



# After an incident

Trauma Risk Management  
(TRiM) by March on Stress

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People who experience traumatic events often experience a wide range of reactions. Quite what reaction an individual will have is not easy to predict. Some people may find that an incident has little or no effect upon them; others may experience very strong reactions. These reactions can affect people's ability to work effectively or impact substantially on their home and social life. The goal of this booklet is to outline some helpful ways to cope with trauma-related reactions and to outline the various possible sources of assistance available to you.

In addition to self-help strategies, the booklet provides details of the Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) Programme. TRiM is a peer support programme which is designed to assist people who have been exposed to a traumatic event to deal with it effectively. TRiM Practitioners are non-medical personnel who have undergone specific training to allow them to understand the effects that traumatic events have upon people. They are not counsellors or therapists, but colleagues who understand confidentiality and have good listening skills to allow them to offer practical advice and assistance.

One recurring theme, which you will see time and time again in this booklet, is that seeking help is not a sign of weakness. In fact, getting assistance that allows you to rapidly and effectively get back on track is a sign of real strength. The various concerns that people have about help seeking are often known as stigma. You should remember, however, that the thoughts and feelings that you may be experiencing are perfectly normal; it is the nature of the stressful incident that is abnormal. If you are reading this booklet in the aftermath of a traumatic event

and have been offered the help of a TRiM Practitioner, their contact details are either included on the final page of this booklet or will have been provided to you separately (e.g. via their business card). This booklet is also suitable for your friends and family as it might help them understand what you are going through and how to better support you.



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Traumatic incidents cause physical, emotional or psychological harm to those affected. They often involve actual, or threatened, death, serious injury or sexual assault. An event may be considered traumatic if it happens to someone directly, if they witness it, if someone who they are very closely attached to is affected by such an event or if, in the course of professional duties, someone is repeatedly exposed to traumatic material.

The range of possible responses to a traumatic event is vast. This handbook highlights the usual responses of individuals and may offer some help in relieving the anxiety such incidents cause, assist with recovery and provide some advice along with identifying further sources of help.

What determines the sort of emotional response that someone will have after a traumatic incident? The answer: is someone's core beliefs. Core beliefs are the guiding principles we have about the way the world does, and should, work. They often relate to how we think about ourselves and about other people. For instance, whilst we may acknowledge that it is possible that we could die within the next 24 hours (for example by being run over by a bus or involved in

a crash or an explosion) we do not ordinarily dwell on this topic much. If we were to really think in detail that our life might not last beyond tomorrow, we might decide to spend our last hours doing something other than reading this booklet for instance.

Core beliefs do not form overnight; they are the product of many years of experiences, what our parents taught or told us and what we read, see or hear about the way the world really is.

Traumatic incidents strongly challenge our core beliefs and the symptoms experienced after a

traumatic event result from us trying to understand how the event and our core beliefs can co-exist. For instance most people believe that it is safe to cross the road if you look left and right before you do so. However, if you have done so but as you step out in the road a car appears to come from nowhere and speeds towards you almost running you over, you may find that your beliefs about the safety of crossing roads are challenged. As a result you



might alter your behaviour (check more frequently before crossing, only use designated crossing points etc). Mostly, as time goes on we go back to our previous behaviour unless the challenge to our core beliefs is so strong that we just cannot make sense of what has happened. In such cases we are likely to experience other traumatic symptoms as described below.

It is important to remember that other factors in your life may contribute to your vulnerability to any incident, and its impact upon you. For instance physical health worries, relationship concerns or financial pressures can make you more likely to experience a persistent and unpleasant reaction to a traumatic incident.

## WHAT IS A POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENT (PTE)?

The term PTE is defined within the DSM V<sup>7</sup> (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) as an event which includes exposure to death; threatened death; actual or threatened serious injury or actual or threatened sexual violence. The exposure itself may occur directly,

through witnessing the PTE in person or indirectly learning of a close relative/friend's trauma (note the relationship with the traumatised person has to be a considerably close one and one that is important in the individual's life). The exposure can also occur as a result of repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties.

Repeated, often occupationally related, exposures are sometimes referred to as Type 2 traumas with Type 1 traumas being the singular 'major' events. Type 2 traumas can have an insidious effect with deterioration in mental health occurring over a period of time rather than 'all of a sudden'.

### Reactions to an incident are likely to be worse if:

- | There has been a death or serious injury.
- | There is a feeling of wanting to have done more.
- | There is little or no perceived support from colleagues, family or friends.
- | The incident follows closely on top of stress-creating events in your life.

