

Coping After Road Trauma

Fact Sheet



You are not alone!

Last year in the United States, over 33,000 people were killed on our nation's roads. Many more were injured.

Road crashes have a traumatic impact on victims, witnesses and family members.

TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Traumatic events are situations that are either life threatening or have the potential for serious injury to yourself or someone else. This Fact Sheet discusses common reactions to road trauma, strategies to cope initially, and when it may be time to seek additional help.

You may have experienced road trauma through:

- being directly involved in a collision as a driver (either responsible for the collision or not)
- being a pedestrian or cyclist hit by a motor vehicle
- being first at the scene of a collision
- witnessing a collision, or
- learning a close family member or friend has been seriously injured or killed on the road.

These events are often shocking, inexplicable and uncontrollable, and can leave you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, helpless and vulnerable. Suddenly the world doesn't seem safe and predictable anymore.

COMMON REACTIONS

It can be common to experience a range of upsetting thoughts, feelings and physical reactions after road trauma.

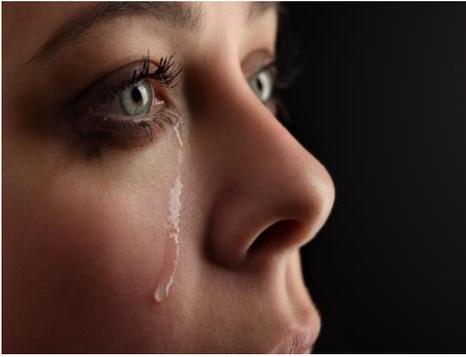


Possible emotional responses include:

- Shock, disbelief, anxiety, sadness, grief, guilt, irritability, anger, shame, feelings of being overwhelmed, powerlessness.

Possible physical responses include:

- Trembling/shaking, sweating, breathing rapidly, increased heart beats, stomach churning, crying, restlessness, insomnia (difficulty sleeping), dizziness.



Possible behavioral and thinking responses include:

- Being preoccupied with what you saw and heard at the crash site
 - Being fearful of driving or worrying about loved one's driving
 - Finding it hard to accept what happened
 - Wanting to withdraw from other people
 - Finding it difficult to concentrate or pay attention
 - Memory problems
 - Going over and over events prior to the crash
 - Obsessing about whether you could have done anything different
- Worrying and wondering about how others are coping
 - Having nightmares or flashbacks (re-living) of the trauma

What helps after road trauma?

There are specific things you can do to assist your recovery after road trauma:

- Recognize that you've experienced a traumatic event and acknowledge that you need time and space to make sense of what happened and deal with the stress.
- Don't try to fight your reactions –be patient with yourself. Most trauma reactions will gradually decrease in frequency and intensity as time passes. However, people who've experienced grief from losing a loved one from road trauma say that they never "get over it." Instead they learn to adapt and live with their grief.
- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible. If you need to take some time off work or school, still try to structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, exercising and spending time with family and friends. Try to do things that are calming and relaxing or provide some relief from thinking too much about the traumatic event. This could mean watching a movie, reading a book, having a massage, playing a team sport, doing something creative or cooking. Some people feel guilty if they "act normal" or experience moments of happiness in the aftermath of trauma, but it's important to realize that constantly thinking about and focusing on the traumatic event, isn't helpful and will slow your healing.
- Take care of yourself by getting plenty of rest, eating regular meals and exercising. Avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings. If you're having trouble sleeping and/or experiencing nightmares, this should gradually improve.
- Reach out and spend time with people who care about you and with who you feel safe and secure. You may be tempted to withdraw from social activities, but social support from other people is vital to recovery from traumatic stress. Ask if you need company or help and allow others to offer practical support such as cooking, collecting children, accompanying you to appointments.
- Find healthy ways to express difficult feelings. Talking with someone who you trust, who won't judge you or expect you to

“get over it” is helpful. If you don’t have anyone you can be completely open with, you may prefer to speak to someone outside of your network of family and friends and/or who is experienced in dealing with trauma and grief. Your family doctor can help you find a counselor specifically trained in traumatic grief.

- Some social media sites such as Facebook have online grief support groups especially for those who have lost loved ones to road crash. These sites can offer a safe way to discuss your feeling with others who are going thru similar experiences and /or losses.
- Although it’s healthy to have an outlet for your feelings, be wary of being forced to recount the traumatic event over and over. It may be useful to have a friend or family member answer calls or questions on your behalf in the aftermath of a very traumatic event.
- In the longer term, participating in memorials and other public rituals may be a useful way to acknowledge and honor your feelings/grief.
- Some witnesses to road trauma have found it helpful to connect with the family of the deceased or injured person either through sending a condolence card or even meeting in person to share information

When to seek help

For most people time, understanding and support from family and friends are the most important requirements for recovery – professional counselling is not needed.

While most people will recover from trauma, some people may experience distressing symptoms that are persistent and/or strong enough to interfere with daily living. Occasionally trauma and bereavement will lead to conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or complicated grief, which require professional treatment.

The following are signs that you should seek professional advice:

- If you’re having ongoing (ie: more than a month after trauma) severe symptoms. These could include: insomnia and nightmares; chronic fatigue, depression, anxiety, phobias, anger, guilt, physical health issues, memory problems, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks of the trauma.
- If you’re having trouble functioning at home or work.
- If you feel confused, emotionally numb to everything or out of touch with reality.
- If your relationships are suffering or you’re having an increasingly difficult time connecting with and relating to others.
- If you’re avoiding more and more things that remind you of the traumatic event.
- If you’re experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or others.

There are other circumstances, where it may be appropriate to seek help from a trained mental health professional such as:

- If you do not have anyone that you can share your thoughts and feelings with or your social support is limited.
- If you were responsible for a collision and prefer to talk to someone outside of your family and friends.
- If you feel that you can't manage your feelings or reactions or if there are any changes in your emotions or behaviors that are worrying you.
- If your family or friends think that you need assistance. Sometimes people close to you are better judges than you about how much event has impacted you.
- If your family or friends think that you need assistance. Sometimes people close to you are better judges than you about how much an event has impacted on you.

Even if the trauma occurred some time ago, it's never too late to seek help (often people with quite severe symptoms mistakenly believe that eventually they'll recover and continue to suffer for years with symptoms of PTSD). Options for professional help include your general practitioner (doctor), a psychologist or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through your workplace.

It can be reassuring to know that you've got professional support and care until you start to feel better. A professional can also assess if you require, and if necessary provide, specialized trauma-specific treatment or grief counselling.

A trained professional can help "normalize" your experiences and assist you to cope with the trauma in a safe, confidential and non-judgmental manner.

