning to the place of the incident) or they might avoid talking about the event, to try and avoid becoming upset or anxious.

Over time, this can lead to people doing less and less or to bottling-up difficult feelings (consequential to the incident), which can affect growing mood problems and loss of confidence.

Avoidance can also lead to more anxiety, as we become less able to cope with or manage situations. This in itself causes more symptoms in the longer term.

The diagram below shows how a vicious cycle can develop; anxiety can become worse over time as focus on physical symptoms, avoidance and worry increases. Understanding problems in this way can help us to think about ways to ‘break’ the vicious cycle.
Do I have PTSD?

You might have heard of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As we have discussed, post-traumatic symptoms such as heightened and persistent arousal, periodic flashbacks, sleeplessness and nightmares are all common responses following a traumatic event. These are all normal and common. For many people, these symptoms naturally resolve after a few weeks.

PTSD, however, is a diagnosis given to someone who continues to experience these problems persistently in the months (or even years) after the traumatic event. For the majority of people, post-traumatic symptoms resolve themselves, over a relatively short period of time (over a matter of weeks or months). However, the line to consider is when and where such experiences, of whatever timeframe, disrupt your ability to live normally. If this is the case, then seeking help via your family, line manager or GP is advised (to talk about the support available).
We know that having a good understanding of what to expect after a traumatic experience can help people to recover more quickly. That is why this booklet talks about common reactions that people have; it is important to understand that you are not going “crazy” or losing your mind. It is a normal response to an abnormal situation. It is important to try not to block out any thoughts or feelings you might have, and allow yourself some time to process the natural responses you experience.

In the next section of the booklet, we will go on to discuss some things that can be useful in helping you to cope in the early stages after a traumatic event. These techniques can help you to tolerate the feelings and experiences we have described above, which although normal, can be extremely uncomfortable and unpleasant. These strategies can be useful in helping you to look after yourself during this time, preventing the development of further problems.

However, if these strategies do not help, or if you continue to experience distressing and persistent symptoms (as described above) after around two to four weeks (especially if it is causing you difficulties either in work or in your home life), you are advised to speak to your GP, who can advise you of support options they might be able to offer or arrange. You can also speak to your manager or occupational health team to discuss additional help that might be available from your employer.
Strategies to help traumatic reactions

In this section of the booklet, we will discuss some simple strategies that you might find useful in helping you to cope and adjust following a traumatic experience.

General guidance:

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing or frightening experience and that you will have a reaction to it.

- Try to accept that you may not feel your normal self for a while, but that it can pass in time.

- Try not to get angry or frustrated with yourself if you are not able to do things as well as or efficiently as normal.

- Don’t bottle up your feelings. Talk to someone who can support and understand you. This might be a friend, relative or colleague.

- Allow family and friends to help you by telling them what you need, such as time out or someone to talk to.

- Try to keep your normal routine as much as possible. Be aware of the vicious cycle of anxiety we discussed earlier, and try not to let problematic patterns of avoidance develop as this can make things harder in the longer term.

- If you notice that you have started to avoid certain things, try gradually building up to overcoming this at your own pace. If you feel particularly anxious at the thought of this, try practicing the relaxation and breathing strategies described below to help you to feel more confident in managing these feelings and building up to the situations you have been avoiding (e.g. going into a particular room).
Ways of reducing your physical symptoms

These strategies can help to calm down your body, making the symptoms of anxiety more manageable. In effect we are looking to tone down the alarm systems we talked about earlier.

Relaxation & pleasurable activities

Try and find time to relax every day. This might seem difficult, but it is worth making time for. Making time to relax and do activities that are enjoyable can help to improve your mood by calming the body and mind. It can also help you to sleep. Without taking the time to unwind, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, anxious and stressed.

Relaxation can involve doing something you enjoy, or just being by yourself. Some examples of relaxing activities may include reading, going to the cinema, having a leisurely bath, doing something creative (drawing or painting), or visiting a friend or family member. Exercise is also particularly effective at helping us to relax (for example, going swimming or on a bike ride).

Try and choose something that you will look forward to and that will give you a break. Taking part in an enjoyable activity will also mean that you have less time to spend worrying.

Mindfulness strategies

At the end of this booklet, we have included some progressive muscle relaxation and calm breathing exercises, designed to help you to relax by learning to recognise tension and stress in the body. We have also included a script for a mindfulness exercise. This aims to help improve awareness of the relationships between thoughts and feelings (and how to better manage these processes) for improved mental wellbeing.

These strategies are not intended to be a fix for difficult emotions and, as highlighted above, we would encourage people to see strong emotional responses as normal and to be expected – rather than something to be avoided. However, many people find strategies such as these positive and helpful.

It may be useful to have a friend or relative read the steps out to you; or you could record yourself reading them on a mobile phone or recording device. There are also lots of self-help resources and pre-recorded relaxation and mindfulness exercises on the internet (e.g. YouTube or smartphone apps) that you may choose to explore, as an aid to practicing these types of exercises.

Some people do find these strategies difficult or unhelpful – stop if you feel this is making you feel worse.
Where else can I get help?

Hopefully this booklet will act as a self-help guide for you to help you to understand and cope with feelings of anxiety following a traumatic experience.

If you feel that you would benefit from further help, you can:

- Seek support and advice from your GP, who can then arrange any further help needed.
- Speak to your manager or occupational health department about the help that can be offered via your employer.

Your GP will also be able to tell you about specialised help available in your area. Many mental health services offer “talking therapies” such as Trauma Focused Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which are protocols of psychotherapy specially designed to help people who are finding it difficult to manage after experiencing a traumatic event.

