

## Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions during COVID-19: Self Help for Healthcare Staff

It is not uncommon for frontline staff to be exposed to potentially traumatic events during the COVID-19 pandemic. These pressures can take their toll on our emotional wellbeing. During such unprecedented times it is normal to experience periods of anxiety, panic, exhaustion, disturbed sleep, racing thoughts or low mood. By being kind to ourselves, prioritising some time for self care and mobilising our support networks, we can find sustainable, healthy ways to cope through the pandemic. Here are some things you can do to help yourself through some common reactions you might notice.

### Unwanted distressing memories, images, or thoughts

These can come without warning and although they can feel upsetting, they do lessen with time.

- Remind yourself that they are just that, memories, and that it's natural to have some memories of the traumatic event(s).
- Letting yourself notice the memory and just sit with it without judgement can often help it to settle.
- Talk the memories through with someone you trust. Allowing yourself to make a narrative around those thoughts and images can be very helpful.

### Sudden feelings of anxiety or panic

These are a common part of traumatic stress reactions and include sensations of your heart pounding and feeling lightheaded or spacey (usually caused by rapid breathing). If this happens, remember:

- These reactions are not dangerous. If you had them while exercising, they probably would not worry you.
- It is the addition of frightening thoughts (e.g., I'm can't cope, I will lose control, I might have a heart attack) that makes them especially upsetting. These frightening thoughts are not true – you are having symptoms of panic, which is not dangerous.
- Slowing down your breathing will help. The sensations will pass soon and you can go about your business after they decrease.

- Use a grounding object: some people find that carrying a small object that they find soothing to touch can be very useful to still feelings of anxiety. This could be a smooth stone or a shell, or a piece of soft or furry material, as long as you can fit it in your pocket and reach for it when you feel anxious.
- Self soothe with smell: smell is a powerful grounding method. If there is a scent you find pleasant and calming, it is very difficult to feel worse after smelling it! Some people use perfume, shower gel, essential oils or even a bit of fresh rosemary from the garden. Breathe deeply and notice the tension reduce.

## Feeling like the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you and notice where you are.
- Talk to yourself. Remind yourself where you are, what the date is, and that you are in the present.
- Try a grounding technique: notice and name three things you can see in the room around you, three things you can hear if you listen closely and three things you can physically feel (like your clothes against your skin or the chair against your back).
- Use your grounding object or grounding smell.
- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water or wash your hands.
- Speak to someone you trust and tell them what is happening. Get support and consider taking some time off to rest and recharge.

## Feelings of guilt or self-blame

Many people who have experienced something traumatic tend to question their actions, wonder if they could have done more, or even if they were somehow responsible.

- Normalise how you feel. You are not alone in feeling like this. Guilt is a very normal reaction to any trauma.
- Resist the urge to self-criticise. Remind yourself of the pandemic conditions you have been living and working with these past months, and the pressure you have been under. The truth is that you have done your best through some incredibly tough circumstances.
- Be kind to yourself, notice your thoughts and emotions without judging them, and take a broader outlook, understanding that you are a human being and you are not perfect. Talk to yourself as you would talk to a friend who needs kindness and compassion.
- Focus on the things that are in your control and try to notice and celebrate successes however small.

## Trauma-related dreams and nightmares

Trauma-related dreams are part of your brain's way of processing what has happened. They can be unpleasant but they will lessen with time, as you naturally come to terms with the trauma.

- If you awaken in a distressed state, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream and that's why you are anxious, not because there is real danger now.
- Try a grounding technique: notice and name three things you can see in the room around you, three things you can hear and three things you can physically feel.
- Consider getting up out of bed, regrouping, and orienting yourself.
- Engage in a pleasant, distracting calming activity (e.g., flip through a book, listen to soothing music, talk to someone if possible).

## Difficulty falling or staying asleep

- Keep to a regular bedtime schedule.
- Avoid strenuous exercise or screen time for at least an hour before going to bed.
- Avoid using your sleeping area for anything other than sleeping or intimacy.
- Avoid excessive alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. These undermine your ability to sleep.
- Do not lie in bed thinking or worrying. Get up and enjoy something soothing or pleasant; read a calming book, drink a glass of warm milk / herbal tea, or do a quiet hobby.
- Go back to bed after about 20 minutes, or when you begin to feel tired enough to sleep.

## Irritability and anger

- Take a time out to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
- Get in the habit of exercising daily. Exercise reduces body tension and helps get the anger out in a positive and productive way.
- Write down those difficult feelings the reasons behind them. Express yourself – it can help you feel more contained.
- If you blow up at family members or friends, find time as soon as you can to talk to them about it. Let them know what is going on and get support.

## Difficulty concentrating

- Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on what it is you need to do.
- Write things down. Making to do lists may be helpful.
- Break tasks down into small do-able chunks.
- Plan a realistic number of events or tasks for each day.
- Have down time where you allow yourself a good long break from concentrating. Sometimes basic activities like watching soothing TV, baking, even ironing can be helpful here.
- Set boundaries: Allow yourself to be off-duty when you are at home so that you can rest. Limit time spent watching the news or browsing social media. The boundary that you might set might differ everyday based on how you feel and your tolerance level.

## Difficulty feeling or expressing positive emotions

- Remember that this is a common reaction to trauma, so try not to feel guilty about it – it is not something that is in your control.
- Try to regularly take part in activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Sometimes, these activities can rekindle feelings of pleasure.
- Compassion fatigue is a reduced ability to empathize or feel compassion for others that can come about when healthcare workers are too exhausted to recharge or 'refuel' emotionally. It can be distressing for compassionate healthcare workers, especially when they don't know what is going on. Consider whether this might be a factor and if so, give yourself some time out.
- Take steps to connect with friends and loved ones in little ways: write a card, leave a small gift, or phone someone and say hello.

## Reactions to look out for that aren't settling down after a few weeks

Sometimes, things might not settle down of their own accord, even after several weeks. How can we tell if our mental health is being impacted significantly by trauma?

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by four types of symptoms which are persisting for an **extended period** of time (more than 1 month) after the trauma has happened:
  - Re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive distressing recollections of the trauma, flashbacks, and nightmares
  - Avoidance of places, people, and activities that are reminders of the trauma

- Negative changes in thoughts and emotions associated with the trauma such as viewing oneself, others, or the world in a consistently negative way (e.g., “I’m a failure”, “people will let you down in times of need”, or “the world is extremely dangerous” ), persistent negative emotions such as grief, sadness, or anger, or difficulty experiencing positive emotions such as happiness or joy; feeling emotionally distant from others (i.e., emotional numbness); and less interest in activities
- Increased arousal including difficulty sleeping and concentrating, being constantly on guard for signs of danger (i.e., hypervigilant), and being easily irritated and angered

**If you feel that you may be struggling with persisting symptoms of traumatic stress, please contact your local staff support, occupational health or Resilience Hub for psychological help. PTSD is an area of expertise for psychological therapists and with support you will recover.**

## **Additional Resources**

Samaritans Call: 116 123

You can access a number of useful apps by visiting the NHS England webpage:

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/>

The CovidMinded website has further coping support and advice

<https://covid.minded.org.uk/trauma-and-distress/>