

Sometimes things just happen ...

SOMETIMES THINGS JUST HAPPEN ...

IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME

The people affected by and involved in a shocking event may also struggle with understanding all of the subsequent various and unpleasant reactions. Life-threatening situations do not usually occur in 'normal' day to day life. People think about this type of thing from time to time, but not in any real sense. Most of us think 'It won't happen to me' (or my colleagues or family/friends). We realise that this type of thing can happen but never or very rarely think about it. Life would become unbearable if we were to continuously focus on all of the various risks and hazards. Experience also teaches us that things usually turn out well, so why would we worry? Almost all of us assume that we control our own existence. As long as we are careful and don't do anything crazy, we'll be fine. As a result, we 'forget' that the world is sometimes not safe. This gives us a sense of calm and reassurance.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDS

A confrontation with aggression, an accident, an attack, disaster or other far-reaching event brutally destroys this sense of reassurance. Serious threats have the same effect. The security we have taken for granted seems to become an illusion. Suddenly we are taking a risk, looking into the eyes of death, seeing others suffer injuries or face threats, or learning of a loved one's demise. The impact of this type of significant event is sometimes compared to a psychological wound. Just like a regular wound causes physical pain, a psychological wound inflicts mental pain. This wound may be more significant depending on the person concerned as everyone has their own experiences. The recovery from a psychological wound is similar to the recovery from a physical wound. It requires focus and care and the scar may remain sensitive for some time. Particularly if the psychological wound is severe.

DWELLING ON IT

The idea that the world can suddenly become life-threatening is hard to accept. It is as though we, quite literally, can't believe that 'it' happened. Feelings of disbelief and bewilderment are very common. Sometimes, we are so utterly overwhelmed that we barely feel anything. As if we are watching things from a distance or existing in a dream-cape.

That is why we are unable to immediately distance ourselves from shocking events; we continue to dwell on them. We talk about them incessantly, because it's all we can think of. There may also be all kinds of horrible memories that we can't process and/or set aside. These thoughts mean we are then either very sleepy or find it extremely hard to fall asleep.

The consequences of aggression, attacks, accidents and disasters are not always limited to material damage or physical injury. People often feel bewildered, powerless, anxious, sad and tired. Not only during the shocking events, but also in the days, weeks, months and sometimes years that follow. This depends, of course, on the event's seriousness but also on how we and those around us deal with the incident.

DWELLING ON IT (continued)

In many cases, people experience nightmares and/or feelings of guilt about what they did or didn't do, see, hear or smell. Many of those affected or involved focus on questions such as 'How could it have happened?' or 'Why did it happen to me?'. Simultaneously, we see ourselves in shocking events which happen to other people. And this recognition can easily reignite the person's own emotions. Previously, we were able to listen and see news/images about this type of shocking event without being bothered, but now we are deeply affected.

We almost relive our own experiences during the shocking event, even though it is actually over. Emotions such as loss, despondence and dismay are very common. This sense of loss will be particularly significant if you (also) lost a loved one. The realisation that you will never see, talk to, touch or hear from someone again is a very hard concept to accept.

BEING MORE SCARED

Because of the fact that 'reassuring' thoughts have been eliminated, we are often more alert and anxious than normal. We feel so vulnerable that we are constantly 'ready' for new hazards. If we have children, for example, we monitor where they are and what they are doing more closely. Loud or sudden noises which previously would not have bothered us, now generate (physical) shock responses. People involved in attacks, abductions or abuse, for example, are scared of loud screaming; those involved in fires have severe reactions to certain smells and those affected by explosions and earthquakes become scared of unexpected vibrations.

FEELING TIRED

It is no surprise that people who are involved in or affected by this type of event begin to feel tired. Because we constantly dwell on things, we are also constantly using up our mental energy. And using mental energy, particularly when it concerns processing shocking events, is just as tiring as using physical energy. We quickly become 'overworked' to some degree, with listlessness and tiredness as a result. Particularly if we also have to (continue to) organise or take care of practical issues.

