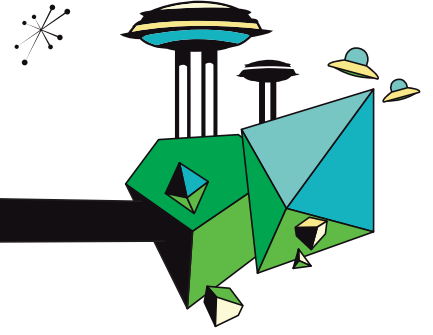




**SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THE EMOTIONAL  
AFTERMATH OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES  
SEEKING A NEW BALANCE**

**ERIK DE SOIR**



## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

### HOW TO COPE WITH EMOTIONAL NUMBNESS OR FEELING DISCONNECTED?

Your mind often keeps you insulated from a traumatic experience, only allowing you to process it slowly. You may feel numb or emotionless at first. What happened seems unreal, like a dream or something that couldn't possibly have really happened.

Your body often responds out of a sense of self-protection, only allowing the painful memories to return bit by bit so you can process the associated trauma gradually. This response is often misinterpreted as “acting strong” or “not being affected”.

Give yourself time to cope with these changes and don't let the people around you rush you through it because they would like to see you process it faster. It takes as long as it takes, and each person responds differently.

However, it can help to learn relaxation techniques that may help you deliberately allow yourself to deal with the residual aftereffects of your traumatic experience.

### STAY BUSY?

Keeping busy without falling into a vicious cycle of overactivity can offer a temporary source of relief when you're having a hard time coping. Other people who are also having difficulty processing a similar experience can help if you share some of your own emotional response with them; sharing your pain can be therapeutic for both people. However, if you notice that you are frantically trying to stay busy, it may be an indication that you are trying to avoid seeking the help that you may need right now.

Many people avoid thinking about what happened by staying very busy. This approach may work, but it is only a temporary solution. You will eventually need to face how you feel and accept it.

#### ► CONFRONT REALITY

Confrontation with reality, for instance by rewatching what happened on YouTube or other internet video sites, reading newspaper reports, and possibly watching television shows about the traumatic event - to the extent that it is covered in the media - and taking part in group discussions among those who were affected may help you to put the events into their proper perspective.

#### ► GETTING THROUGH THE WORST OF IT

To gradually become fully aware of what happened, you need to contemplate it, allow yourself to think about it, talk about it and dream about it. For you to heal, your experience needs to be pieced together again. You can achieve that by putting together more pieces of the puzzle. Contact friends who were there with you or who were also at the festival and ask them about their stories. If you have questions about people you're looking for or things that happened, post your questions on Facebook or Twitter.

You will need to try to 'replay the film' of what happened in your mind, completing the picture in order to understand everything that happened. This understanding is an essential part of restoring your emotional balance and regaining some control of your life.

## ▶ **GIVING AND RECEIVING SUPPORT**

Receiving physical and emotional support is generally a great relief. Do not reject supportive gestures. Giving and receiving hugs can be very comforting. Sharing experiences with others who have been through similar experiences will often do you good.

You can come closer to each other as ‘barriers’ crumble; when people have been through the same traumatic experiences, much deeper personal contact with each other becomes possible.

## **MOMENTS OF PRIVACY**

In order to fully cope with your emotions, you will sometimes need time to be alone or in the private company of your family and/or friends. Also give yourself permission, when you’re feeling overwhelmed, to occasionally withdraw to places that you experienced as a “refuge” or “safe place” even before the traumatic event happened.

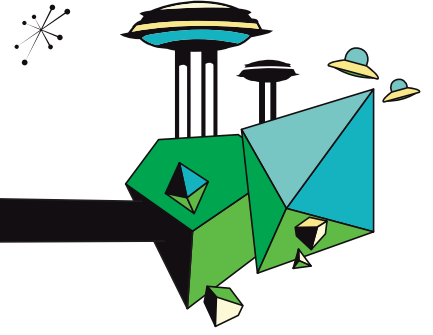
If you just need to be alone for a bit, say that to the people around you and make sure they respect your wishes.

There is nothing wrong with seeking silence and meditating to find a place for the things that you experienced.



## **CONCLUSIONS SO FAR**

1. Reliving or repressing your memories or overactivity (blocking out or suppressing your emotions) to an excessive extent is unhealthy and will delay your recovery process.
2. The most important thing is to openly deal with how shocked, affected and surprised you are.



## OVERVIEW OF POSSIBLE RESPONSES

### **NORMAL RESPONSES AFTER A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE**

- ▶ flashbacks, repeated and overwhelming memories of the events during or after the storm's passing
- ▶ sadness, emotional numbness, anger, rage about what happened
- ▶ dreams (nightmares) about what happened, frequently including dreams in which you or your loved ones are killed
- ▶ no longer wanting to be reminded of what happened; withdrawing
- ▶ (temporary) loss of enjoyment, inability or lack of desire to smile, laugh or have fun, shortened perspectives on the future
- ▶ fatigue, exhaustion, depression


### **THESE SUGGESTIONS MAY HELP SOFTEN THE IMPACT OF A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE:**

- ▶ Don't hold your emotions inside; express how you feel and let others share your sadness and pain caused by the traumatic experience; seek contact with others; don't crawl into your shell. Only those who were there know what it was like, but that doesn't mean that other people can't offer you a listening ear.
  - ▶ Take every opportunity to talk to others about your experiences, but be careful not to jump to conclusions about causes; don't pass on rumours or gossip about things you didn't see for yourself;
  - ▶ Don't feel like you have to talk, but allow yourself to be part of a group of people who care about each other; do not let embarrassment or pride keep you from allowing others to talk to you about what happened.
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- ▶ Don't forget that children around you may also be dealing with similar emotions, especially if they notice that you've been acting different for several days. However, you shouldn't treat them like 'little adults'; they have their own specific way of dealing with traumatic experiences. How children process these things is often highly symbolic and playful, and may not be easy for adults to understand.

