



# Coping with witnessing a traumatic event

Being a witness to a traumatic or violent event can have a very deep impact on people, especially children.

The impact of witnessing a traumatic event is often referred to as 'vicarious trauma'. This means that even if you were not physically hurt or involved in the event you can still be psychologically affected by what you have seen or heard.

Common reactions to witnessing a traumatic event include:

- prolonged crying and sadness
- fear
- nightmares and difficulty sleeping
- anxiety
- nausea or headaches
- difficulty concentrating
- disorientation and confusion
- uneasiness.

These reactions are normal and may continue for days, weeks or even months.

## **Resurfacing feelings of grief and anxiety**

Traumatic events can trigger memories of past losses or events that happened many years ago. These memories can bring back feelings of anger, grief and sadness.

People may be particularly vulnerable to vicarious trauma if they have:

- recently experienced a loss
- undergone a life change
- suffered a major crisis
- experienced war.

It is normal for witnesses of a traumatic event to experience resurfacing emotions from past events.

## **Recovering from your experience**

Some ways to reduce the impact of your experience are:

- Spend time with people who love and care about you – talk about the event and the past experiences you are recalling;

- Expect your mood and feelings to be intense and constantly changing - you may be more irritable than usual or more easily upset by things. Your mood may change from day to day or hour to hour;
- Try to maintain a regular eating and sleeping pattern – a traumatic experience may disturb your eating and sleeping habits so making an effort to rest and eat well will help you cope with stress;
- Don't be too hard on yourself – acknowledge that you have been traumatised by the experience and your body and emotions are trying to deal with it; and
- Don't expect yourself to be back to normal immediately – recovery will take time.

## **How can counselling help?**

If negative reactions to your experience continue for a long period, or if they are severe or getting worse, you may benefit from professional support. Counselling can provide you with an opportunity to talk in a safe and confidential environment and may help you find ways of coping with your feelings. Counsellors can also refer you to other agencies for different types of assistance.

## **Helping children to cope**

Children are also likely to need care and support if they witness a traumatic event. Children often react differently to adults, so parents need to be understanding and patient.

Information on helping children cope with trauma is available from another Victim Support and Child Witness Service information sheet, available at [www.justice.wa.gov.au](http://www.justice.wa.gov.au), or by calling the service on the numbers below.

## **Further advice**

The Victim Support and Child Witness Service can assist victims of crime with professional counsellors, trained volunteers, and a network of information and service providers.

### **Victim Support and Child Witness Service**

District Court Building  
Level 2/500 Hay Street  
PERTH WA 6000

Telephone: 9425 2850  
Facsimile: 9425 4428  
Freecall: 1800 818 988

*Adapted with the permission of Victim Services, Attorney Generals Department of NSW*