



## **If you have been involved in a serious incident**

**Many people do not really know how to react when someone has experienced a serious incident. If you know what reactions can normally be expected, it is often easier to accept both your own reactions and those of people close to you. People can then understand that these reactions are natural, given the intense pressures experienced.**

**For the same reason, it may be beneficial if your close family, circle of friends and people at work are aware of these reactions.**

*Although some people may react very strongly, this does not apply to everyone.*

### **Immediate reaction – unreality**

Immediately after an incident, many people experience a feeling of unreality. They know the incident has occurred, yet it seems incomprehensible. Many people describe feeling empty inside and emotionally “numb”. It may sometimes be difficult to remember important parts of what happened. Over time, the whole sequence of events becomes increasingly clear, and this is usually when the strongest reactions occur.

### **Intrusive mental images**

It is normal to keep thinking about what happened, whether you want to or not. Memories, for example visual images, may seem so real that you feel as if you are reliving the incident. These unpleasant and intrusive memory experiences may occur when you are awake as well as in dreams.

### **Internal anxiety and sense of vulnerability**

Strong internal anxiety and a sense of vulnerability are common, and for a time these feelings may become stronger and more painful when you go through the event in your mind. It may often be difficult not to think about your unpleasant experiences.

The internal anxiety may mean you become restless, and find it difficult to sit still and concentrate on other things. Some people become more impatient and easily irritated than usual. Others find it hard to do anything at all.

### **Various physical reactions**

Various physical reactions are also common and natural. They include trembling, sweating, headache, palpitations, dizziness and feeling faint, lack of appetite, lassitude or muscle tension and pain, mainly in the chest, shoulders and neck.



## A sense of disaster

For many people, involvement in a serious incident may destroy their everyday sense of security. Some people feel increasingly on the alert, so the slightest sound makes them jump. The anxiety and apprehension you feel after the incident may also make you afraid that something else disastrous or unpleasant will happen, or that someone in your family will become ill or die. In children, this may be apparent as clinginess and an increased need for closeness.

## Sleep problems and nightmares

It may be difficult to sleep. Unpleasant memories may emerge in your thoughts as you fall asleep. Your sleep becomes restless, and you may wake up frequently and early. Some people relive the events as nightmares. Nightmares may also involve threatening situations other than the one actually experienced.

Many people find they become less plagued by nightmares and intrusive mental images if they take the opportunity to talk to someone about what happened. Sleep also tends to become less troublesome once you have a better grasp of what you have been involved in.

Poor sleep for several nights in a row may make you feel worn out and irritable. In these circumstances, it may be useful to take something for a short time to help you sleep. However, you should use sleep medication, and alcohol, with care.

## Survival anxiety and feelings of guilt

Some people may feel uncomfortable that they survived, perhaps uninjured, while relatives, workmates and other people were killed or injured in the incident. This may lead to a feeling of guilt and not allowing yourself to have a sense of relief that you survived and were not injured.

As someone directly affected by or a witness to a serious incident, your feelings of guilt may also be connected to thinking subsequently about what might have happened if you had intervened or acted differently in some way.

Anger and irritability are common reactions. The anger may also be directed unintentionally towards people close to you, which reinforces the feelings of guilt.

## Relationships with other people are affected

Some people may feel the need to withdraw and be alone. For others, solitude may be difficult because they are totally at the mercy of their own thoughts and feelings.

## Questioning the meaning of life

When you have been involved in a tragic and serious incident, it is very common to start thinking about the purpose and meaning of life. You may then reassess much of what previously seemed obvious.



## **SOME SIMPLE ADVICE**

### **Talk to other people**

Talk to people close to you. And to others if possible, for example people who were also at the incident. Even if it is difficult to talk about, and you think it will bring back the emotions you felt at the time, it is often beneficial and sometimes necessary to share your experiences, thoughts and emotions with other people. You will get a better grasp of what happened by discussing and going through the events. You will also suffer less from nightmares and intrusive mental images.

For some people it may be equally valuable to take the time, over a period of a few days, to write down your memories and thoughts about what happened.

### **Visit the place where the incident occurred**

After a serious incident, some people feel anxious about going back to the scene of the incident or other special places. In this case, it may be helpful to go back as soon as possible to the place you feel anxious about, ideally accompanied by someone you feel safe with.

### **Remember the children**

Remember that children and young people do not have the same ability as adults to understand or interpret their experiences of a serious incident. To help them deal with their experiences, and to understand that the danger to themselves and to their immediate family is over, adults should:

- be available to answer questions and deal with concerns
- explain what is happening and has happened
- quickly resume everyday routines and normal activities
- do fun things together.

### **It is good to stay active and go to work**

Physical activity is a good way to reduce internal tension. For most people, getting back to work as quickly as possible is a real benefit. It is often a good way of resuming everyday life.

**However, demand less of yourself and reduce your workload for a while.**

### **It is normal to react**

It is normal for someone who has experienced a serious incident to react in the way described here. The reaction usually subsides gradually as you get the opportunity to think through, understand and process what you have experienced. The memories will not surface as frequently, and the emotions they awaken will be less painful and less overwhelming than they are to begin with.



## Let other people read this information sheet

Relatives or other people who were not present at the incident may be worried by the sometimes strong reactions that may arise afterwards. It may therefore help them, and indirectly you too, if you let them read this information sheet.

## Seek help early

For various reasons, reactions may be so strong, painful and prolonged that you need help. Do not wait too long to contact someone you think may help you. You could contact your family doctor, health centre or occupational health service, for example.



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