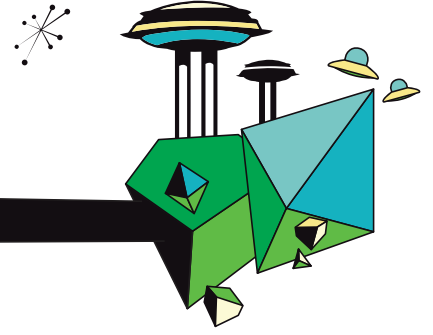
Give them room to talk about their emotions, express themselves in their own unique, childish ways in games and drawings, and offer them emotional support. Even if they weren't there, changes in your behaviour also affect your children.
- ▶ Drive carefully and be particularly careful in your home; accidents are much more likely after intensely stressful situations. People are more accident-prone when they have recently suffered a traumatic experience.
- ▶ Try to think about other things as well throughout the day, without trying to escape from reality by not thinking about what happened.

- Stay busy, keep yourself moving and try to help others without getting trapped in a form of hyperactivity; taking regular breaks and eating enough healthy food is essential to a healthy balance.
- Make sure that you find out exactly what happened, rather than trusting what you think might have happened.
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- Think about exactly what changed in your life after experiencing this catastrophic event and tell the people around you about those changes. Be aware that you are living NOW and tell your loved ones how happy you are to see them; now more than ever, this is the time to stop and realise how precious they are to you.
- Keep making plans for the future and try to hold true to your ideals and principles.

**BE AWARE THAT A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE CAN OFTEN ALSO BE A UNIQUE POINT IN YOUR LIFE, A CHANCE FOR YOU TO GROW, DEMONSTRATE RESILIENCE AND CHERISH LIFE AS PRECIOUS. LOOK AROUND YOU AND BE COMFORTED AND ENCOURAGED BY ALL THE GOOD THAT YOU SAW (AND SEE) PEOPLE DOING AROUND YOU.**



Remember that the pain of an 'emotional injury' is what keeps the healing process moving forward: by accepting this pain and allowing yourself to feel it, you give yourself time to deal with what happened. You may even come through this traumatic experience feeling stronger, feeling like you are now appreciating what is truly important in life. It is equally possible that you will discover that you experience life more intensely and/or learn to cherish your loved ones more deeply.



## WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Post-traumatic stress responses following a traumatic experience generally fade on their own as time passes, especially if you talk to your family about your emotions. Even so, some responses may be very hard to get rid of and could affect your quality of life for a longer time period.

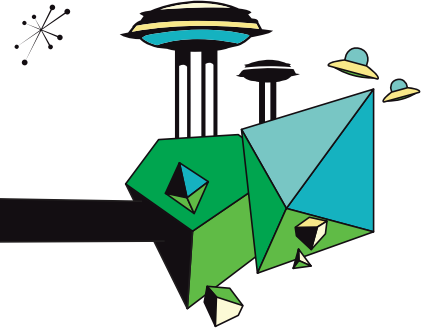
Your emotional and physical responses could even take on a special personal significance for you, increasing in frequency and intensity rather than fading away over time. At a certain point in time, it may be advisable to seek additional professional help, usually in the form of a series of more in-depth appointments with a counsellor or therapist.

If you are completely unable to function at all as a result of what happened, you should preferably seek professional help right away. This does not necessarily mean that you are ill.

Just embrace the thought that 'it's OK not to be OK' right now! You are allowed to feel whatever it is you're feeling.

### **YOU SHOULD CONSIDER SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP IF THE FOLLOWING APPLIES TO YOU AFTER ABOUT 6 WEEKS:**

- Your emotions or physical responses continue to be overwhelming; memories, dreams and images of the traumatic experience continue to plague your thoughts; as a result, you are constantly anxious or uneasy.
- You do not experience relief after tension and/or confusion and you permanently feel empty and exhausted.
- Your work continues to suffer as a result of what you still feel and think about the traumatic event and you are unable to concentrate.
- You are forced to keep busy in order to avoid thoughts and emotions about what happened; you have noticed that you experience fits of rage if someone tries to prevent you from doing so.
- You have no one that you can share your feelings with.
  - Your relationship is suffering due to your responses; you have noticed that your behaviour with respect to smoking, drinking and/or eating has changed for the worse, even though you know that excessive alcohol consumption after a traumatic experience doesn't solve anything.
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  - You have become overtired, cynical, bitter or emotionally drained; you are asking yourself if it wouldn't be better to just give up completely and feel like your life has no meaning.



## **ACCEPT AND REMEMBER**

### **WHEN YOU HAVE HAD A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE:**

- **YOU WILL NEVER GO BACK TO BEING EXACTLY THE SAME PERSON YOU WERE BEFORE IT HAPPENED**
- **YOUR VALUES AND PRINCIPLES MAY CHANGE**
- **THE COLOUR OF EVERY SEASON AND OF LIFE AS A WHOLE WILL CHANGE**
- **YOU ARE HAVING A NORMAL RESPONSE TO AN ABNORMAL EVENT, BUT YOU MAY NEED TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE TO FIND YOUR WAY BACK TO A BALANCED LIFE**

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