Helping a Loved One After a Traumatic Event

It can be challenging to reach out and help a loved one who's coping with the after effects of a trauma, especially if the person is in denial or is taking his or her anger out on you. You might feel powerless to help change your loved one's feelings or outlook on life. The suggestions below can help you provide meaningful support as your friend or relative works through the healing process in the wake of a 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.

Learn about their condition. By researching information into the common effects of trauma, you are better prepared to understand and support what your loved one is going through. The internet, trauma support groups, and your EAP can help.

Listen. Don't be too quick to offer solutions or advice; take time to understand and appreciate what the person is going through. Simply listening to your loved one's feelings and ideas is one of the most effective ways to show you care.

Be patient. Give your loved one time to come to terms with his or her feelings. Remember, recovery from a trauma takes time. Don't take anger or emotional outbursts personally. These feelings are normal, and are not likely directed at you.

Validate your loved one's feelings and experiences. You may not understand exactly what your friend or relative is going through, but do your best to put yourself in your loved one's shoes.

Offer practical help. Cook a meal, wash the dishes or baby-sit the kids to give your loved one a needed break.

Encourage the person to seek additional support. While you can help, you can't expect to "fix" the situation all by yourself. Gently suggest to your loved one that he or she would benefit from support through a counsellor, spiritual leader, or another trusted advisor.

By "being there" for a loved one after a traumatic experience you can deepen your relationship with that person, and support them in the healing process.