LOSS OF PATIENCE AND CONCENTRATION

As a result of these circumstances, we can easily lose our 'normal' sense of patience. For example, we no longer have the capacity to calmly help or praise our children, or we respond abruptly rather than offering support. We are irritated by the most minor setbacks, e.g. a 'wrong' comment by a friend or a colleague. And if we're suffering from tiredness, our ability to concentrate is also diminished. As a result, we can make mistakes, become forgetful or suddenly forget what we're doing.

SEEKING DISTRACTION

Nevertheless, we are not necessarily susceptible to all of the responses which correspond to reliving the event. People have a natural defence mechanism in relation to being overwhelmed by painful thoughts and feelings. We can effectively 'get our breath back' by not talking about it, working hard or seeking another type of distraction. We are able to 'forget' shocking events or significant consequences or eliminate memories momentarily. As a result, we are temporarily protected from all of the distressing emotions.

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TALKING AND RESTING HELPS

Seeking distractions will alleviate issues (slightly) and this is important for processing events. At least, as long as you're not avoiding things. Processing events is not the same as burying them, denying it happened or silencing your experiences, thoughts and feelings. A psychological wound, just like a physical one, requires care. As well as taking time to rest, the psychological wound can be resolved by talking to others and venting the corresponding, painful emotions. Talking alleviates the pain, as does having a good cry. The event won't, of course, be processed in one fell swoop; just like a physical injury, it won't simply heal overnight. That is why it is good to *keep on* talking about things. Preferably in a relaxed context, so that you can gradually 'organise' all of your experiences, thoughts and feelings. Every time you talk about your experience, the pain will become slightly more bearable. We may sometimes feel as if 'we've said the same thing ten times over'; this is understandable but not problematic. This is about very substantial events that we will never forget.

FOCUS AND SUPPORT FROM YOUR CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

Receiving focussed attention from your friends and family is of huge importance; people must take the time to listen to the story and ask questions about how things are going or what happened in a non-sensationalised manner. In short: people must show understanding and acknowledgement of what has occurred (and what may still happen). Not just in the first few days, or the first week, but for many months and sometimes years.

TIPS FOR THOSE AFFECTED/INVOLVED

- Talk about it with others and don't 'hide it away'
- Make sure you allow yourself to relax and rest
- Be aware of your thoughts and feelings
- Don't pretend to be stronger than you really are
- Keep the use of sedatives or sleeping pills to a minimum
- Try to create a little structure in your day-to-day activities
- Don't work too much (excessively)
- Avoid tricky discussions about the event
- Accept that processing events takes time and energy
- Don't shut out the people who are important to you
- Take part in your normal work activities as much as possible, even if you are less productive

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TIPS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

- Show an interest but avoid sensationalising events
- Listen attentively and don't make flippant comments/jokes
- Express your opinions but show empathy
- Remember to ask how things are going in the weeks and months thereafter
- Offer practical help if the person concerned needs it, but don't make a fuss
- Make sure that the person concerned rests and takes time to relax
- Don't offer advice unless it's asked for
- Offer structure and an overview
- Don't try to alleviate pain by pointing out that others have had much worse experiences
- Realise that the person concerned will want to tell their story over and over again
- Be genuine in your responses and avoid sensationalism
- Be aware that everyone reacts differently
- Don't allocate blame or guilt
- Keep the person concerned aware of any investigations

PROBLEMS WITH PROCESSING

All reactions, such as dwelling on the problem, being scared, feeling tired and losing your patience and ability to concentrate are normal reactions to abnormally shocking events. Everyone has to face up to these responses to a greater or lesser degree.

Most people, however, are capable of processing a shocking event independently and with support, understanding and acknowledgement from their friends and family. The unpleasant reactions will gradually ease and, after a while (days, weeks, months), life and work will no longer be hindered.

This does not apply to all, however. Some people retain stressful responses and life and work becomes increasingly disrupted. This is often related to the severity of the experiences. Different people will process this type of event and the corresponding grief differently.

If you find that you can't eliminate symptoms after the event and they begin to dominate your life, you should contact the carer from POBOS or your own GP.