

When a Friend or Loved One Has Been Traumatized

Traumatic events are quite common. War, combat, civil unrest, disasters and terrorism are some of these. Sexual assault, child abuse and other domestic violence are other overwhelming situations. Most individuals experience several traumatic experiences and traumatic losses across their lifetime. These events not only affect individuals, but also their families, friends, co-workers and neighbors. It is important for those who have experienced such events to have the support of their friends, family, neighbors and others. It is also important that these supporters can understand their loved ones' reactions as well as their own, so they can help them through the difficult times that accompany and follow traumatic events, and also take care of themselves.

Natural responses to traumatic events

It is natural for most people who experience traumatic events to have a variety of reactions. Among many responses this includes intrusive re-experiencing of memories, nightmares or flashbacks; emotional numbing and avoidance of these memories; and hyperarousal and anxiety; and dissociation, or feeling of profound disconnection. These normal reactions can occur for a significant period of time and then begin to diminish. However, some may also experience significant distress and trauma reactions that don't readily seem to lessen with time.

Some may be very upset, angry or cry. Others may seem calm and composed or even numb, cold and detached. They may want to talk about their traumatic experience or may wish to remain quiet. Some may want physical contact while others may not. They may have any number of emotions including feelings of fear, anger, guilt, sadness and confusion.

In the immediate aftermath of traumatic events, it may be somewhat easier to see a person's reactions to trauma. As time goes by, while the survivor may still be quite affected, it may be difficult to observe reactions and also not as easy to provide support. Some individuals who have endured traumatic situations, despite how they are feeling, may believe it is necessary to assure others that they are fine. They may not want to "bother" others with their continuing problems or may want to get "back to normal." Some will use alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, overeating or overworking to numb their feelings. Survivors may experience nightmares, insomnia or excessive sleeping, changes in eating, physical aches and pains, difficulty concentrating, and loss of interest in activities and in others. They may have frequent, disturbing memories of traumatic events. It is common for people to experience mood swings during this time, and survivors may misdirect anger toward others or toward themselves. They may feel dependent upon or become overprotective of others. Problems with trust and intimacy can be common.

These reactions are typical for victims of traumatic life events. However, each individual may experience unique reactions or may alternate among these reactions.

Reactions of friends and family

When an individual learns that a friend or loved one has been traumatized, he may experience a range of emotions that are similar to the emotions of the loved one. Some of these include feelings of helplessness and confusion, anger, guilt, fear and depression. People often want to help, but may not know what to do, feel helpless and confused in the face of the pain, and also may get conflicting messages from the survivor. Learning about a loved one's trauma can remind an individual of her own traumas or may overwhelm her as she imagines it as if it had been her own experience.

Frustration and impatience may also exist. Taking care of oneself allows an individual to be available to a loved one. Being able to share these responses with other supporters can be helpful and less lonely.

What can friends do if someone they care for has been traumatized?

Offer support and listen. Offer support by listening to survivors and letting them talk about their experiences at their own pace. Be there for the survivor. Often, friends and family of the survivor will feel

a need to "problem solve" or offer advice. However, physical presence and support are usually more valuable. It is helpful not to comment on what the survivor should have done or to tell him what to do now.

Provide safety to communicate about the traumatic experiences. Friends can let the survivor know that they are there to listen and give support when the survivor is ready. Believe the survivor and validate her feelings and reactions. Rather than minimizing what the survivor has been through, be clear that the traumatic experience was not the survivor's fault. It is helpful not to question or judge what she did to survive. Friends can reassure the survivor of their love and concern. Friends can also communicate their support through their behavior. Small gestures of kindness can be very meaningful to survivors.

Provide another focus. Take a break from talking about the traumatic experiences. Follow the survivor's lead on when to talk about it and when to leave it behind. Allow time for mutual relaxation and pleasant and comforting activities.

Broaden the social support network. Friends can encourage survivors to get additional support. This support may come from other friends and family members, religious institutions, support groups, self-help resources, crisis counseling agencies or trained mental health professionals. Friends and family may also want support and may seek individual, group, couple or family counseling if they are troubled by their trauma reactions. These include their own thoughts or images of what happened to the survivor, anxiety, depression, fears, anger, addiction or relationship problems.

Help to return control. Friends need to respect the time and space it takes to heal. This requires patience. By respecting the survivors' wishes and allowing them to make decisions, friends help return control to them.

Education. Educate yourself about trauma and the healing process. Learn about common reactions to traumatic experiences and about resources by attending classes, viewing films, reading books, searching the Internet or talking to a counselor.

The appreciation of survivors: Survivors will appreciate the support of friends and family, although they may not always be able to express it. Such support may be especially helpful in letting survivors know they are not alone, and that eventually, when they can more closely relate to friends and loved ones, they will be there.

Finding support

A family doctor; clergy person; local mental health association; state psychiatric, psychological or social work association; or your employee assistance program may be helpful in providing a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience in treating people affected by traumatic stress and their loved ones.