Whether you were actually harmed or threatened with harm, or witnessed it happening to someone else, you may struggle to come to terms with what's happened. For some time afterwards, memories of the event may still trouble you – your relationships, your studies may begin to suffer as a result.

There is nothing wrong with you – you are NOT weak & you are NOT going crazy.

However, you may be experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD.

**What is PTSD?**

PTSD is a common reaction to stressful events. While the majority of people exposed to trauma recover in the following weeks or months, a significant minority continue to suffer symptoms long afterwards. In PTSD with delayed onset, symptoms may not appear until months after the actual event.

It's not WHAT HAPPENED, but WHAT IT MEANT TO YOU that matters.

One's experience of fear, helplessness & horror during the trauma predicts a person's risk of developing PTSD better than any objective measure of danger or physical injury. E.g., you might be involved in a car accident/assault in which you escaped with minor physical injuries. However, if during the event, you genuinely believed that you might die or be killed, you may be at greater risk of suffering posttraumatic stress.

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**Symptoms of PTSD**

You may have trouble sleeping; have recurring nightmares; or be disturbed by upsetting memories or 'flashbacks' about the event. While you may have very vivid memories of some parts of the event, you may have amnesia for other bits. It is not unusual to be mentally preoccupied with what happened while, at the same time, desperately trying to avoid thinking or talking about it.

You may feel nervous or 'on edge' and prefer not to be alone. Some feel very irritable or tearful, while others feel rather numb, dazed, cut off from everyone around them. You may also feel hopeless about the future.

In terms of work or study, you may find your memory is poor and you cannot concentrate as usual. While family or friends try to be helpful, you may sometimes wish they would stop asking questions and leave you alone. Other times it may feel like no-one understands or cares enough about what's happened to you.

Feelings of anxiety (e.g. “I'll never feel safe in that house”, “what if I never feel myself again?”), guilt (e.g. “if only I hadn't been driving”), anger (e.g. “I wish everyone would leave me alone”, “how can they get away with this?”) are very upsetting but normal.

**Ways of coping**

- **Be patient with yourself:** It can take weeks or months to come to terms with what's happened, to learn to live with it, & to grieve for whom/what you may have lost.

- **Don't bottle things up.** Some people avoid thinking or talking about the event, hoping to feel better & forget it sooner. But this can also intensify the memories, flashbacks & dreams.

- **Ask for support from others.** Others may want to help, but not know how. If there's something you need, ask. Don't feel embarrassed about accepting help, you would do the same for your friend too.

- **Do 'normal' things with others.** You may want company but not to talk about what happened. Just explain this to your friends.

- **Routine can help too.** You may not feel like eating or doing much of anything. But try to keep regular mealtimes, even if you don't eat much. And try a little exercise – something gentle at first – or just a walk out of the house can help.

- **Talk it over.** Bit by bit, allow yourself to think about what happened & talk about it with friends & family. Don't worry if you cry, it's natural & can be helpful. Remember that others might not know how to react at first.

- **Avoid drink and drugs.** It can be tempting to try to numb the pain but it can also delay your recovery & lead to other problems.

- **Put off any major life decisions.** Now is probably not the best time to decide about the future. Take one day at a time until you feel more like yourself.

- **Take care.** When you're preoccupied with trauma & recovery, you may be more prone to accidents. Be careful around the house and on the roads.
When should I get professional help?

Family and friends can be a great support during this difficult time. However, you may need to see a professional if your feelings are too much for you, or go on for too long. Speak to a counsellor if:

- you feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, or nervousness,
- there is no-one you can talk with,
- you feel no better after six weeks,
- you are getting on badly with those close to you, or isolating yourself more & more,
- you are thinking about suicide or self harm,
- you have nightmares & cannot sleep,
- your work is suffering,
- those around you suggest you seek help,
- you are drinking or smoking too much.

Counselling at CAPS

At UWI, the Counselling and Psychological Service (CAPS) offers free and confidential counselling to students.

Psychological therapy provides an opportunity to think through some of the reasons why you might feel the way you do and to understand more about post traumatic stress. Therapy offers ways of coping with symptoms and a ‘safe place’ to start to talk about how you feel about what happened… at YOUR pace.

Whether you see the counsellor for one or two sessions, or on a more regular basis, depends on what you find most helpful.

Self help material

Check out the self-assessment tools on the CAPS website. These anonymous questionnaires screen for PTSD as well as depression, alcohol abuse, eating disorders, anxiety, and other problems. See the website: http://sta.uwi.edu/caps/

Other useful websites:

http://www.ptsdinfo.org/
http://www.helpguide.org
(follow the links to stress & trauma)

How to contact CAPS?

Call us: 662 2002 ext 2491
Or email: counsellor@sta.uwi.edu

Or pop in and see us. We are located in the Health Service Unit, between Trinity Hall and the Learning Resources Centre (LRC).

While we usually see students by appointment, we make every effort to see someone immediately in an emergency.

Opening hours

CAPS is available throughout the year, from 8:30am – 7pm during term-time. During vacation, we close at 4:30pm.

This leaflet prepared by the Counselling & Psychological Services, UWI, St Augustine.