

COPING WITH THE FLU OUTBREAK

RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA

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NHS

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INTRODUCTION

This leaflet is one of a series about pandemic flu and mental health. The leaflets contain information about how the flu outbreak might affect your mental health, how to look after yourself, what to do if a problem persists, and where to find further information.

Pandemic flu is a type of influenza that occurs every few decades and which spreads rapidly to affect most countries and regions around the world. Its key features are:

- It affects the whole world, not just one area.
- It can occur at any time rather than being concentrated in winter time.
- It may affect two or three times as many people as ordinary flu – perhaps around one quarter of the population.
- It is likely to be more severe, and hence causes more serious illnesses and deaths.
- It may affect any age group rather than being a threat mainly to the very old and the very young.

Whilst all of us are familiar with a degree of adversity in life, the flu outbreak and its consequences is a particularly difficult and stressful experience for everyone, and some people may have to cope with being unwell, looking after family members or dealing with loss and bereavement. Coming to terms with the consequences that the flu has had for you and those close to you can take some time.

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People who have had to deal with very distressing sights or events during the pandemic flu may need to take extra time and care to recover. This leaflet focuses on coping with traumatic events; others cover bereavement, fatigue and coping with worry and uncertainty.

What is trauma?

Traumatic experiences, such as being involved in or witnessing assaults, serious accidents, fires, acts of terrorism and natural disasters, can happen to anyone. Following such immensely upsetting events, many people understandably feel distressed, have bad dreams and cannot get memories of the trauma out of their mind. This can last a few days or weeks. Allowing enough time to heal physically and mentally is important to recovery, as is support from friends and family. Some people find it helpful to talk about what has happened to them; others prefer not to discuss it. Either strategy is fine, provided that you feel able to choose what you do.

Early reactions following trauma

Within the first few weeks it is not at all unusual to experience one or more of the following:

- Upsetting memories such as images or thoughts about the trauma
- Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)

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- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when reminded about the trauma (by something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes)
- Feeling frightened
- Feeling tearful
- Loss of interest
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger, or upset

Common physical reactions to trauma reminders

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- Getting very startled by loud noises or something or someone coming up on you from behind when you don't expect it
- Feeling shaky and sweaty
- Having your heart pound or having trouble breathing

Because trauma survivors have these upsetting feelings when they feel stress or are reminded of their trauma, they often act as if they are in danger again. They might get overly concerned about staying safe in situations that are

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not truly dangerous. For example, a person living in a safe neighbourhood might still feel that an alarm system, double locks on the door and a guard dog are all necessary to keep safe.

Common emotional reactions

Most people will experience strong feelings following a traumatic event including:

- **Fear and anxiety** in case a similar event happens again, or feeling frightened of losing control over physical feelings or emotions.
- **Self blame or guilt** for actions taken or not taken at the time of the traumatic event.
- **Anger** about what has happened and why, actions taken (or not taken) by others and at the senselessness and injustice of the event.
- **Shame** caused by a sense that they did not react in the way they would have wanted to, or because they feel degraded by the event.

These reactions are likely to decrease over the first few weeks for most people. Whilst healing takes place it is important that survivors look after themselves physically and emotionally.

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How can you make yourself feel better?

Talk to others, tell others how you are feeling

Help yourself through activity

You may find yourself becoming less active, or avoid certain activities possibly because you feel tired and do not have the energy and motivation to do things you used to do. If you can, try to increase positive, engaging activities. By doing things you enjoy or find satisfying you will improve your mood and have less time to brood. The day does not have to be crammed with distracting activities, but everyone needs some sense of satisfaction and achievement, however small.

Do something relaxing. This can be anything as long as it helps to unwind, for example, going for long walks, or listening to music.

Set yourself realistic goals. If people try to behave as they did before the traumatic event, they might begin to feel overwhelmed. Allowing a bit of space to come to terms with the traumatic event is important.

How interpretations of events affect emotions

How we think about things is crucial to how we feel about them. If we notice a friend walking past without greeting or recognition, we might conclude that we have been

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snubbed and consequently feel hurt or offended. If we saw the very same event as evidence of our friend's frequent absentmindedness, we might feel amused. Similarly, the interpretations we make during and after a traumatic event are a very important part of how we cope with and feel about what has happened. People who have survived a traumatic event can take excessive responsibility for what happened and might blame themselves for things outside of their control.

One way to do this is to test the validity of your negative thoughts by examining all the evidence that supports or does not support each of your thoughts. Then taking into account this evidence will allow you to develop a more balanced alternative. Below are some specific questions that might help you to arrive at a more balanced view:

- What other explanations might there be?
- How much power did I have to influence what happened?
- What understandable factors might have made me act the way I did?
- How could I have known what would happen?
- How might a friend see things?
- How much time did I have for thinking through my reactions at the time of the trauma?
- If this was another person, what would I expect of them?
- How did my emotional state at the time influence my feelings and behaviour?

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Look after yourself

Emotional as well as physical healing is also helped by maintaining a reasonable diet, not drinking too much alcohol and by getting a little exercise if at all possible. In the short-term not following a reasonable diet or drinking too much may give you some relief, but in the long-term this can lead to other health and psychological difficulties.

When should you seek professional help?

If your memories of the events remain very vivid and distressing for more than a month after the traumatic events, see your GP.

KEY POINTS

- People who experience a traumatic event in their lives often experience distressing symptoms. For many these will gradually disappear after a few weeks.
- Talk to someone you trust about how you are feeling, and remember to look after yourself.
- Consider the sense you are making of your experiences.
- Seek help if your symptoms are not improving after a month.

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Further reading

- Overcoming Traumatic Stress by Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore (1999), publisher: Constable & Robinson
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The invisible injury by David Kinchin (2001), publisher: Success Unlimited
- Recovering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (2007) by Martina Mueller, available from www.octc.co.uk
- Manage your Mind (2007) by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope, published by Oxford University Press.

Internet & other sources of information

About recovery from trauma:

- www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/information/ - website run by the National Centre for PTSD in the USA. It contains a wealth of information about trauma.
- www.mind.org.uk – provides information on all aspects of mental health.
- www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk – a 24-hour advice service run by the NHS.

About the flu:

- Go to www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu and/or www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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About the flu continues:

- Call NHS Direct on 0845 4647
- Pick up leaflets from doctor's surgeries and other places

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Other leaflets in this series:

- Bereavement (PB 246.09)
- Depression (PB 247.09)
- Fatigue (PB 248.09)
- Worry and Uncertainty (PB 250.09)

This and the other leaflets in this series can be found on the Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust's website:
www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk

If you need the information in another language or format, please contact us:

Nëse ky informacion ju nevojitet në një gjuhë apo format tjetër, ju lutem na kontaktoni:

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જો તમને આ માહિતી બીજી ભાષામાં અથવા બીજા આકારમાં જોઈએ, તો કૃપા કરીને અમને પૂછો :

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ਜੇਕਰ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੀ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਜਾਂ ਸ਼ਕਲ ਵਿੱਚ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੋਵੇ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰ ਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਪੁੱਛੋ:

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی دوسری زبان میں یا کسی دوسرے طریقے سے درکار ہوں تو براہ کرم مہربانی ہم سے پوچھیں:

Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust,
Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
Freephone: 0800 052 6088
www.oxfordshirepct.nhs.uk