**Possible trauma related reactions may include:**

- | Sadness for deaths, injuries or losses of every kind.
- | Guilt for not having done more or for having survived.
- | Anger at what has happened, at whoever caused it or let it happen; at the injustice of it all; at the lack of understanding of others; at the inefficiencies in the 'system' etc.
- | Shame for not having reacted as one would have wished or been seen as helpless, 'emotional', needing others or feeling overwhelmed by the event.
- | Fear of 'breaking down', 'losing control'; or of a similar event happening again;
- | Memories or feelings of loss or of concern for other people in your life; of past, similar events;
- | Intense disappointment which can alternate with hope.

People who have experienced traumatic events often find that their thoughts and emotions



appear to pendulum between positive and negative states. So someone who had just survived a car crash in which someone else died or was seriously injured might think "I am so lucky to be alive" [a pleasant thought] and then this might rather quickly alternate with "why did I survive when others did not" [a guilty thought]. In most cases the swinging of the emotional pendulum decreases with time unless of course someone develops a persistent mental health problem.

## PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS

Often people who have faced a traumatic incident will experience physical reactions either with or without the thoughts and feelings described above. Possible trauma related physical reactions include tiredness, sleeplessness, palpitations, nausea, excessive sweating, headaches, neck and back aches, muscular tension, tightness in the chest and throat, changes in eating habits and altered sexual interest. Psychologically, people who have been through a traumatic event often present with four sets of symptoms.

First, people suffer with what are called re-experiencing symptoms which include nightmares, unwanted and unpleasant memories of the event and, in more severe cases, people may experience what are called flashbacks which is where parts of the trauma are actually experienced again (such as actually seeing again the truck coming towards you or feeling again the crushing sensation of the car's airbag pushing on your chest). Secondly, people may experience avoidance symptoms where they don't want to talk about the event or want to be reminded of the event. Third are hyper arousal symptoms which include loss of concentration and/or motivation, poor memory, hyper vigilance (always on your guard) and being easily startled and lastly are changes in the way that people think and their emotions. This includes feeling emotionally numb so you cannot easily connect with those you care about, feeling shameful about your behaviour or response during the event or persistently feeling that something bad is just about to happen.

Some people who severely experience significant numbers of the four sets of symptoms above for more than a month after the traumatic event are likely to suffer with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) although it's worth noting that this disorder is not experienced by everyone

who experiences a traumatic event. On the contrary most people who suffer the above symptoms will experience a gradual reduction in the number and severity of symptoms in the weeks after the traumatic event. It's noteworthy that irritability and sleep disturbance are also not uncommon. Tired and irritable people do not often have a good sense of humour and being in such a state can put relationships with family and friends under considerable strain. However you feel, do try to keep in mind that those close to you may be suffering additional stress and can feel left out. Often they want to help but do not understand how best to support you.

So, if you find yourself withdrawing from those closest to you and are finding it difficult to express your feelings or rejecting help offered then:

**Stop for a moment and consider what you want to happen [probably to feel better] and what has helped before [probably talking to people you trust].**

Remember that:

- | The reactions you are experiencing are a result of what has happened to you. They are, at least initially, a natural process.
- | In almost all cases, if you can speak to someone you trust about your current thoughts and emotions, it will make things easier. You do not have to tell everyone everything, but telling no one anything is unlikely to help.
- | If someone you cared about was suffering, you would probably want to help them. So let people you trust who are offering to provide assistance do so.

Once again, accepting help should be seen as a sign of strength not weakness. If you can't open a jar you can struggle on and keep trying (and failing to open the jar) or you can let a more muscle-bound friend or indeed someone with a proper jar opener help. Not accepting help and therefore not getting the jar open is certainly not a 'strong' or 'clever' way of behaving.



## WHAT HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH ME?

People who undertake highly challenging work are more likely to come into direct contact with traumatic situations. Such individuals are likely to have the advantage of training, skills and experience which can help them remain strong in the face of stress. However, no matter how resilient someone is, traumatic incidents do happen, often with little or no warning, and the individual or colleagues can be hurt or killed. Minimising the risk of traumatic exposure is not the same as eliminating it which would be ideal but is often unrealistic.

The harsh facts are that traumatic incidents do occur; you may have experienced one or more yourself or know people who have. Most people who do experience a traumatic incident will have a temporary reaction as a result and will find that talking to people they trust really helps. However, some do not and can struggle on for months, or even years, not enjoying life as they used to, being troubled by thoughts and emotions which impair their quality of life and make them less effective at work and at home. Once again, the key message of this booklet is that where you might benefit from help, support or advice, you're a stronger person if you use the assistance available to you than if you struggle on and have a poorer quality of life than you might otherwise without it.



