

## Patient information

### After the Assault

#### Emergency Care – Royal Liverpool Hospital

If you have just been involved in an assault then you have just experienced a traumatic psychological experience. Even these day's assaults are unexpected - you always believe it will happen to someone else. But when it does happen to you it takes you completely by surprise - leaving you to pick up the pieces.

Most assaults happen very quickly, usually lasting one to two minutes. However, some people involved in an assault often experience the process in slow motion. They often describe it as "time standing still". People often experience a sense of disbelief, as if they were watching a television programme or film.

People react differently during an assault. Some people can appear very calm and logical, while others may become hysterical. The main theme for most people is an increased fear or anxiety about their survival. When the assault is over, most people worry about what might have happened. These feelings can be very strong; sometimes they are worse than the event itself.

You may find that you can only focus on one particular aspect of the assault; the face of the assailant, the knife or gun, the clothing worn, sometimes it is a particular feeling you had at the time. It is worth remembering these images can return again and again, acting as a constant reminder. Some people remember very little, almost as if they have blocked the event completely out of their mind.

One of the common reactions during an assault is to 'freeze' - being unable to move or act in any way. This is a state of helplessness, which often makes people feel ashamed or guilty. Don't be critical of yourself. It is easy to criticise your actions when you have the time and composure to do so after the event!

Any person involved in an assault is bound to react with strong feeling. Remember, it is an event outside your normal experience, therefore psychologically you do not know how to react to it.

Below is a list of thoughts and feelings that may occur. Please remember that we are all different. You may have some or all of these feelings and in certain people there may be little or no reaction at all.

#### Feelings that can be experienced

##### Helplessness

- If we have been involved in an assault it can leave us feeling out of control and vulnerable. This can leave you feeling shocked, intensely sad or numb and the event seems unreal, like a dream.

## **Anxiety**

- About being left alone.
- About going back to work.
- About being in the same environment again.

## **Fear**

- That leaves you scanning for any signs of danger, i.e. in a shop, on the bus, or out in a crowd.
- Going home alone late at night.
- That the assailant knows you or will follow you home.
- That you will meet the assailant again.

## **Anger**

- At the assailant for what they have done to you.
- At family or friends because they do not understand what you have been through.
- At the nature of the attack; what is the point; how can people act so heartlessly.
- At the injustice of it happening to you.

## **Guilt and shame**

- For what you did during the assault or failed to do.
- For feeling helpless and out of control.
- For feeling emotional or unable to cope.
- For letting others down.

## **Feelings of elation**

Psychologically when we are put under extreme threat, it is normal to feel afterwards a sense of relief. Often you may feel elated, something that may be shared by all the others involved. These feelings only last for a short time and are often followed by feelings of sadness and anxiety.

It is also normal to try to forget or avoid what has happened. Your behaviour may change in that you will avoid or keep away from anything that could remind you of your assault. Remember, you may, experience some, all or none of these feelings. Indeed for some people they feel nothing out of the ordinary for the first 24 hours.

## **Physical effects**

When the human body is put under threat it reacts by physically producing chemicals and hormones that increase your heart rate and tension of your muscles etc.

It is similar to the physical feelings you may experience before an interview, driving test or important event.

However, during and after an assault the level of these particular chemicals and hormones are particularly high. Therefore, you may experience certain physical sensations, which may cause you to worry that you are physically ill.

**Some common physical effects are:**

- Dizziness.
- Extreme tiredness or fatigue.
- Palpitations.
- Tightness in the chest or difficulty in breathing.
- Nausea and diarrhoea.
- Headaches, back or neck pain caused by muscular tension.
- Disturbances in your menstrual cycle.
- Physical shaking / tremors.

**You may also have sleep disturbances that present as:**

- Waking early.
- Difficulty in getting to sleep due to recurrent thoughts of the event.
- Continual waking in the night through sweating or an increased heart rate.

Many people following an assault think it is a good idea to try and forget or avoid feelings or thoughts surrounding the attack. For a short period of time this is a good idea as it helps you psychologically to come to terms with the attack. However, in the long term it is easier to face up to your feelings as soon as you can. If they are left to fester it can lead to more problems later on.

**How long does it take?**

It will normally take six to eight weeks for you to come to terms with the assault. Please remember that everyone brings his or her own unique life experience to any situation. In other words, how you react to the assault and beyond will be largely determined by your past life experience. During this 'healing' time as well as experiencing the feeling and physical effects already identified you may also experience the following:

**Flash backs**

These can happen at any time without warning. Sometimes there may be a specific trigger factor. Certain images may come into your mind, which instantly remind you of the assault.

**Re-run**

You may experience feelings similar to the assault, which make you feel it is happening again, this again can be linked to a specific trigger factor. You may also re-live specific painful events that you have been through in your life.

## **Lack of interest**

You will discover that generally you lose interest in family and friends, even your job. Quite often you will feel generally apathetic.

## **Cocoon**

In trying to come to terms with the assault and its physical and psychological effects you may find that you detach yourself from contact with other people. This is known as the 'cocoon effect'.

In general terms you will experience "feeling blue", a low mood that sometimes leads to loss of confidence at home and at work. You may make mistakes – don't worry this will pass in time.

## **What can you do?**

Firstly, be kind to yourself; the memories and feeling will take time to go. Don't be hard on yourself if it takes longer than you think it should.

Let yourself heal: a wound only heals when it is clean and has the materials to heal.

## **Therefore**

- Let the feeling out – you will not go mad or lose control.
- Let yourself cry – physically and psychologically it allows you to heal.

Don't keep hold of your feelings, if someone does not understand you show them this booklet. Look after yourself. You are very important. Express your feelings honestly and openly to one person at least. Make sure you get plenty of rest and sleep. If other people want to help then let them. Form a social group with others involved in the assault – even for a short time. At least you will understand each other and, more importantly, support each other.

If you want to help others involved in the assault, good! But don't allow yourself to help others at the expense of yourself. Because of your detachment and low mood, be careful when driving or operating machinery. Be careful around the house.

Monitor your mood, alcohol and cigarette intake. They may help for a short period, but excesses will only 'dull' the feeling and lead to problems in the long term.

We hope that reading this booklet has been useful for you.

## **However, it may be necessary for you to seek help if the following occurs:**

- If you cannot handle your feelings or the physical sensations.
- If you feel you are losing control -'going mad'.
- If you continue to feel tense, anxious or depressed.
- If your sleep pattern is still disturbed or you are having intrusive dreams or nightmares.
- If you have no-one to share your feelings with.

- If you are having problems with relationships of any kind.
- If you are taking any excess medication or smoking and drinking heavily.
- If you feel you cannot cope with work again.

If you have any problems with any of the above, then please contact your family doctor (GP) who may refer you to a counsellor.

## **Feedback**

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

## **Further Information**

### **The Royal Liverpool University Hospital**

**Tel: 0151 706 2060/2065**

**Text phone number: 18001 0151 706 2060 / 2065**

### **Samaritans**

**Tel: 0151 708 8888**

### **Rape Crisis**

**Tel: 0151 666 1392**

## **Victim Support**

- **Anfield Tel: 0151 530 1380**
- **Netherton Tel: 0151 530 1380**
- **Kirby Tel: 0151 547 4177**

### **Counselling in the Community**

**Tel: 0151 922 3760**

### **Victims of Domestic Violence**

**Tel: 0151 727 1365**

## **Author: Emergency Care**

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