

# SupportLink – *Opening statement*

Inquiry into Dangerous Driving 26 October 2022

Picture yourself in the following scenarios:

It's been a long day, you've just finished dinner and settling in for a quiet night when the doorbell rings, a Police Officer, delivers overwhelming, life-altering news.

Perhaps you're a high school student, stressed out with exams and looking forward to the next holidays. On Monday morning you're met by a group of crying classmates, a fellow student is never going to be joining you at school again.

Maybe you've just dropped the kids off at school, drinking your take-away coffee in the car on the way to work when you happen across a devastating situation, without a second thought, you stop to help. What happens next will flash through your mind, involuntarily, for the rest of your life.

On the other side of town, someone turns on the news and starts to tremble as the memory of their own loss is triggered by the story read out by a news reader.

Maybe you're starting your first day of Kindy, your neighbour has agreed to drop you off because the family car has been written off, mum's still in hospital and dad just can't get out of bed, he's been crying for weeks.

Parents, carers, witnesses, colleagues, classmates, friends, children, community.

We cannot quantify the emotional impact of serious road incidents just to the reported number of lives lost.

While these numbers are shocking, unacceptably high, and significant – they do not reflect all the people who need care and support following road trauma.

The effects of trauma and trauma reactions are well documented.

People impacted by trauma often experience flashbacks, disrupted sleep, increased anxiety, restlessness, lapses in concentration and a lack of interest in their usual activities. The young student might find that they're unable to focus on their exams, the impacts of that influences them for years to come.

Another common reaction is the preoccupation with what has happened, this can be all consuming. For our witness that could mean significant changes to lifestyle as they now drive the long way to work to avoid a location at the risk of triggering traumatic memories.

Others will report physical symptoms such as tension, nausea, fatigue, chest pains and headaches. They might develop a fear of driving, of being a passenger, or a pedestrian, worrying about others driving or using the roads.

The dad in our story can no longer work, he was a delivery driver, but the thought of getting back behind the wheel is crippling.

Or perhaps their basic assumptions about the world have been shattered, and that nothing is 'safe' anymore. For all the individuals in our story, their world view is now filtered through the lens of trauma.

Although the above symptoms are considered “normal responses” to a traumatic event, there is nothing “normal” about the way life feels anymore. Individuals going through these experiences routinely report they think they’re “going crazy” and can’t understand their reactions.

Imagine their relief to know that what they are experiencing is completely expected under the circumstances, but how do you know that unless someone tells you and how do you process all this unless someone guides you.

There are so many issues for you to consider in this inquiry, both complex and systemic.

I’m asking you to think about one area, the experience of a road accident, a death or major injury, from the perspective of the people affected, those that are there, and of their loved ones.

Currently, there are no services in the ACT that provides timely, trauma-informed, outreach support to people impacted by a road trauma.

The Coronial Counselling Service has been funded to provide counselling to people following a death being investigated by the coroner. But what about support for all those people outside of the criteria for this service.

Everyone will react differently, depending on the circumstances of the accident and the outcomes.

There is substantial evidence advocating the benefits of intervention at the earliest possible time following a road fatality, as well as cost benefits to the community, first responders, health services and government.

Research supports that Involvement in a motor vehicle accident places people at increased risk for psychological issues.

Yet we still have no service here in the ACT.

Even incidents that are considered “minor accidents” can have flow on effects such as chronic pain, anxiety, depression, PTSD and sleep issues, as well the potential dependence or addiction to tranquilisers and pain medication prescribed to manage these complications.

Furthermore, underlying mental health issues, trauma, or physical injuries, that we know are prevalent in the general population, can be exacerbated following a road trauma.

At the end of the day every person’s experience will be their own, influenced by past experiences, who they are, and also what happens next.

It is possible to become desensitised to words, Road trauma. Victim. Survivor. Accident. Witness.

To get caught up in the complexity of it all.

To me the solution seems fundamentally simple, a single point of contact that reaches out and connect with people. We can help those impacted to process what has happened, to identify healthy ways of managing triggers, to support them in navigating the path ahead and know where to get help when they need it

Working toward a full recovery is much more effective and achievable when people have access to an adequate support system.

Appropriate and timely support is such a crucial part of recovery.

I genuinely thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you today and you taking the time to listen to what I have to say.

Donna Evans

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/identifying-health-impacts-following-a-road-traffic-accident/>

<https://www.rtswa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/03/2018-RTSWA-Coping-after-Road-Trauma-Factsheet-4pp-v3-Reduced.pdf>

<https://www.novusglass.com/en-au/industry-insight/how-to-support-a-family-member-after-a-car-accident/>