Responding after a Traumatic Event

What is a traumatic event?
A traumatic event is an event that overwhelms the usual coping strategies of an individual and tends to be outside ‘ordinary’ human experience. Such incidents typically include loss of life or threat to physical safety such as a suicide or serious fire on campus.

The impact of a traumatic event
Exposure to traumatic events commonly causes strong emotional responses in victims, helpers and observers and has the potential to cause significant traumatic stress. Most people recover from a traumatic event without professional help, but in a small percentage of people, the incident can interfere with their ability to function effectively.

People who may be affected by traumatic events include:
- People directly exposed to the incident
- People who have lost family or friends in the incident
- Relatives and friends of those affected by the incident
- People with previous trauma or grief can be more vulnerable to adverse reactions
- Helpers, recovery and support personnel
- People who could have been involved if not for chance circumstances

Managing traumatic events at The University of Tasmania
The University has established the Crisis Management and Recovery Team (CMRT), which will be convened in the event of any serious, larger scale incident involving students, staff or property. Smaller incidents will generally be managed on a practical level by the university emergency management network or relevant university function areas.

In the aftermath, support for students, staff and others affected by a crisis will generally be coordinated by the Trauma Recovery Team, working with relevant Schools, Colleges and Divisions and under direction of the CMRT (when activated).
The role of the Trauma Recovery Team

The support response may involve some or all of the following:

- Liaising with key stakeholders within affected areas to plan an appropriate response
- Contacting students and/or staff affected by the incident, assessing their wellbeing and offering any practical assistance
- Identifying and establishing a physical space on campus and/or a virtual space where those affected can find safe connection, support and information
- Assisting with information flow regarding the incident
- Talking with staff individually or in groups to discuss appropriate responses where their students or colleagues are affected
- Speaking in lectures, tutorials or to groups of students about how to care for themselves and others after the incident
- Following up affected students and/or staff over a time period as needed
- Providing professional counselling or appropriate referral where requested

What can you do?

If you become aware of a traumatic incident or event that may require a response from the university (including any student or staff death), notify Security staff in the first instance. They are able to take any immediate action as needed and contact appropriate staff to coordinate a response. Having Security as an initial point of contact ensures that the most relevant and priority areas of the University receive information in a timely manner.

In the case of any death of a student or staff member, even if it is just a notification of a death in circumstances that may not be considered traumatic, contact Security. It is better that Security are notified many times by different sources than not at all. An effective response is dependent on appropriate information being disseminated quickly.

Once practical measures are in place to address the incident, your role is primarily to provide appropriate support to those around you who may be affected by the incident as well as to manage your own self-care.

Supporting students or colleagues affected by a traumatic event

Most people recover on their own or with the help of family and friends, and don't require professional help. Therefore, lecturers, tutors and other staff who know the person well are in a good position to provide support, information and monitoring.

Initial assistance should involve practical and emotional support and information, tailored to individual needs. This is sometimes referred to as psychological first aid, and doesn't need to be provided by a health professional. Generally the Trauma Recovery Team will contact those directly affected, but staff are in a good position to look out for those who may have been affected less directly, and/or do not wish to access professional support.
Supporting a student or colleague after a traumatic event

The amount of support you provide to others will depend on the scale of the incident, what other support is being provided, and the limitations of your role. However, you may be able to assist people who have been affected in one or more of the following ways:

1. Practical assistance: Check they are getting the practical assistance they need (this could include accommodation issues, contacting family/friends, financial issues, academic issues). Ensure that they are aware of available services, and notify Student Experience/HR staff of any outstanding issues you become aware of.
2. Provide reassurance: Reassure people that their feelings are normal, and convey expectancy that they will recover. Don’t pressure them to talk about the incident unless they wish to.
3. Encourage connectedness: Encourage them to make contact with family/friends, and to utilise the supports around them.
4. Restore routines: Gently encourage them to maintain their previous schedule as soon as they feel they can.
5. Promote self-sufficiency: Encourage problem-solving and prioritisation, allow the individual to make decisions, even though they may need more support than usual.
6. Monitor: If and when appropriate, take a minute to check how they are doing. People are most vulnerable for the first four weeks after an incident, so it is important to monitor them over that period.
7. Encourage professional help: If the individual is very distressed, doesn’t seem to be recovering, or becomes more distressed over ensuing weeks, encourage them to contact professional help. Contact Student Wellbeing or HR for advice and referral options.
8. Get support for yourself: If you are unsure about how to deal with a particular situation, ask for assistance. Helpful Contact details are listed below.

Self-Help Tips

Things to consider when supporting others and caring for yourself after an event:

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<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON'T</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spend time with people who care</td>
<td>Use alcohol or drugs to cope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give yourself time</td>
<td>Keep yourself busy and work too much</td>
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<tr>
<td>Find out about impact of trauma and what to expect</td>
<td>Engage in stressful family or work situations</td>
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<td>Try to keep a routine going – work, study, etc.</td>
<td>Withdraw from family and friends</td>
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<td>Return to normal activities</td>
<td>Stop yourself from doing things you enjoy</td>
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<td>Talk about how you feel or</td>
<td>Avoid talking about what</td>
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what happened when you are ready | happened at all cost
---|---
Things that help you relax | Supress/avoid emotions you may not be used to
Things that you enjoy

**After a traumatic event**

The Crisis Management and Recovery Team will be stood down once the key responses to the event are implemented. Similarly, Trauma Recovery Team staff will follow up as needed for a limited period. After this, regular services will be available to deal with ongoing psychological/welfare issues that may continue or arise. This may include staff counselling (provided externally through an EAP), HR support, chaplaincy and the Student Experience staff. You can have an important role over this period, monitoring students and colleagues and notifying regular support services if you are concerned.

**More Information**

For more information regarding the role of the Trauma Recovery Team or the issues surrounding management of a traumatic event, please contact The Executive Director Student Experience.

**Useful Contacts**

In an emergency call **000**

If you are on campus, contact Campus Security

- Launceston **(03) 63243336**
- Hobart **(03) 62267600**
- Cradle Coast **(03) 63243336**
- Rozelle **0402 696 321**

University of Tasmania [Counselling Service](http://www.utas.edu.au/students/shw/counselling), 1800 817 675 or Counselling.Consultancy@utas.edu.au

University Staff Counselling: Visit the UTAS Work Health and Safety website:

https://secure.utas.edu.au/work-health-safety/myhealth/mental-health/counselling-services#Counselling Services

Trauma Recovery Team Leader – Executive Director Student Experience – 03 6226 2099

Student Experience support staff - [http://www.utas.edu.au/students/shw](http://www.utas.edu.au/students/shw)

Human Resources and Work Health and Safety – [health.safety@utas.edu.au](mailto:health.safety@utas.edu.au) or 03 6226 7555/6298