

Traumatic experiences information leaflet

What is a traumatic experience?

Extraordinarily stressful and threatening events in life that cause great fear, helplessness and inability to cope. Such experiences of powerlessness can trigger strong feelings and responses, which may be temporary or longer lasting. A traumatic event can leave behind psychological damage and physical injury. Physical injuries can often be seen easily and the need for treatment is obvious. In contrast, psychological wounds are not visible and therefore frequently go untreated.

What happens inside the body?

Our brain processes traumatic experiences differently to everyday events or occurrences. Normally, events are categorised as important or unimportant, and stored in our memory or forgotten accordingly. Traumatic experiences, on the other hand, are fragmented and the event becomes difficult to coherently perceive or remember at first.

Frequently, individual scraps of memory manifest themselves. However, memories of an event can only be stored and processed in our brain when everything that belongs together is together, like a completed jigsaw puzzle, for instance. If the individual pieces of the puzzle fly around here and there though, storage is impossible.

In an extreme situation, our primal instincts are automatically activated in our brain. This releases high doses of adrenaline. The body undergoes a "fight, flight or freeze" response. Until our system has understood that the danger has passed, this energy remains in our body and can cause various symptoms to develop. The nervous system is overloaded if the pent-up energy that the traumatic event has caused to accumulate cannot be discharged.

How does a trauma manifest itself?

Traumatic experiences can cause those affected to suffer greatly. It is important to know that the sometimes severe symptoms are a normal reaction to an extreme "abnormal" stress situation. Trauma symptoms are the body's attempt to heal itself.

The trauma process goes through three phases:

1. **Shock phase**
(up to 1 week after the event)
2. **Impact phase**
(follows the shock phase and can last 2 weeks)
3. **Recovery phase**
(2–4 weeks after the event)

Everyone reacts differently to a traumatic event. Some reactions are the same for many people:

- Tension, trembling, headaches, exhaustion, cardiovascular disturbances, perspiration, nausea, lump in throat
- Concentration difficulties, empty-headedness, intrusive memories, heightened alertness, rumination, nightmares
- Fear, helplessness, grief, emotional outbursts, guilty feelings, shame, anger, irritation, disappointment
- Lack of interest in what was previously important, evasive behaviour, heightened irritability, loss of appetite, ravenous hunger, restlessness, increased consumption of alcohol and other addictive substances, social withdrawal

Many of those affected have a capacity for self-healing that leads to stabilisation and a decline in symptoms after 2 - 4 weeks.

When do you start to need support?

If the symptoms last longer than 4 - 6 weeks, if they continue to intensify and if your life is still impaired, it is advisable to seek professional support:

- If you suffer from constant sleep disruption and nightmares.
- If you have constant memories of the event and cannot suppress them.
- If you avoid situations and places that remind you of the event.
- If your work performance decreases.
- If your relationships

It is important to get help and not to wait too long, so that secondary disorders can be prevented.

What can you do yourself?

- Talk to confidants about your experiences for as long as it does you good. Also have the courage to say no if you are not in the mood to talk, or if you feel worse afterwards than before.
- Take time for rest and recovery.
- Try to accept that, for the time being, you might not function as you are used to, and that you are more thin-skinned and vulnerable.
- Eat as healthily as possible, avoiding alcohol and other addictive substances.
- Get regular exercise. Take walks, ideally in nature.
- Occupy yourself with things that did you good before the event.
- Take time for your grief and for processing it. Do not put yourself under pressure to function "normally" as quickly as possible.
- Accept offers of help from those around you.
- Try to return to your usual everyday life as soon as possible. If necessary, structure your daily routine consciously.
- Resume usual everyday activities and hobbies, even if you are no longer as interested in them as before the event.

How can we support you?

We would be happy to discuss whether we consider trauma therapy a suitable form of support for you. If so, and if you wish, we can refer you to mental health professionals or complementary therapy specialists with specific training in trauma.

If a crime has been committed as per the Victim Support Act and psychological impairment is related to the incident, it is also possible for us to cover the costs of psychotherapy.

Depending on how you are insured, we can pay for your first ten therapy sessions, at our rate of CHF 150 per session, in the context of immediate assistance.

If more than ten therapy sessions are required, you can request further cost coverage via cantonal Victim Support.

<https://www.gsi.be.ch/de/start/dienstleistungen/formulare-gesuche-bewilligungen-organisationsstruktur/ais-formulare-gesuche-bewilligungen/opferhilfe.html>

We recommend submitting your request early, as it will take time to process. We will gladly help you with this.

