



Supporting loved ones after a major incident

In the aftermath of a major incident, supporting a loved one who has been involved can be challenging for families and friends. Media coverage can give us some insight into what our loved ones may have experienced, but it rarely gives us insight into how it feels for a police officer on duty or how it feels when they come home.

Making sense

After any trauma exposure it takes time (often weeks) for the brain to process what has happened. Terrorist incidents may be particularly difficult to make sense of because of their unexpected nature and the severity of their impact. In policing, attending such incidents may be 'part and parcel' of the job, but this does not make it any easier on the brain to process events, reset the stress response, and return to the demands of everyday life. It is useful for officers, families and friends to understand what natural trauma processing is and how to support it.

What to expect

While the brain is busy trying to make sense of a traumatic incident, it is often distracted. From the outside, loved ones may come across as being distant or detached from everyday life. As the brain tries to process a lot of emotional memories, individuals may seem 'cut-off' and unresponsive. Processing trauma exposure takes a lot of mental energy. It may disturb sleep, leading to irritability, jumpiness and low energy levels.

How to support trauma processing

The best way to support a loved one who has attended a major incident is to understand that their brain needs to process what has happened. If their behaviour changes, it is important for loved ones not to panic or make judgements. Making space and time for trauma processing is valuable. Some people prefer this to be 'alone time', and others benefit greatly from sharing experiences with willing peers.

As a practical tip, some people find drawing helpful. Suggest they imagine they are looking down on what happened and sketch it. Combining a drawing with a timeline of the event can help to put things into context

and make it easier for the brain to cope with difficult memories. It's a simple technique which helps to "file" memories away making it easier to cope with the stress of traumatic situations.

Looking after yourself and children

Families and friends of officers involved in major incidents should not ignore themselves in the aftermath. While it may be helpful for some couples and friends to talk through incidents, this can be a form of 'secondary trauma exposure', which can be distressing. It is also important to be mindful that children and young people may also be exposed to media and social media coverage and may worry about their loved one and their behaviour.

When to seek further help and what to ask for

Advice on PTSD has been developed by the mental health charity MIND. You should also consider contacting your GP who will be able to discuss the options available within your local NHS area.

For more advice, please contact the Police Dependants' Trust advice line on 020 8941 6907 or visit our website.