The Healing Process After Trauma

Although the healing process is individual and personal, there are some common steps that most people go through. Although this process is natural and normal, it is also painful and difficult. Moving through the healing process means acknowledging a painful reality and integrating it into your life in a meaningful way. That may require a lot of time and patience. The following points summarize what we know about the healing process:

1. Make a connection between the event and your response. The response to trauma may be immediate or delayed, mild or intense. It may include numbness, or a strong connection with another event that caused feelings of loss or helplessness. It’s crucial to have the support of others, and, at the right time, to make the connection between your pain and the event itself. Try to keep from sealing off your reactions and feelings.

2. Find a safe environment for emotional sharing. A very natural response to trauma is to deny or “wall off” the painful reaction to the event. While you may need privacy to deal with events and feelings in your own way and your own time, you also need to talk about these feelings, either with friends, family and colleagues, or with a counsellor or trauma specialist.

3. Make an effort to think the event through, either individually or in a group. It’s important to be able to acknowledge your feelings of sadness, anger, confusion or guilt. If others went through the trauma too, talking about it together can help all of you make sense out of what may have been a senseless event.

4. Ask the questions that don’t have easy answers. For example: “Why does it always happen to the good guy?” “How could someone do this?”

5. Allow memories of painful events in the past to surface, even if you feel that you have already dealt with them. Trauma brings back memories of trauma. Although it may seem unfair, an incident can make you remember and sometimes rework experiences that don’t usually intrude into your everyday life. This is normal. By consciously remembering and re-experiencing these painful events, the memories will eventually recede into the background. The mistake is to push them down again too fast, too soon.

6. Examine for yourself as an individual, as well as a member of the group, what this event means for you. An example: “As a result of this, we recognize how important we are to one another and how little time we spend communicating. We need to examine our values more closely.” This encourages acceptance of a new, more difficult reality and the beginning of being able to move on with life.

7. Understand that your life may never be the same as it was before the trauma. You will heal and rebuild your life, but it will be different from what it was before. Trying to “get back to normal” is impossible if normal means as it was, exactly, before the trauma.

The healing process doesn’t always proceed in a straight line. You may seem to be recovering, but then something - the anniversary of the incident, or hearing about a similar incident - can cause a setback. Keep in mind these points about the healing process, you’ll be better equipped to eventually work through the pain.