

Getting on with Life after a Trauma

A Leaflet for People Coping with Limb Reconstruction after an Accident



Feeling upset, anxious and not your usual self after a serious accident is normal. Being involved in a traumatic event like an accident is very distressing, particularly if you were seriously injured. It is common to be affected in the days and weeks afterwards. These feelings usually go away over time, but if they don't you may be experiencing a post-traumatic stress reaction (sometimes called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD).

If you think you are experiencing this, try not to worry. Help is at hand. This booklet contains lots of information and advice. You might find it helpful to read it in small chunks, or with a family member or friend. You can also talk to your healthcare professional about getting further support if you need it.

Is this Booklet for Me?



- ✓ Did you injure your limb in an accident more than six weeks ago and need limb reconstruction treatment?
- ✓ Have you been feeling anxious, 'on guard', low in mood or numb?
- ✓ Have you been experiencing nightmares or flashbacks about the accident?
- ✓ Have you been avoiding things that remind you of what happened?

If you said yes to these questions you may be experiencing a post-traumatic stress reaction and this booklet is for you. With the support of friends, family and healthcare professionals, and with the ideas in this booklet, it is possible to overcome post-traumatic stress.

What is a Traumatic Event?



A traumatic event is anything that happens that is 'out of the ordinary' and is extremely distressing and upsetting for the person experiencing or witnessing it. A range of events can have this effect including road traffic accidents, fires, attacks, burglaries and serious unexpected illness or injury.

Three Key Signs and Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress

1. Re-experiencing the trauma in your mind
 - Having distressing pictures or images of the trauma coming into your mind (e.g. 'flashbacks', nightmares and unwanted thoughts)
 - Feeling that the trauma is happening again, as if you were reliving it
 2. Avoidance and numbing
 - Avoiding people, places and things that remind you of the trauma, e.g. the first person on the scene, the place it happened, conversations about the trauma
 - Being unable to remember things about the trauma
 - Feeling 'cut off' or detached from your usual feelings. Feeling numb.
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3. Feeling tense and irritable
 - Feeling 'on edge', 'on guard' or on the lookout for danger
 - Feeling angry, irritable and snappy

What causes post-traumatic stress?

It is unclear why some people do and some people do not experience post-traumatic stress. Some of the things that make it more likely to happen are if the event was sudden and unexpected, went on for a long time or caused serious limb injury or loss of a limb.

There are other factors, like your beliefs and behaviours, as well as how your memory and alarm systems in the body work that may have a role in the development of post-traumatic stress.

Beliefs and behaviour

Your beliefs about yourself, the world and the future may have changed following the trauma. You might believe that the world is no longer a safe place, that you are a vulnerable person or that you are living on 'borrowed time'.



The things you do to cope, like avoiding things that make you feel bad or using alcohol to block things out, sometimes help in the short-term. However, these strategies are often unhelpful in the long-term and do not help the symptoms of post-traumatic stress to reduce.

The way your memory works

The way your memories of the trauma were stored away at the time might have a role in post-traumatic stress. Normally, memories are filed away neatly in the brain so we can find them when we want them.



However, when you experience a trauma, this filing process can be messy and incomplete because of the extreme stress you were under at the time. This haphazard filing means that thoughts, images and memories can burst out in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. This is sometimes called re-experiencing

Your Body's Alarm System ('Fight or Flight')

Re-experiencing is very distressing because it sometimes feels as if the trauma were happening all over again. This is frightening and triggers the body's 'fight or flight' response.

The 'fight or flight' response is an alarm system that developed thousands of years ago to keep us safe from danger, like predators, by getting your body ready for a fight or for running away when we feel threatened (e.g. by making your heart beat faster and your muscles tense up).

Unfortunately, this response does not really help us deal with distressing images or memories of things in the past. Instead, it can make you feel constantly on the lookout, stressed, exhausted and eventually low in mood.



"Why do I feel this way? Is it normal?"

Post-traumatic stress can affect your thoughts and feelings as well as what you do and how your body feels. All of these are normal and understandable. They are not permanent and can change for the better with time.

How feelings are affected

- Anxious, nervous, frightened, easily startled, panicky
- Uptight, on edge, on the lookout, on guard
- Irritable and angry
- Unreal, detached, out of it
- Down, sad, low in mood, tearful
- Feeling guilty, regretful or ashamed



How thinking is affected

- Worrying constantly, racing mind, fearing the worst,
- Have trouble making decisions, can't concentrate, fuzzy headed
- Re-experiencing the trauma through dreams, nightmares or unwanted thoughts and images
- Blaming yourself for the trauma
- Thinking about yourself, the world and the future more negatively
- Having thoughts like "It was my fault", "I'm going mad", "I can't cope", "I should have died".

