

## Coping with Trauma

It is crucial to make our students aware of what trauma is and how they can cope with it because exposure to traumatic events is linked to mental health difficulties such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance use. Students with a history of trauma can also find adjusting to university difficult, might have poor academic performance or even dropout.

### **What is Trauma?**

The American Association of Psychology (APA) has two definitions of trauma, and they are:

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*1. Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation (sometimes referred to as an out-of-body experience), confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behaviour, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behaviour (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.*

*2. Any serious physical injury, such as a widespread burn or a blow to the head. — traumatic adj.*

### **What are the most significant or widespread traumatic events for University students?**

- The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one
- A sudden violent death (eg., suicide or homicide)
- Physical assault
- Assault with a weapon
- Life-threatening illness or injury
- Any stressful event or experience
- An unwanted or uncomfortable sexual experience
- Sexual assault (e.g., rape, attempted rape)

(Covid-19 Pandemic: it's also essential to add that some of our students might be experiencing Covid-19 and its impact as traumatic)

### **What happens immediately after a trauma?**

It is common to experience shock immediately after a traumatic event. Many people describe this as feeling numb or cut off from others. Denial is also common, you cannot accept what happened, and you start behaving as though nothing happened. People react differently to trauma so that others might be:

- **Frightened** that the same thing will happen again, or that you might lose control of your feelings and break down

- **Helpless** that something terrible happened and you could do nothing about it. You feel weak, vulnerable and overwhelmed
- **Angry** about what has happened and with whoever was responsible
- **Guilty** that you have survived when others have suffered or died. You may feel that you could have done something to prevent it
- **Sad** mainly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew
- **Ashamed or embarrassed** that you have these strong feelings you can't control, especially if you need others to support you
- **Relieved** that the danger is over and that the threat has gone
- **Hopeful** that your life will return to normal. People can start to feel more positive about things quite soon after a trauma

### **What else can happen following a traumatic event?**

In the weeks after a trauma, you may notice:

- Sleep disturbances
- Nightmares relating to the trauma
- Flashbacks
- Difficulties concentrating
- Memory problems
- Angry outbursts with little or no provocation (verbal or physical)
- An inability to experience positive emotions
- Negative beliefs "the world is completely dangerous" "no one can be trusted."
- Change in appetite

### **What should I do?**

- Give yourself time: Allow yourself to process what has happened; it takes time to work through the challenges
- Find out what happened: It is vital to not dwell on what should not have happened. Instead, allow yourself to focus on the facts of the situation
- Be involved with other survivors: It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you
- Ask for support: It can be a relief to talk about what happened. You may need to ask your friends and family for the time to do this - at first, they will probably not know what to say or do
- Take some time for yourself: At times you may want to be alone or just with those close to you
- Talk it over: At first, this can be challenging, and you might start crying, crying is natural and usually helpful
- Maintain your routine
- After a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful around the home and when you are driving

### **What should I NOT do?**

- Don't bottle up your feelings
- Don't take on too much

- Don't drink or use drugs
- Don't make any significant life changes

### **When should I get professional help?**

Family and friends will probably be able to see you through this challenging time, and you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you or go on for too long. You should probably ask your GP or psychologist for help if:

- You have no one to share your feelings with
- You can't handle your emotions and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, or nervousness
- You think that you are not returning to normal after six weeks
- You have nightmares and cannot sleep
- You are getting on badly with those close to you
- You stay away from other people more and more
- Your work is suffering
- Those around you suggest you seek help
- You have accidents
- You are drinking or smoking too much or using drugs to cope with your feelings

### **Where can I Get Help?**

- Speak to your doctor
- Your psychologist or contact SCD
- **SADAG UFS Line**  
0800 00 63 63 SMS 43302