There are some useful strategies after you have been through a traumatic experience which can make things easier for you. Remember that some reactions may be delayed a little, so while you are still 'on task' or 'mission-focused' you may appear to be functioning well. It might not be until you finally reach a place of real safety that the true scale of the incident you have been involved with becomes clear to you. You may feel emotionally numb initially and for a while the event may seem unreal, almost dreamlike, and you may even wonder if it ever happened at all.

Remember however that:

- | Keeping yourself occupied and in a routine can help. Sticking to your hobby, fitness training, reasonable work etc can be reassuring. Most people generally do better if they can stick to a routine. However, using work or other activity to avoid having to deal with a traumatic event is not helpful and can delay your recovery.
- | Talking to trusted friends or colleagues, especially those who were also involved in, or aware of the incident, can be helpful. Such conversations can help you make sense of the incident. However, relying on overly anxious or overly curious friends or

colleagues may not help at all or can make things worse in some cases.

- | A controlled return to the scene of the event is one way of confronting the reality of it all and can sometimes assist you in making sense of what happened. Expect to feel some anxiety when you do this; often staying with the anxiety rather than 'avoiding it' allows it to settle once and for all.
- | Having dreams about the event, possibly repeatedly at first, is not uncommon. Such dreams may be nature's way of helping you to make sense of the information you have about the event.
- | Having the support of others can be invaluable. Try not to say 'no' if genuine support is offered. Help from others who have had a similar experience may be especially helpful. Turning down such offers by isolating yourself is unlikely to be helpful especially if you are usually a social person.
- | There are times, however, when you may need to be alone with your thoughts and feelings. Again, this is natural but remember that talking things through, at a pace you are comfortable with, with people you trust is also helpful.

Don't expect your symptoms to resolve immediately, like all wounds, healing can take a little while. In the case of traumatic events this is usually a matter of weeks.

## TRAUMA RISK MANAGEMENT (TRiM)

If the incident involves death or serious injury you should be offered support from a Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) Practitioner. They are trained to assist you and may possibly ask to have a detailed chat/interview with you. TRiM practitioners who have a detailed chat with you should, as a minimum, check in with you again a month or so later to see how things are. If you are not offered support from a TRiM Practitioner/Manager but think you need it or are aware of someone who you think may need it then please approach a TRiM Practitioner/Manager as soon as possible. They will be able to speak with you in confidence.

### Focus of the TRiM interview

This is an opportunity to allow a TRiM Practitioner to find out how you are coping with the



event. The Practitioner's aim is to help you get any assistance that they or you think might be of use to you. The interview is also an opportunity to provide you with some information about the natural reactions to traumatic situations and to discuss coping strategies. Finally, where a TRiM interview is conducted as a group, the meeting can assist in pooling your experiences and resources.

### Confidentiality

Everything that is said within a TRiM interview is completely confidential as would be talking to your doctor. However, if the Practitioner becomes seriously concerned about issues that affect your personal safety, or the safety of your colleagues, they may have to talk to someone else about such concerns although they will always discuss the issue with you first. Additionally, if there are issues you would like the Practitioner to take to management then, in most cases, they can do should you so wish.

- | Don't avoid talking about your experience(s).
- | Don't expect the memories to go away immediately, they may be with you for quite some time.
- | Don't be too hard on yourself; give yourself some 'slack' while you adjust to what has happened. Try to think of what you would say to a friend or colleague in your situation.
- | Don't make any long lasting or major decisions soon after experiencing a traumatic incident if you can possibly avoid doing so.
- | Do accept opportunities to share your experience with others that you trust. They may have something to offer.
- | Do also make time to review the experience within yourself, but try to avoid isolating yourself.
- | Do take the time to be with your family and friends.
- | Do try to keep to your routines as much as possible.
- | Do drive with greater care; your concentration may be impaired.
- | Do be more careful - accidents are more likely to happen at this time.

## WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL HELP

- | If you are finding it difficult to handle intense thoughts, feelings, or physical reactions which came on after the event.
- | If you continue to feel numb and detached from your friends, family, work etc. for more than a month.
- | If you have to keep highly active in order to avoid thinking about the incident.
- | If you continue to have nightmares, or are sleeping badly.
- | If you would like to speak to someone but have no one that you trust who you can discuss your situation with.
- | If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.
- | If people you trust advise you to seek help.
- | If you have become accident prone, or your work performance is suffering.
- | If you are smoking or drinking to excess since the event.
- | If you are suffering from depression or exhaustion.