How the body is affected

- Heart pounding, shallow breathing
- Tense and stiff muscles, tight chest, aching body
- Sweating and shaking
- Dizziness, feeling unsteady or wobbly
- Churning stomach and nausea
- Sleep and appetite change

Things you might do and choices you might make

- Avoid things that remind you of the accident
- Avoid people, places and activities, or avoid being alone
- Being restless, can't sit still, pacing
- Rejecting help from others or relying on others too much
- Drink, smoke or take recreational drugs more than usual



What keeps it going?

Avoidance

Avoiding things keeps post-traumatic stress reactions going. It is understandable to want to avoid people, places or thoughts that make you feel really bad or really scared all over again. Avoiding them works really well in the short-term so it makes sense that you have been doing it.

However, in the long-term avoidance is unhelpful because;

- it stops you making sense of what happened and finding ways to cope
- it stops your brain from filing away the traumatic memories properly. This means they keep on bursting out, making you feel worse
- it takes away your confidence little by little because you never get a chance to find out that you could cope if you faced your fears

Thinking Styles



Your thoughts affect how you feel and what you do. For example, if you heard a bump in the night and thought it was your cat, you might not be bothered and roll over and go back to sleep. But if you believed it was your partner coming home from the office Christmas party much later than expected you might feel annoyed and tell them off for not phoning you.

Below are some common thinking styles linked to post-traumatic stress. Often these thoughts are not true and trigger 'false alarms' of the 'fight-flight' system.

The examples below show how thinking styles can make you feel worse by making you think more negatively about your physical and emotional recovery. All of this thinking, and the worry that goes with it, can happen without you really noticing.

<i>Thinking Style</i>	<i>Example</i>
Thinking the worst	"The accident has damaged my body beyond repair and I'll never get over what happened that day."
Mind reading	"Other people can tell I'm having a terrible memory or flashback. They must think I'm a freak"
Predicting the Future	"I'll never get back to normal at home or at work because these horrible memories will never go away"
Overgeneralising	"If an accident like that can happen once it will definitely happen again to me. I'm an unlucky person"
Jumping to Conclusions	"My heart is racing, I feel dizzy and I feel as if it is happening all over again. I must be going mad"
Being 'on guard'	"Now I know that the world is such a dangerous place, I'd better look out for danger so I can avoid it. The harder I look the better I get at spotting danger"

To break this cycle, it can help to notice these thoughts. Then try to ask yourself some of the questions in the next section of this booklet.

Overcoming Post-traumatic Stress

Useful questions to ask yourself



Is there any evidence against this thought?

When you feel very bad, physically or emotionally, it is easy to imagine that the worst will happen or that you won't be able to cope. However, you may remember times in the past when you coped during hard times or you may recall some good news your doctor gave you about your recovery. This might help you think of things you can do that will help you feel a little better.

Is there anything I can do about this problem?

Have you ever tackled difficult problems before? You might be able to draw on your own experiences or the experiences of friends and family to come up with a plan to deal the problem.

Is there another way of thinking about the situation?

For example, perhaps people were looking at you because they were curious about your frame, having never seen one before. They might not even have noticed that you were having an unpleasant flashback or memory.

How helpful is it to think this way?

Focusing on your losses and predicting that you will never get back to normal will just make you feel more disheartened. Instead, focus on how you have managed to overcome challenges in the past and pay attention to any signs that things are improving, even in very small ways.

What would you say to a friend?

Imagine your friend was trying to cope after a trauma and was having painful treatments. Would you tell them their situation was bleak and that they were in for a long and uncertain recovery? Probably not. You would probably say encouraging, kind and compassionate things to them. Try not to fall into the trap of being much harder on yourself than you would ever be on others. This is not fair on you and probably not helpful.

Taking care of yourself

Try to eat a well-balanced diet. Take regular exercise if you can. Think of an activity which is manageable for you and which you might enjoy. You might need to take this quite slowly and, if you are working with a physiotherapist, ask for their advice. Eating well and keeping active can help to reduce the stress and physical tension which often accompany post-traumatic stress.



Allow yourself enough time for sleep and rest, but try not to worry if you are not sleeping well. Having a regular bedtime, and allowing time to wind down before bed, can help. Try to resist any temptation to have a few alcoholic drinks at bedtime or to rely on caffeine during the day. This will only make you feel worse in the long run.

