

First on the scene and witnesses of road trauma

If you were a passenger, witnessed, or assisted at the scene of a fatal or serious collision, it is important to acknowledge that you have experienced a traumatic event and that you may be experiencing a wide range of thoughts, feelings and responses to the trauma.

We hope the following information will be helpful to you.

You might be experiencing some of the following trauma reactions – flashbacks, sleep difficulties, anxiety, confusion, guilt, feelings of helplessness, anger, disbelief, irritability, wanting to withdraw from others, avoiding reminders of the collision (eg the site of the crash), shaking, low attention span and lack of concentration.

You might be preoccupied with what happened at the crash site, what you saw and heard, and the events following the collision.

You may feel that your basic assumptions about safety in the world have been shattered, and that you feel that nothing is 'safe' anymore.

You might be fearful of driving, fearful of having people who are important to you drive, or be afraid to be a passenger in a motor vehicle.

You may be over-critical of yourself and question whether you could have done something to help the person or people who were injured or died in the collision. You may wonder whether you made the right decisions at the scene. Survivor guilt feelings might be adding to your distress. If you were first on the scene, you may have tried to help a person in his or her last moments. You may have a bond with that person, which few others really understand. You may be grieving for those who have died and for their family and friends.

These are all normal and natural reactions to what you have experienced and are to be expected at this difficult time.

You might find that your thoughts and feelings may not be understood by others and that others expect you to 'get over it' because you did not know the person or people who died. Because of these feelings of being not understood, you may be avoiding talking about the crash, and what you saw, heard or smelled. This can lead to feelings of isolation.

Who can help?

At times like these, supportive family and friends can provide the most help. However, following a fatal road collision, it can also be helpful to speak with someone outside of your network of family and friends. Speaking with your general practitioner, a psychologist, a social worker or a counsellor experienced in trauma and grief can be useful.

Witnesses who have been involved in fatal collisions can receive ongoing support and information from qualified counsellors and trained volunteer peer supporters at the Road Trauma Support Team Victoria.

What can help?

Recognise that you have been through a traumatic event. Give yourself permission to have time and space to acknowledge what you have been through. But try not to become too isolated from other people.

Recurring flashbacks, dreams and thoughts about the trauma are normal. Don't try to fight them; they will decrease in frequency as time passes.

- Find someone who is a good listener. Talk about what you are thinking and feeling.
- Look after yourself. Get plenty of rest. Eat regular, well-balanced meals. Exercise regularly. Try not to use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain. Reduce your use of stimulants such as coffee, tea, cola and cigarettes.
- Take time out to relax.
- Try to resume a normal routine as soon as possible.
- Ask for help when needed.

Counsellors

Qualified counsellors at Road Trauma Support Services Victoria can provide you with information about how to cope with the trauma, and with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours you are experiencing. You do not have to be concerned about the effect that parts of your 'story' may have on a professional counsellor.

Volunteer Peer Supporters

Volunteer peer supporters are people who have, themselves, experienced road trauma and who wish to support others who have had a similar road trauma.

Volunteer peer supporters can offer real understanding and empathy.

They know better than most people that, in 'one split second', a person's life can be changed forever. You may find it helpful to speak with someone who has been in a similar experience.

The Road Trauma Support Services Victoria is a not-for-profit organization offering support to anyone in Victoria affected by road trauma – bereaved family members, drivers, witnesses, those who assisted at the scene, passengers, pedestrians, people who have been injured, and friends and family of the above.

Counselling and support services are provided free of charge.

Free call: 1300 367 797