If you cannot control your memories of the event and they are affecting your sense of personal wellbeing.

Remember you are basically the same person that you were before the event and you should expect to return to being that person again albeit acknowledging that in some cases your world may have significantly altered to some degree (e.g. physical injuries, loss of a close friend or colleague). Reactions which are severe and/or persistent (weeks and weeks on end) are indicators that you should seek professional advice.



## NEGATIVE COPING ACTIONS

These are actions which appear to help in the short term (e.g. consuming excessive alcohol can aid sleep or, more correctly, unconsciousness) and may appear to reduce distress immediately.

However, they short-circuit more permanent beneficial changes and increase the chance that you will experience longer term problems. Actions that may immediately seem effective that cause later problems can be addictive, like smoking or alcohol abuse. These habits can become difficult to change. Negative coping methods can include isolation, use of alcohol, 'workaholism', violent behaviour, intimidation of others, altered eating pattern and different types of self-destructive behaviour. Where negative coping actions are persistent, you should seek help. Doing so is a sign of strength.

### Use of alcohol and drugs

These may appear to help 'wash away' memories, increase social confidence or induce sleep. But they will cause more problems as being dependent on alcohol will harm your judgement and decrease your mental abilities. Furthermore, over-indulgence in alcohol/drug taking will, most likely, ruin relationships with spouses, partners, families, friends and colleagues. There will also be a detrimental impact on your health and work. Alcohol/drug misuse can place a person at risk of self-harm or suicide and increase the likelihood of accidents. In your own experience of life, think

how many people you know who use alcohol/drugs to deal with life's stresses are really content? The answer will be a round figure: zero.

### Social isolation

By reducing contact with the outside world you may avoid many situations that cause you to feel afraid, irritable or angry. However, isolation will also cause major problems. It will result in loss of social support, friendship and intimacy. It may breed further depression and fear. Less participation in positive activities leads to less opportunity for positive emotions and achievements.



### Anger

Like isolation, anger appears to get rid of many upsetting situations by keeping people away. But

it also keeps away positive connections and help and gradually drives away the important people in a person's life. It may also lead to job problems, marital or relationship problems and a loss of friendships or criminally violent behaviour.

### Continuous avoidance

Avoidance of thinking about the unpleasant event or about the fact that you may need some additional help keeps away distress, but prevents progress in coping with trauma and its consequences. Avoidance can prevent people from seeking help with their problems.

## POSITIVE COPING ACTIONS

Individuals who have experienced unpleasant events need to take active steps to deal with their problems. Often these steps involve making a series of thoughtful changes in lifestyle to reduce symptoms and improve the quality of life. Common lifestyle changes you may consider include:

### **Increasing contact with people that matter**

The best way of dealing with this is to seek understanding and camaraderie and support of other people who have been in similar situations to the ones you have or indeed were involved in the incident with you. By making contact with others who have been through similar things, it is often possible to make sense of what happened to you. Being less isolated will also allow opportunities for positive social interaction which can improve your sense of wellbeing.

### **Re-invest in personal relationships**

Take action to have more contact with family and friends and work at improving those relationships. Try to reconnect with people who make you feel good. Remember you don't have to tell people everything that has happened to you in one go. Take things at your own pace and you will often find that the majority of friends and families would rather be included than excluded from your pain. Let them listen to you and help where they can.

### **Don't drink excessive amounts of alcohol or use drugs**

Many people who have experienced unpleasant events use alcohol or even drugs to help cope with their symptoms. However, as stated above, this is not a helpful coping mechanism. So make an active decision not to use alcohol to excess or drugs at all. These lifestyle decisions are required if you are to benefit from treatment and stay on the path to recovery.

### **Start an exercise programme**

Exercise, even in moderation, has a number of possible benefits for those suffering from trauma symptoms; walking, jogging, swimming, weight lifting and other forms of exercise reduce physical tension. Exercise also helps distract the individual from painful memories or worries and thus gives them a break from difficult emotions. Importantly, exercise can improve self-esteem and create a feeling of personal control.

### **Consider volunteering or assisting in the community**

Offering your services to others can help you improve your esteem and wellbeing. You don't

have to do much but each 'good' thing you do provides you with an opportunity to interact with others and may help, perhaps just temporarily, distract you from your symptoms.