Learn to relax

Learning how to relax your mind and body can help you to manage stress and tension. You can try out different things until you find one that works for you. For example;

- Listen to relaxing music or 'white noise' like the sound of waves crashing. You can download free 'White Noise Apps' to your smart phone, use Google to find audio files to download to your PC or MP3 player or buy a CD (these are widely available).
- Spend five minutes focusing your attention on your breath
- Try using prayer or meditation practices
- Imagine being in a peaceful scene, such as a beach or a woodland. Notice what you can see, hear, touch, taste and smell.
- Gently tense and relax different muscle groups in your body until your body feels physically relaxed, skipping any areas where you have pain if necessary
- Try not to rush around during the day. Leave plenty of time for your planned activities.



Balance your awareness

Being aware of your body can help you to make wise choices, but being over-aware can make it hard for you to focus on other things. This can mean you miss out on fully enjoying the good things in life. Being over-aware can also cause you unnecessary worry and distress, which can make your symptoms feel worse. It can help to put your feet flat on the ground and simply notice how it feels. You can also try focusing on what you can see and hear in the world around you.



Making sense of what happened

Find out as much as possible about what happened on the day of your accident. This can help you begin to make sense of what happened by getting the full story.



Try some of these steps;

- Talk to other people that were there such as other people who were involved, ambulance crew, police, passers-by. Get their view
- Talk your experience through with someone you trust
- Write down your account of what happened, including any new information you were able to find out

If this is too difficult and distressing, you may find it helpful to work on making sense of what happened with a psychologist or counsellor. You can talk to your healthcare professional about how to access these services.

Dealing with Flashbacks

It is normal to want to avoid unpleasant flashbacks, nightmares and memories by trying not to think about them. However, this rarely works in the long-term.



Instead, try to put aside some time each day to review the trauma and the flashbacks, nightmares and memories about it. Pick a time when you won't be rushed or interrupted and calmly write down a summary of your experiences. This has been found to help reduce flashbacks and nightmares as well as making unpleasant thoughts and memories less powerful and less frequent.



Try to include something positive about your current situation in your review, such as "Even though my injuries were serious, my treatment is going well" or "Although I thought I wouldn't make it, I am still here to see my children grow up".

Facing your Fears

Although it is a very difficult thing to do, facing your fears is an effective way to overcome post-traumatic stress. Don't worry if you feel worse initially. This is normal and will pass.

Begin by asking yourself the following questions;

- "What am I avoiding or not doing anymore since the trauma?"
- "What is the worst thing that could happen if I went ahead and did it?"
- "Are there any other possible outcomes? (e.g. Could something good come of it?)"



When you are facing your fears, your predictions about what will happen are often much worse than what actually happens. Even if something bad does happen, maybe you'll get a chance to find out you can cope despite these challenges. This will build your confidence and help you overcome your post-traumatic stress.

Now try these simple steps;

1. Write a list of the things you have been avoiding since the accident
2. Order them from least challenging to most challenging
3. Choose to do the least challenging (What do you think will happen?)
4. Go ahead and do it! (Did your prediction come true?)
5. Give yourself credit for your achievement. Now choose another.
6. If you didn't manage to do it, don't worry. Choose another less challenging activity and start the process again, perhaps with some support from others.



Tackling problems

When you are living with post-traumatic stress, it can seem like everything will go wrong, and you might feel quite overwhelmed. This is a way of gaining some control by breaking down problems into steps.

1. Make a list of all the problems which are troubling you.
2. Pick out one you can do something about and circle it. Don't pick the hardest one to start with.
3. Now make another list, of everything you could possibly do about this problem.
4. Pick out the option you would like to try first and circle it.
5. Write down how you will put this option into practice. Break it down into steps if you need to.
6. Write down how you will be able to tell if it's working.



How do you know when you have overcome your post-traumatic stress reaction?

- ✓ When you can think about the accident without getting distressed
- ✓ When you don't feel under threat or 'on guard' anymore
- ✓ When you are no longer troubled by thoughts about the accident that butt in at in appropriate times, e.g. flashbacks

Further reading

- Overcoming Traumatic Stress. Herbert & Wetmore, 2008.
- Are you on edge?: A booklet for people coping with the stress and worries of limb reconstruction, IMPARTS Project, 2012 (*A booklet about anxiety & limb reconstruction*)
- Are you struggling? A booklet for people living with the effects of limb reconstruction, IMPARTS Project, 2012 (*A booklet about depression & limb reconstruction*)



Next Steps

- Plan a time to use the ideas in this leaflet
- Share the ideas with someone who can support you
- If you have tried the ideas in this leaflet and you have not seen any improvements, talk to your healthcare professional about getting further support.



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