

Wellbeing for the Bush

TRAUMA

It is normal to have strong emotional (or physical) reactions after experiencing a traumatic event. It's important to remember though that these reactions are a part of the body's natural healing and recovery process and will most likely subside after a few days or weeks. As a rural and remote health worker, you will likely be exposed to potentially traumatic events. Such events can be a "moment in life that tests us, that challenges our understanding of the world and our sense of safety".¹

Traumatic events in the rural and remote health context could include:

- Experiencing/first responder to serious accidents, physical or sexual assault or abuse
- Exposure to people who are seriously injured
- Repeated or unexpected exposure to a deceased person
- Witnessing or hearing about events occurring to colleagues, friends or their family members
- Listening to disclosures from patients or clients about such events.

Experiencing some level of psychological stress or distress following exposure to a traumatic event can be considered a normal response to abnormal events. However, not everyone exposed to the same event will be emotionally affected in the same way.



It's normal to experience some of these things after a traumatic event:

- Feeling anxious, scared, irritable, angry, sad, guilty or numb
- Changes to sleep patterns and/or eating behaviours
- Having nightmares or intrusive thoughts about the event
- Blaming yourself for the trauma and thinking you should have handled things differently
- Constantly being on guard, watchful or easily startled
- Denial - behaving as though it hasn't happened
- Avoiding situations, people or places that remind you of the event or trying not to think about it
- Experiencing poor memory, concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Lack of interest in the things you usually enjoy
- Not engaging in your usual regular behaviours as you did before the event, for example, not walking the dog or calling your partner daily, or showering less often.

You may also find yourself trying to make sense of the event, for example, questioning why the event occurred or why/how you were involved.

1. Phoenix Australia <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/your-recovery/>



Helping yourself after a traumatic event

Most people who experience a traumatic event will recover by themselves using their own internal and external strengths, coping strategies, resilience and support. To encourage your healing, here are some strategies to support yourself over the coming weeks.

- Recognise that you have been through a distressing event and that you will have a reaction to it.
- Give yourself time to process the event.
- Accept that you will not feel your normal self for a while, but that it will eventually pass.
- Avoid throwing yourself into work or activities to avoid painful thoughts or feelings. However, try to stick to your routine.
- Talk about the event when you feel ready to do so. You may feel like avoiding anything that reminds you of the event, but research shows that avoiding can make things worse.
- Ask for support. Ask for help from friends, family, or someone that you trust, whether that be emotional support, helping you with practical tasks, or just spending time together.
- Make sure you maintain your normal routine: eating, sleeping, moving, and relaxing. Looking after your physical health helps healing and supports your mental health.
- Try to avoid excesses such as overeating, alcohol or using external substances to help block out thoughts or distress. This can sometimes lead to worsening symptoms and developing habits that may be hard to break.

When to get professional support

As rural and remote health workers, we can sometimes minimise experiences of trauma. It's important to remember that these events can be triggering or can simmer away and, over time, have a negative impact on your mental health.

If you feel that you are having difficulty processing the event/s or the following symptoms apply to you, reach out for help early. It's important not to minimise the experience and to seek professional help as soon as possible in order to prevent symptoms from getting worse.

Call the Bush Support Line or contact your GP if you find yourself:

- Feeling very distressed after the event
- Feeling like you're not coping with the intense feelings or physical sensations
- Feeling that things aren't getting back to normal after three to four weeks
- Continuing to have physical symptoms or disturbed sleep
- Deliberately avoiding anything that reminds you of the event
- Finding that relationships with family and friends are suffering
- Using more drugs or alcohol
- Becoming more accident-prone
- Unable to manage responsibilities or return to work
- Feeling as though you do not have anyone to share your feelings or concerns with.

More information

Access our booklet 'Supporting Yourself and Others After Traumatic Events':
crana.org.au/support-after-traumatic-events