

## This is a short guide to:

- common reactions to traumatic events
- what you can do to help yourself
- what staff counselling can offer

As hospital staff, we may often come into contact with traumatic events. However, when a major incident has occurred even the most experienced can sometimes be left feeling overwhelmed.

The experience of others who have been involved in Major Incident (MAJAX) operations has taught us a lot about the most common reactions. We have described them here.

Not all of this may apply to you. If it does, remember that it does not mean that you are not managing appropriately. For the most part it is actually part of a natural process of recovery after an extraordinary event. It might also be, however, that talking to someone might really help this process.

## How might a MAJAX affect you physically?

- ❖ Tiredness
- ❖ Muscle tension
- ❖ Palpitations

Traumatic events place the body under intense stress and this does not necessarily stop when it is over. You may continue to be tense for some

time, leading to feelings of tiredness and perhaps, exhaustion.

## What you may feel after a MAJAX

- ❖ Sadness or tearfulness
- ❖ Helplessness or feeling overwhelmed
- ❖ Flashbacks
- ❖ Nightmares
- ❖ Numbness or shock
- ❖ Poor concentration
- ❖ Nervousness
- ❖ Anger
- ❖ Guilt

If the MAJAX has had a big effect on you, you may find yourself getting upset or remembering or re-living parts of it long after it is over. This can be very distressing and confusing. You may even be feeling quite stunned, and notice feeling quite distant from people close to you. Sometimes this can give you time to gather your thoughts; but sometimes it can leave you feeling less able to cope.

Surprisingly, you may feel full of energy, making it difficult to rest when you come off duty. Intense feelings of anger can be quite common, too. This may be out of character for you.

All of these feelings are part of normal reactions.

## How you can help yourself

- ❖ Above all else, over the first few weeks be led by what feels right. Many people find talking over what has happened to be really helpful, but others prefer to deal with things alone, at least at first. What we do know is that encouraging people to talk before they are ready is rarely helpful.
- ❖ If it feels like talking things over would be helpful, or if the feelings listed in this leaflet have not got better on their own after a month, **don't hesitate to contact staff counselling.**
- ❖ Don't forget that many colleagues are likely to have similar feelings and letting your feelings show is not a sign of weakness.
- ❖ Try to keep to your normal routine as much as possible. Many people have an understandable desire to avoid reminders of unpleasant memories after a major incident, but avoiding things tends to make it worse.
- ❖ Remember, too, that following severe stress people are likely to be a little more distracted, so be extra careful for a while.

The reactions we've described here usually fade over time a month or so after an incident. Sometimes, though, they can get stuck and it can be helpful to talk to someone trained to help in such situations, such as a staff counselor, or sometimes a Clinical Psychologist.

## **If you weren't involved**

Sometimes people who were not actually involved in an incident may still be affected by it. This may be staff who were on leave or on-call but not called in and feel guilty that they weren't able to help, or staff working in other parts of the trust who had friends or relatives involved. You may feel quite distant from those involved in the incident, and may also be distressed by what you have heard.

## **How the staff counsellors can help**

If you want to know more about these services, have a query about how a traumatic event can affect staff or would like to talk to a staff counsellor, you can contact us on:

**(20) 65515**

Or write to us at:

**Department of Clinical & Health  
Psychology  
Fielding House  
St. James's University Hospital  
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## **Taking Care of Yourself**

### **After a MAJAX**

*A guide for Trust staff*