

Following a car crash

First and most importantly, talk about the crash

People react differently to a car crash. Some people clam up and want to forget that it ever happened. Others will want to confide in a close friend or family member about what happened. Talking it through will help to clarify the events and make sense of what happened.

Drive again

The last thing many drivers and passengers want to do again is get into a car. The very thought of it can be all it takes for the flash backs and bad memories to return. It is not the same as getting back on a bicycle again, but it is necessary to conquer the fear and learn to feel comfortable sitting in a car and driving one again. If a car is required to get to work, it will be important to get back behind the wheel again as soon as possible. Putting it off will make it harder and more nerve wracking. It may also be a burden on others. At first, you may require some assistance from a friend or family member, having someone else sitting beside you as you start to drive again can help you to rebuild your shattered confidence.

Let go of regret

It is not possible to turn the clock back and avoid the crash. Regret will not help the situation, but will make a person gloomy and depressed. It is best to accept what happened and try to learn from it. Is there anything that you could do differently next time you drive? Survivors of car crashes often make great drivers, as they are more cautious and observant of road conditions, other vehicles and their own driving techniques.

A car crash is a terrible experience to go through. It can leave a person scarred physically and emotionally for many years to come, but survivors find that to concentrate on the fact that they are still alive and that they will overcome their overwhelming flood of feelings over time is a great way to move forward.

Moving forward

After a collision it is usual that a person will feel recovered from the psychological impact within 3 to 12 months, others may have persistent problems or suddenly developed anxiety or other symptoms months after the collision.

Anxiety about travelling may mean feeling anxious when driving or riding in cars or avoiding cars altogether. You may also feel nervous or anxious when passing the site of the collision, seeing similar road conditions or travelling in the vehicle involved in the collision or a similar type or colour of car.

What will help you cope?

It is important to talk about the incident with family and friends. Talking about the experience helps to contain the stress and helps you to work through and understand what has happened. It is also advisable to inform your GP at an early stage, especially if you are being treated for an ongoing matter.

Try to get adequate rest, eat a balanced diet, and engage in light physical exercise such as walking for fifteen minutes to half an hour each day. Coping with emotional problems is a little easier when we are in good physical health.

Try to accept that the unpleasant symptoms you are experiencing are normal and that others have experienced them too.

It is important not to make radical changes in your life in an effort to avoid a similar circumstance. There comes a time when you have to return to normal activities.

The most important factor in recovering from the trauma of the collision is recognising that you are having a problem and getting help.

Like other types of trauma, car collisions can cause long-term stress that affects your work and relationships and can eventually lead to depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. These kinds of reactions are normal and to be expected in the [short-term] aftermath of whatever has happened, but if they start to become persistent, that is a sign that they may become [long-term] and can become very debilitating.

If two or three months have passed since a collision and you still feel anxious, are avoiding certain driving situations, or have persistent thoughts or dreams about the collision, you should seek help from your GP.

Treatment may include anxiety management, breathing and relaxation exercises, or medications to relieve anxiety and/or help you sleep.

Like adults, young children often suffer anxiety and phobias after a collision. For some children the situation may be made worse by having no choice about when and where they are travelling and also because their parents may voice their own fears and phobias about the collision to them.

Why you are feeling this way?

Understanding trauma reactions

Emotional responses can range from mild to severe and disabling. The intensity of the experience will usually dictate the intensity of the reaction. For instance, a person who witnesses a car collision may have a milder trauma reaction than someone who is actually involved in the collision. And, of course, a person who is severely injured is likely to experience a more severe reaction than someone who escapes without a scratch.

More often than not, the initial response to a traumatic event is a feeling of numbness. After that, reactions may include sleep problems and changes in eating habits. Some people even experience situational amnesia – they do not remember what happened. Emotional reactions such as depression, anxiety and agitation are common. A startled response when encountering something that reminds the person of the incident is another typical response.

Reactions vary in duration

The duration of this acute period of stress varies with the duration of the event.

Recovery may also be slower for those who were suffering from emotional problems before the event, have suffered a physical injury, or who lack a strong support system of friends and relatives.

Although the majority of people recover from a traumatic event in less than six months, there are a small number who are unable to adjust satisfactorily after the six

months. This problem can be prevented by seeking help as soon as possible after the traumatic event.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

Did you experience or witness or were you confronted with an event that involved threatened death, serious injury, or threat to physical integrity of self or others?

After one to three months are you still?

- Re-experiencing of the trauma
- Recurrent and distressing recollections of the event
- Recurrent distressing dreams
- Acting or feeling 'as if' the event was recurring
- Intense distress when exposed to internal or external cues that resemble or symbolise the event
- Persistent Avoidance and numbing/decreased responsiveness
- Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings or conversations associated with trauma
- Efforts to avoid activities, places or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
- Inability to recall important aspects of the trauma
- Diminished interest or participation in activities
- Feeling detached or estranged from others
- Unable to have loving feelings
- Sense of foreshortened future
- Sleep difficulty

- Irritability or anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hyper vigilance
- Exaggerated startle response.

This list is just for awareness, should you feel you can relate to a number of these issues several months after the incident, it is advisable to talk to your GP. If PTSD is diagnosed, relevant and appropriate support will be put in place for you.

Most people find that as time goes by, the impact of the collision starts to fade, this guide is designed to help you understand what you may experience and to help support you through the weeks and months after the event. It is always recommended that you seek medical help if you feel that you are not making any progress in good time.

Finally, it sometimes helps to talk to someone outside of your family and circle of friends

The Samaritans have trained operators who are available 24/7 – Freephone 116 123 www.samaritans.org

Brake helpline – 0808 800 0401 www.brake.org.uk

Citizens Advice – Traffic collisions www.adviceguide.org.uk

Remember, what you are feeling is normal it is the situation that is abnormal.