

## AVOID...

- Acting as if not affected
- Bottling up emotions
- Turning to alcohol or recreational drugs

Your brain is trying to cope – **THESE FEELINGS ARE NORMAL.** By acting tough and bottling up emotions a barrier comes between you and resolution of the underlying problem. Alcohol and recreational drugs merely hide the problem until another day and makes things worse. It can delay the psychological repair.

## DO...

- Know what happened
- De-brief with those present
- Reflect and relax
- Share your emotions
- Stay physically active
- Try to continue as normal

When you are involved in an incident you narrow in on the one area of a task you feel you did wrong. By de-briefing with those at the incident, e.g. your fellow rescuers, you will be able to piece the story together and get an overview of the "big picture". It also reinforces the fact you are not alone and it is normal to have symptoms after such an incident.

Try to get sleep, but also to personally reflect on the event. By processing the information, your brain is beginning to deal with it. If you don't you will bottle it up and it will fester, only to come back later creating stronger feelings and effects on your life.

Talking with your family and friends outside of work, (maintaining confidentiality of course), will help them appreciate what you are going through. They should also be allowed to express their emotions as they may well be having similar feelings to you. They care about you and want to protect you, but may also feel the events are affecting your relationship. By talking you can find a compromise. Occasionally they do not want to "hear about it" this is also normal and they need time.

The advice to exercise but also relax may seem contradictory, but it is the balance of a healthy lifestyle you are trying to achieve. When we are stressed, tired and unfit we are more likely to be distracted and have an accident!

## When do I need to get help?

Your response to an incident is very individual. It may be delayed in its onset, persist for a long time or start to affect your work and family life. If you experience the following:

- Signs and symptoms persisting longer than one month.
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse.
- Unexplained physical symptoms.
- Intrusive thoughts or nightmares.
- Avoidance (of situations or people similar to event.)
- Depression or anxiety
- Family expressing concern

**It is time to get some HELP!**

## Who can help?

- Your own General Practitioner
- Surf Life Saving Headquarters
- [postincidentssupport@sls.gb.org.uk](mailto:postincidentssupport@sls.gb.org.uk)

If the incident occurred whilst volunteering or being employed by the RNLI they can also be contacted via their health and welfare team: [Health\\_and\\_Welfare@RNLI.org.uk](mailto:Health_and_Welfare@RNLI.org.uk)

## Websites:

[www.sls.gb.org.uk](http://www.sls.gb.org.uk)  
[www.rpspsych.ac.uk](http://www.rpspsych.ac.uk) - leaflets and contact numbers.



**Surf Life Saving GB**

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# LIFE SAVING

## Post Incident Support

As a lifeguard or lifesaver we experience many exciting and uplifting moments. Due to the nature of what we do we will occasionally experience things that are more traumatic. This leaflet hopes to guide you through what is normal, and when to seek help.

## ACUTE STRESS REACTION

'Acute stress reaction' is the initial response to a traumatic event - it is normal. It is very common, and most people involved in rescue work will have experienced it at least once in their career. If the body's normal responses last longer than a month it can develop into post traumatic stress disorder. This has wide ranging effects (often detrimental) for our personal lives, the effects of which can extend into our work and family. In the extremes it can lead to suicide and psychiatric illness. Anybody who witnesses a traumatic event is likely to experience an acute stress reaction. As a rescuer you have probably experienced it without even realising.

## TRAUMATIC EVENTS

### So what is a traumatic event?

**Disasters** - as rescuers we often don't see the whole scenario and will be making difficult decisions based around what we can see. We are also likely to experience horrific things.

**Accidents** - happening to us or if we are the rescuer involved.

### Threats to your life or those around you.

**Resuscitation attempts** - these are especially difficult as the casualty is taken away to hospital and we assume the worst.

**Body recovery** - very emotive (especially on the senses) but also if a body or facial feature reminds us of somebody we know.

**Significant personal events** - divorce, death, birth of a new child, even birthdays and marriage!



## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Acute stress reactions are visible signs of the brain processing a traumatic event. The signs and symptoms that we are suffering from an acute stress reaction can vary. You may have all or only one or two of them. The intensity with which they are experienced will be different for everybody.

In the immediate period after an event people are often **dazed, upset and confused**. They are not aware of what is going on around them and not able to follow basic commands. They can become anxious and agitated; some will get very **lethargic** and **angry**. Occasionally they can become withdrawn. Their perspective on the event changes, they start to see events as if they were watching themselves.

If the brain cannot process normally the symptoms can persist and lead to new symptoms.

If things aren't settling down, the brain is not processing the information, 'overload'. As a result it starts to do funny unexpected things. The brain produces new emotions, feelings and symptoms. The following physical and psychological things can occur:

**Re-living the moment** 'Flashbacks' The event is seen as a video in your mind, often triggered by a smell, sound or sights but often comes out of the blue!!

**Same emotions** During the flashback the same painful and distressing emotions can be felt as were felt at the incident.

**Dreams** Nightmares make people afraid to turn out the lights, unable to sleep, and can be extremely distressing. Lack of sleep affects our ability to concentrate and perform daily tasks.

**Sad, numb or helpless feelings** The numbness can create

gaps in memory and an unwillingness to remember events. This can develop into emotional numbness affecting

relationships.

**Avoidance** Avoid remembering, this might mean avoiding triggers like watching television reports of the event, not going to the beach/site of the incident etc. or avoiding people connected with the event.

'**What if?**' Excessively reflecting on the events and questioning what was done, why it happened to you and if the outcome would be different if you had done something different.

**Jumpiness/anxiety** Becoming very 'jumpy', not able to let go. Constantly on duty, increased vigilance.

**Anger** Not just at the incident but also at small things not connected such as the remote control missing. Feelings of life being unjust, senseless etc.

Very common in survivors of disasters, because they survived and others did not. Guilt they couldn't change events - often inappropriate as they had no control over it.

**Wishing** Longing for things to be back to how they were, as if it had never happened.

A collection of psychological symptoms including sadness, depressive thoughts characterised by worry, poor self-image, self blame, guilt and low self confidence; downbeat views on the future and a feeling of hopelessness.

Emotionally moving away from the family, this is exacerbated by lack of sleep, and tendency towards alcohol and recreational drugs. "Nobody understands me!!" - often recognised by close friends and immediate family. They may need to get help for you.

Symptoms can become physical. The body gets worn down under the strain. Headaches, tiredness, chest pain, indigestion, stomach upset etc. have all been associated.

Signs and symptoms can occur within minutes and usually pass within 2-3 days. For some people the onset of signs and symptoms may be delayed or continue for longer. This is normal and is the brain trying to tackle the raft of traumatic information it has just received. If symptoms continue for over one month or you feel you are not coping it may be time to seek help.

