Understanding trauma

From a violent incident or natural disaster, to the loss of a loved one or a terminal diagnosis, a trauma can leave a person feeling unsafe and vulnerable. It's not uncommon for a traumatic event to cause strong emotional reactions that interfere with a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. People suffering from trauma may find they have trouble concentrating, remembering things, or even trusting people. It's important to deal with the effects of trauma before they become more devastating than the traumatic event itself.



Common signs of trauma

Trauma can have destructive effects on day-to-day life. Depending on the person, these can include substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, or withdrawal from family and friends. Read through the lists below for some of the most common signs of trauma.

Physical. Whether you were injured in the event or not, a trauma can really take its toll on your body, causing tension, aches and pains, fatigue, insomnia, and changes in appetite.

Emotional. Trauma can bring about a range of emotional responses that can leave you feeling overwhelmed. These include shock, depression, fear or anxiety, irritability, guilt, mood swings, sadness or grief, outbursts of anger, panic attacks and nightmares or flashbacks.

Behavioural. The emotional stress of working through the aftermath of a trauma can change your behaviour and negatively impact your interactions with co-workers and loved ones. You may find that you withdraw or isolate yourself from others, show distrust, become less tolerant of others or lash out, move erratically and are easily startled by noises or unexpected touch, and/or increase use of alcohol or drugs.

Cognitive. The way you think and process information can even be affected after a traumatic incident. Cognitive symptoms of trauma include decreased ability to focus or concentrate, along with forgetfulness, suspiciousness, confusion or difficulty making decisions and/or heightened or lowered alertness.

These signs sometimes appear immediately after the traumatic event, or may develop hours or even days later. They can also endure: it may take weeks, months, or even years to fully recover from traumatic events and establish a new "normal".