

Coping After a Traumatic Event

If you have been through a critical incident, or traumatic event—for example, a natural disaster, sudden loss, or frightening exposure to violence—you may experience emotional reactions for weeks or even months afterward. Although many stress reactions diminish fairly quickly, others may last longer than you expect. It's important for you—or a loved one who has undergone a traumatic event—to take care of yourself and to remember that resources are available to help.

Common reactions

People respond to trauma in different ways, depending on their personalities and previous experiences. Some of the more common reactions to trauma include:

- flashbacks and disturbing memories about the event
- feelings of numbness or detachment
- bad dreams and difficulty sleeping
- feelings of sadness and grief
- feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, and powerlessness
- feelings of anger, irritability, and impatience
- unexplained fatigue
- changes in appetite
- difficulty concentrating
- increased worry about what will happen next

If you are experiencing any kind of physical reaction to stress, like headaches, heart palpitations, chest pains, dizziness, or difficulty breathing, it's important to seek medical attention immediately.

Ways to cope

Following a traumatic event, there are important steps to help you or your loved ones to recover. Afterward, it's important to:

Acknowledge your emotions. Give yourself time to process your feelings. It will help you adjust to what you've experienced. Many people find it helps to talk with others about their experience. Others find that they need time alone for quiet reflection on their feelings. Don't be hard on yourself for feeling the way you do; it's normal to have an emotional reaction. Keep in mind that people respond differently, so avoid comparing your reactions to those of others.

Take care of your health. Make a point of eating well-balanced meals and getting some exercise, even if it's just a 20-minute walk. If you don't have the appetite for ordinary meals, try eating smaller nutritious snacks through the day. Limit or avoid alcohol and caffeine, but drink plenty of water—stress can sometimes lead to dehydration.

Get rest. This can be hard if you are taking care of others, but it's important. Closing your eyes and practicing deep breathing for even five to ten minutes twice a day can help.

Be careful when you are cooking, driving, and working. Stress lowers your ability to concentrate, so accidents are more likely to happen when you're distracted by stress.

It can also be a good idea to:

Write down your thoughts. Many people find it reduces their anxiety to keep a journal of their feelings. This can be especially helpful if you're having difficulty sleeping.

Spend time with others. Isolation can make many people who are feeling bad feel even worse. When you have someone else's perspective to counterbalance your own, it's easier to overcome negative thoughts and feelings.

Maintain rituals that are relaxing and fulfilling. If you enjoy playing board games on Friday nights or reading aloud to your child every evening, try to continue these routines if possible. Spend time doing activities you enjoy, such listening to relaxing music or going on walks in a tranquil setting.

Reduce other stress in your life. Try to avoid making big life changes if you can. Eliminate nonessential activities where you can, especially those that you don't enjoy.

Learn a new stress management technique. You might like to try yoga or mindfulness meditation, which can help you feel calmer. Or put up a picture of a place where you feel peaceful, and focus on it a few times a day.

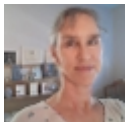
If reactions persist

Sometimes reactions to a trauma last long after the event and make it hard to get back to everyday life. Past traumas and feelings can also be triggered by the event. Left untreated, these reactions can also affect your physical wellbeing. If you have persistent problems with any of the following, it's important to get expert help:

- sleep difficulties or bad dreams
- memories and flashbacks of the event that interrupt your everyday life
- memories and flashbacks of a prior traumatic event
- withdrawal from activities that you once enjoyed
- feelings of anger, sadness, or mood swings
- difficulty with personal relationships

Many professionals, including psychologists and social workers, specialize in helping people who have undergone a traumatic event. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy is an effective for trauma and brings relief in a short period of time. Some people find that joining a support group of people who have been through a similar trauma can be helpful; others prefer one-on-one conversations. Speak with a therapist or contact your organization's assistance program for support.

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