

TO YOU WHO
**HAVE EXPERIENCED
ARMED CONFLICT**





Experiences of armed conflict and recovery

Traumatic incidents affect everyone who has experiences them, but in different ways. The kinds of reactions vary from person to person. For some people, the reactions come right away. For others, it takes many years. For some, the reactions slowly give way, while for others the reactions remain, even after a long time. Age and stage of life are also important when it comes to such reactions. Children react differently to adults, for example.

It would be more unusual not to react!

Are you concerned about your own, or your family members' reactions to difficult experiences?

In this brochure, you can read about some common reactions. Understanding some of these reactions, and knowing that they are completely normal, can help you move on.

We will also inform you about what has helped others in similar situations.

How do people react?

As human beings, we can react very differently from one another after a dramatic incident. While some seem almost unaffected, others have severe reactions. Even those who do not reveal their reactions to others, they often have a hard time inside. Anxiety, confusion and an experience of things seeming unreal are common after dramatic incidents. Often, it can be difficult to relax. Pictures and sensory impressions from the incident can come back, again, and again. It is not uncommon to sleep poorly, or to have bad dreams about the painful incident that happened.

Our functionality can be affected in many ways, even months and years after dramatic incidents have occurred. Reactions differ from person to person, but some feelings and reactions are typical, especially for those of you who have experienced repeated or lasting violence. Dramatic incidents can affect our thoughts, feelings, what we do and how we function, as well as our relationship with other people.



Here are some examples of how dramatic incidents can affect us in our daily lives:

If painful memories continue to affect you

Painful memories can come back through picturing what happened. One can relive thoughts, pictures, sounds, smells or physical impressions from the incident, again and again. Usually, this happens suddenly, and without one deciding to think about it. It can seem as if the memories come back on their own, although there is usually a reason for them coming back. It could be that something reminds you of the place it happened, or of objects, persons, smells or sounds tied to the incident. It could be something in your own body; a feeling or a thought about something specific which brings back the painful memories. Being together with other people can also bring back memories, especially if there are different kinds of physical closeness tied to the painful incident.

For some, the memories appear suddenly during the course of the day, while for others the memories come back as bad dreams at night. Both can be very tiresome for a person who experiences it.

Avoidance after a painful incident

It is natural for you to seek to avoid what brings back painful memories. It may be that you avoid thinking about the incident, or avoid having feelings in connection with what happened. Some also seek to avoid activities. If you have experienced a traffic accident, you may find it hard to be in a motor vehicle afterwards. If you experienced a painful incident in a particular place, it may be hard for you to go to similar places. For some, social contact may be affected. It can be hard to be close to your spouse, child or others.

Avoidance is a natural reaction. For some, however, avoidance increases the pain.

The body reacts as if you were in danger

After a dramatic incident, the body is often still in a state of emergency preparedness. The body is prepared for something dangerous to happen again, even if you know you are safe. The body often remembers a painful incident, and this can manifest itself in different ways. One may feel tense, have bad digestion or frequent headaches. When the body is tense, it easily affects your mood, and you can become more irritated and angry compared to before. It can be hard to remember things as well as you did before, and you may not be able to concentrate as well. Sleep problems are common. It can be hard to fall asleep, or you may wake up often during the night.

You may also find that you are not fully there in your daily life, that you are distant from others. If you have experienced many painful incidents, your body may also feel distant or numb.

Guilt – a common reaction

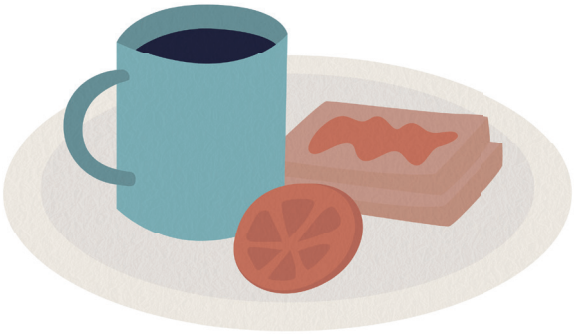
One of the most common reactions after a dramatic incident is feeling guilty, a reaction which can be hard for those around you to understand. You can feel guilty over what happened to you, guilty for not taking better care of yourself (or those close to you) or guilty for not paying attention to warning signs, or reacting to them. One can feel guilty for having survived, when others died. In short, one may feel responsible for what happened. Some feel guilty because of the pain not going away. Many become very strict with themselves and think of themselves negatively, so that it affects how they function in their daily lives.

What can you do yourself?

There is no easy solution that works for everyone. You must start with yourself, your own needs and the situation in which you find yourself. Here are some things which has shown to be helpful:

Regain control of your life

Every effort you make to regain a sense of control over your life is important. Deciding for yourself, whenever possible, can help to restore self-respect and sense of self-worth. Even taking responsibility for day-to-day decisions, like when to go out for a trip or with whom to have a cup of coffee, can be small steps in the right direction. Remind yourself that even if something brings back memories of a painful incident, it does not mean that you are back at the incident. Repeat to yourself that you are in the place that you are, and that you are here now. The memory belongs to the past. You are safe now.



Acquire daily habits

- Eat as regularly as possible.
- Reduce or gain control of your alcohol consumption.
- Try to get enough rest, preferably regularly.
- Engage in physical activities.
- Move about, play with children or take walks regularly.
- Set small, realistic goals for yourself to overcome difficulties, for example by re-establishing daily routines for you and your family.



Care about your feelings

- Give yourself permission and time to mourn.
- Accept your feelings as they are.
- Feeling rage, for example, does not mean that you want to hurt anyone. Feeling as if you are out of control does not mean that you will lose control, or go crazy. Feeling helpless does not mean that you are helpless.
- Use what worked for you during earlier times of crisis or stress.
- Stay in contact with your family, friends and persons around whom you feel safe, if possible.
- It can be important to talk about your war experiences and reactions. It can be helpful to share your experiences (and what you have learnt from them) with people around whom you feel safe.

- Be careful in choosing persons with whom to speak of your experiences. There are people who can be helpful through listening to you, while there are others who can make you feel more alone, or confused, afterwards.
- A dramatic incident can affect your sexual needs. Talk to your partner about how close you want to be, so that things will be good for the both of you.
- Some situations, like anniversaries, important dates in your life or information on TV or the internet can awaken painful memories. Different things can awaken memories, but try to see these in advance and prepare yourself.

If the problems become too big

Even if the problems seem insurmountable right now, remember that many people with similar experiences do in fact succeed in living meaningful lives, with time. If your reactions after difficult experiences become so extreme that they affect how you function in your daily life, or continue to strengthen with time, you should consider contacting a professional, like a psychologist. Talk to your regular doctor, who can refer you to professionals who have experience in providing this kind of help. Seeking help with reactions to a difficult incident does not mean that you are crazy. It means that you are taking responsibility for having natural reactions to a difficult incident.

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