## LIFESTYLE BALANCE

Keeping yourself on a healthy track may assist you in regaining your sense of personal balance in the aftermath of being exposed to a traumatic event. Consider the following:

### Physical self-care

- | Eat regularly e.g. breakfast, lunch, dinner and try to do so healthily.
- | Exercise regularly within your own fitness limits.
- | Get enough sleep.



- | Take leave.
- | If possible, try to make time to be away from phones/email.
- | Seek help if feeling physically unwell.

### Psychological self-care

- | Make some time for self-reflection.
- | Read literature that is unrelated to work.
- | Do something at which you are not an expert or in charge.
- | Attempt to decrease stress in your life.
- | Notice your inner experiences and be curious about them.
- | Practice receiving help from others (help, advice, friendship).

### Emotional self-care

- | Spend time with others whose company you enjoy.
- | Stay in contact with important people in your life.

- | Find a way to increase your sense of self-esteem.
- | Re-read favourite books and find things to make you laugh.
- | Identify and seek out healthy, comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places.
- | Relax when you can.

### **Use relaxation techniques**

Sometimes people, who are highly frustrated or angry, find that taking some time out by concentrating on their breathing is helpful. Should you feel tension building inside you, whether it is in your body or in your head, try taking time to move away physically (and in your thoughts) from the situation that is irritating you. Concentrate on taking deep breaths and notice the air moving in and out of your body. Concentrate on just the movement of air and try to let other thoughts drift gently out of your mind. As you do this, hopefully you will feel the tension drift away from you and you should regain a sense of calm. Don't just stay in the situation which is irritating you and risk getting physically angry or making your distress worse. By taking an active role in controlling your emotions, through the use of deep breathing techniques or otherwise,

you will begin to be able to deal with your problems a little better. Some people also find that concentrating on your immediate surroundings can help distract angry or irritable thoughts; for instance try to notice how your clothing feels on your skin or look at the details within your immediate surroundings (the leaves on the trees, the texture of the walls). As you are concentrating on the details around you, you should notice that you are dwelling less on unpleasant and distressing thoughts and feelings.

### **Journal your thoughts**

It may be useful to write down your thoughts regarding the traumatic event - in a notebook or you can use your smartphone, tablet or any other suitable method. Being able to journal your reactions and emotions and, in time, read and reflect on them can be really helpful.



In the aftermath of an incident or upon returning from a stressful time at work, you may become aware that the character, or personality, of a person close to you has changed. In most cases, these changes are temporary and, with your help and support they will get back to their normal persona. To be helpful consider the following:

- | Listen carefully; do not interrupt them, or complete their sentences, if they are finding telling their story hard going.
- | Spend time with the traumatised person doing anything that might be pleasurable.
- | Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help, reassure them. Try not to judge what they tell you.
- | Help them with everyday routine tasks without being controlling or interfering.
- | Attend social functions with your spouse/partner. Supporting your partner in this way can help but be aware that they may feel anxious when attending large social functions even if they did not before.
- | Allow them some private time.
- | Do not take their anger or other feelings personally; however do suggest they take

some time to calm themselves if they need to and do point out if they are being unreasonable. Being distressed is an explanation for out of character behaviour but not an excuse for it.

- | Do not tell them that they are “lucky it was not worse” or “you will get over it” or to “pull yourself together”; these statements do not console traumatised people. Instead tell them that you recognise something traumatic has occurred and that you want to understand and assist them.



## AND FINALLY...

Try your best not to give yourself a hard time over events that have already happened. Instead, try to re-orientate your thinking about the event in a more helpful way. Take stock of the event in its real place within your life (like a small pebble on a big beach). When recounting or mulling over stressful incidents, it is unhelpful to review or self-critique your actions in an overly negative light. Instead, try and think about the event in a realistic way; by all means learn lessons but try not to magnify the significance of incidents which may have been, wholly or in part, beyond your control.

Thinking realistically takes some effort (you may not be used to doing this, but like physical exercise it gets easier with practice) but remember remaining strong in stress brings its own very positive rewards.

Use the help that is offered to you – doing so is a sign of strength.



## CONTACT DETAILS

[gram.trim@nhs.scot](mailto:gram.trim@nhs.scot)

TRiM Practitioner name: .....

Contact telephone: .....E-mail:.....

### Additional Support Contact Details

TRiM Manager name: .....

TRiM Manager tel:.....E-mail: .....

Within your organisation the TRiM Team Manager is the best point of contact for enquires about your TRiM process and policy.

Occupational Health tel: .....E-mail: .....

Human Resources tel:.....E-mail: .....

Other sources of possible support can include: your line manager; Occupational Health; your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP); your General Practitioner (GP); your union.



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