Things to remember

- It is normal to have strong reactions following a distressing or frightening event.

- Health professionals are not immune to experiencing emotional reactions to distressing events.

- People can experience a range of physical, mental, emotional and behavioural reaction; everyone is different. Even when people experience the same traumatic incident, it is normal for their emotional responses to be different. Just because others may seem okay, doesn’t mean you should not feel the way you do.

- There are many things you can do to help yourself cope and adjust following a traumatic experience (as described in this booklet).

- Seek help via your local GP or line manager if you don’t begin to feel better after two or three weeks.
Appendices

1. Calm and mindful breathing guidance

When we are anxious, our breathing often changes. We can begin to gulp air quickly, thinking that we are going to suffocate. This has the effect of making us feel dizzy, faint, sickly or anxious. This is called over-breathing, or hyperventilation. It is not harmful or dangerous, but it can feel unpleasant.

To relax your breathing, take smooth, slow, and regular breaths to regulate the amount of oxygen you take in. Sitting upright is usually better than lying down or slouching, because it can increase the capacity of your lungs to fill with air.

- Take a slow breath in through the nose, feeling your belly rise as you breathe in for a count of two (1…2…)
- Hold your breath for one or two seconds
- Exhale slowly through the mouth for a count of four (1…2…3…4…)
- Wait a few seconds before taking another breath

You do not need to be feeling anxious to practice – in fact, at first you should practice while feeling relatively calm to give yourself opportunity to practice. Try calm breathing for at least five minutes twice a day, or whenever you notice yourself getting anxious. As you relax your breathing, you might notice your thoughts wandering. The thoughts and feelings you experience might be pleasant or unpleasant. This is normal; it is just what the human mind does.

What can be useful here is a calm, non-judging awareness, where we allow thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is concentrate our attention only on what is happening in the here and now, not the past and not the future.

As thoughts come into your mind, simply notice them and then bring your attention back to your breathing. Likewise, you can notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breathing. You don’t have to follow those thoughts or feelings, don’t judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It’s okay for the thoughts to be there and for your attention to wander. Just notice when this happens and let the thoughts drift on by, each time bringing your attention back to your breathing.
2. General ‘Progressive Muscle Relaxation’ guidance

Sit in a comfortable chair (or lie on the floor or on a bed). Ensure you will not be disturbed by other noises. If you become aware of sounds - just try to ignore them and let them leave your mind just as soon as they enter. Make sure the whole of your body is comfortably supported - including your arms, head and feet.

Close your eyes. Feel the chair supporting your whole body - your legs, your arms, and your head. If you can feel any tension, begin to let it go. Take 2 slow and deep breaths, and let the tension begin to flow out.

Become aware of your head - notice how your forehead feels. Let any tension go and feel your forehead become smooth and wide. Let any tension go from around your eyes, your mouth, your cheeks and your jaw. Let your teeth part slightly and feel the tension go.

Now focus on your neck - let the chair take the weight of your head and feel your neck relax. Now your head is feeling heavy and floppy. Let your shoulders lower gently down. Your shoulders are wider, your neck is longer. Notice how your body feels as you begin to relax.

Be aware of your arms and your hands. Let them sink down into the chair. Now they are feeling heavy and limp.

Think about your back - from your neck to your hips. Let the tension go and feel yourself sinking down into the chair. Let your hips, your legs and your feet relax and roll outwards. Notice the feeling of relaxation taking over.

Notice your breathing - your abdomen gently rising and falling as you breathe. Let your next breath be a little deeper, a little slower...

Now, you are feeling completely relaxed and heavy.... Lie still and concentrate on slow, rhythmic breathing....

When you want to, count back from 5 to 1 and open your eyes. Wiggle your fingers and toes, breathe deeply and stretch. Look around the room, becoming more alert as you notice what you see, hear and feel. Pause before gently rising.
3. ‘Leaves on a Stream’ Mindfulness-based Visualisation guidance

Find a comfortable seating position and close your eyes. Focus your attention on you breathing – breathing in, and then breathing out. Be aware of your breathing and of the feeling of calmness and relaxation you can feel begin to wash over you, as you breathe in ....and out, in......and out. Find a breathing rhythm that feels comfortable to you.

Imagine there is a balloon in your stomach, with the balloon inflating as you breathe in.....and deflating as you breathe out.......the balloon getting larger as you breathe in.......and smaller as you breathe out.

You’ll notice thoughts pop in your mind as you breathe – just be aware of them, notice them but don’t pay them too much attention. Be aware of them, and bring your mind back to your breathing, and the feeling of increasing calmness on each out breath.

Notice sounds around you that you would not normally be aware of – both inside and outside of the room. Just be aware of these – don’t pay any one thing too much thought. Notice...then continue to bring your attention back to your breathing.

Notice different feelings in different areas of your body.......some parts may feel warmer or colder than others; some muscles may feel tighter and some looser than others; some areas of your body may feel more comfortable than others. Just be aware of these differences that you can notice...and then bring your attention back to your breathing.

Now imagine you are sat at the side of a stream, which is calmly flowing down a hill, on a warm sunny day. There is a tree next to the stream and its leaves are falling, one by one, into the stream, as the wind gently blows. Picture this in your mind. Take each thought that pops in your mind and place each on one of the leaves, drifting down the stream. Watch each thought drift away, gently, as the stream runs gently down the hill. For every thought that pops in your mind, place it on a new leaf and watch it drift down the stream...calmly and gently.

Bring your attention back to your breath, feeling calmer with every out breath. When you are ready, bring your attention back to the room and open your eyes.