

# Coping after road trauma



Road trauma can leave you feeling stressed, overwhelmed, helpless and vulnerable. This fact sheet discusses common reactions to road trauma, ways to cope and when to seek additional help.

## Common reactions

It can be common to experience a range of upsetting thoughts, feelings and physical reactions after road trauma.

### Emotions can include:

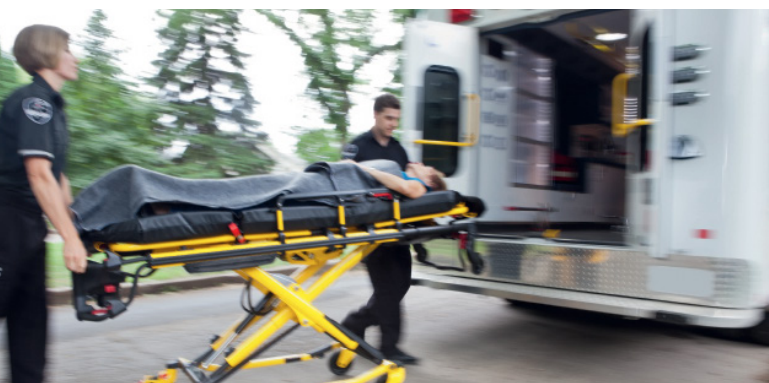
Shock, disbelief, fear, sadness, grief, guilt, anger and shame, as well as feeling overwhelmed and powerless.

### Physical reactions can include:

Trembling, sweating, breathing rapidly, increased heart beat, stomach churning, crying, restlessness and disrupted sleep.

## Behaviours and thoughts can include:

Thinking over and over again about what you saw and heard at the crash site, avoiding driving, finding it hard to accept what happened, avoiding speaking to other people, being easily distracted, forgetting things easily, obsessing about whether you could have done anything different, worrying about family and friends as well as flashbacks (re-living) of the trauma.



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## What helps after road trauma?

There are specific things you can do to assist your recovery after road trauma:

- Recognise that you have experienced a very stressful event and allow yourself time and space to adjust.
- Try to allow, rather than push your feelings away. Most trauma reactions will gradually decrease in frequency and intensity as time passes.
- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible. If you need to take some time off work or school, still try to structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, exercising and spending time with family and friends. Try to do things that are relaxing or provide some relief from thinking too much about the traumatic event. This could mean watching a movie, reading a book, having a massage, playing a team sport, doing something creative or cooking. Some people feel guilty if they “act normally” or enjoy themselves in any way after trauma, however it is important to realise that constantly thinking about and focussing on the traumatic event, is not helpful and will slow the recovery process.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings. If you are having trouble sleeping or are experiencing nightmares, this should gradually improve (it may be helpful to refer to our fact sheet “Coping with sleep difficulties following road trauma”).
- Reach out and spend time with people who care about you and who you feel safe talking to. You may feel like avoiding social activities, however social support from other people is vital to recovery from trauma. Ask for help and support and let other people do things to help like cooking, collecting children and taking you to appointments.
- Find healthy ways to express difficult feelings. Talking with someone who you trust, who won't judge you or expect you to “get over it” is helpful. If there isn't anyone available, it may be good for you to talk to a professional who is experienced in dealing with trauma and grief. You can contact RTSWA at any time after a crash and have a confidential discussion with a counsellor.
- Although it is healthy to express your feelings, be wary of being forced to talk about the traumatic event over and over. In the past, “psychological debriefing” was often provided immediately after traumatic events. We now know that this can actually worsen the effects of the trauma and delay healing. It may be better to let a friend or family member answer calls or questions on your behalf after a road trauma.

**Try to allow rather than push your feelings away.** Most trauma reactions will gradually decrease in frequency and intensity as time passes.



## When to seek help

For most people, time, understanding and support from family and friends are the most important requirements for recovery – professional counselling is often not needed.

While most people will recover from trauma, some people may experience ongoing or highly distressing symptoms that may interfere with their normal life.

The following are signs that you should seek professional advice:

- If you are having ongoing (i.e. more than a month after the trauma) severe symptoms which could include insomnia, nightmares, fatigue, depression, anxiety, phobias, anger, guilt, physical health issues, memory problems, intrusive thoughts or flashbacks of the trauma.
- If you are having trouble functioning at home or work.
- If you feel confused, emotionally numb to everything or out of touch with reality.
- If your relationships are suffering or you're having an increasingly difficult time connecting with and relating to others.
- If you are avoiding more and more things that remind you of the traumatic event.
- If you are experiencing thoughts of harming yourself or others.

A trained professional can help to normalise your experiences and assist you to cope with the trauma in a safe, confidential and non-judgemental manner. Even if the trauma occurred some time ago, it is never too late to seek help.

There are other circumstances, where it may be appropriate to seek help from a trained mental health professional such as:

- If you have no one available that you can share your thoughts and feelings with.
- If you were responsible for a collision and prefer to talk to someone outside of your family and friends.
- If you feel that you cannot manage your feelings or reactions or if there are any changes in your emotions or behaviour that are worrying you.
- If your family or friends think that you need assistance. Sometimes people close to you are better judges than yourself of how much an event has impacted on you.

Options for getting professional help include your doctor, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counsellor through your work or seeing a counsellor at Road Trauma Support WA.



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## Support services/websites/blogs

**Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**  
[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

**Journey Beyond Road Trauma**  
[www.journeybeyondroadtrauma.org](http://www.journeybeyondroadtrauma.org)

**My Grief Assist**  
[www.mygriefassist.com.au](http://www.mygriefassist.com.au)

**What's Your Grief?**  
[www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

**The Compassionate Friends**  
A self-help organisation for parents who have lost a child of any age  
[www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au](http://www.compassionatefriendswa.org.au)

**Solace Australia**  
A self-help organisation for those grieving over the death of their partner. [www.solace.org.au](http://www.solace.org.au)

## Further support services

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**Kids Helpline** 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)

**Crisis Care** 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (free call)

**GriefLine** 1300 845 745

**Rural Link** 1800 552 002

## About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral required.

### We provide:

- Information and support
- Education and training (costs may apply)
- Counselling

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Road Trauma Support WA is delivered by Injury Matters with funding from the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management through the Road Safety Commission.



**Every year in WA, thousands of people are impacted by road trauma.** Losing family and friends, dealing with injuries, caring for those injured, causing a crash or witnessing a serious crash can have a devastating and enduring impact.