

## coping with highly stressful or traumatic events

After encountering a highly stressful or traumatic event, the majority of people will initially experience difficult thoughts, emotions and physical reactions. It is common and normal to experience such reactions after facing a terrifying or horrific event. These reactions can appear immediately after, a few hours or days after, or sometimes weeks after the incident has occurred, and may last a couple of days or weeks.

Having the support and understanding of friends and family usually helps with the natural recovery process which can occur after a traumatic event. If you have symptoms that are particularly severe, or have lasted for more than one month, you may benefit from seeking out professional help. It is extremely important to note that seeking help does not imply weakness, but rather, it reflects the impact of the incident.

The following are common (generally temporary) symptoms which may be present shortly after encountering a traumatic event:

### thoughts

- Confusion
- Uncertainty
- Hypervigilance
- Nightmares
- Intrusive images
- Flashbacks (feeling as though the event is happening again)
- Suspicion towards others
- Poor problem solving
- Difficulties with concentration
- Memory deficits
- Heightened awareness, or the opposite (feeling “spaced out” or in a fog)
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- Obsession or preoccupation with the incident
- Difficulties looking toward the future
- Denial that the traumatic event occurred or minimization of the impact

### emotions

- Fear / anxiety
- Guilt
- Grief
- Panic
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Anger / rage
- Shock
- Emotional outbursts
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Heightened emotional response to related and/or unrelated events
- Numbing or restricted range of emotions
- Inability to feel strong positive emotions, such as joy or affection

### physical experiences

- Trembling
- Restlessness
- Agitation
- Fatigue / exhaustion
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Digestive upset
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fainting
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Rapid heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Clenching teeth
- Muscle tension (may lead to backaches, headaches, etc.)

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## behaviours

- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Inability and/or unwillingness to relax
- Sleep disturbance (may sleep more or less than usual)
- Loss of appetite, or increased appetite
- Self-destructive or risk-taking behaviors
- Increased substance use or abuse
- Relationship problems: increased conflict with friends, family, others
- Decline in work/school performance
- Avoidance of reminders of the trauma (e.g., avoiding places or people which trigger memories)
- Strong need to talk about the stressful event, or the opposite (refusal to discuss the trauma)

## coping with signs and symptoms of stress reactions

The following are suggestions to try to deal with stress reactions:

- Engage in appropriate physical exercise, especially within 48 hours of the incident. Keep up your usual exercise routine, and if you are typically inactive, consider trying some brisk walking or some other light physical activity in the days following a traumatic event.
- Engage in relaxation activities. These may include breathing exercises and/or muscle relaxation exercises, in addition to activities that make you feel calm (e.g., hobbies, woodworking, reading, colouring, watching calming movies or television shows, playing music, baths, etc.)
- Maintain your usual schedule, as much as possible. You may need to reduce commitments slightly, but try to do at least a few of your usual activities each day.
- Remind yourself that you are having normal reactions to an abnormal event, and you will not feel this way forever.
- Talk to people. Share your thoughts and feelings with others. Don't keep your experiences to yourself.
- Avoid drinking alcohol, taking drugs, and other stimulants, such as caffeine.
- Reach out to people; ask for help or increase your time being around friends and family.
- Give yourself permission to feel the way you do – there is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel after a trauma.
- Do things that you enjoy doing.
- Consider processing some of your experiences by journaling about what happened.
- Avoid making any big decisions immediately. Practice making smaller decisions that are within your control, such as what you'd like to eat for dinner.
- Sleep disturbance after a traumatic event is very common. If your sleep is disrupted initially, this is normal. It will improve with time. That being said, try to follow your typical sleep routine as much as possible.
- There is no need to try and stop reoccurring thoughts or flashbacks. Remember that these are normal responses, and they represent your mind processing what has happened. These experiences will typically decrease over time and become less painful and intrusive.
- Eat regular, well balanced meals, even if you don't feel like eating, and remember to stay hydrated.

## how to help family and friends who have experienced trauma

- Listen carefully. Let the person talk about their experiences, and validate their thoughts and feelings.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your support, including listening, even if they have not asked for help.
- Give reassurances they are safe now.
- Let them know that the intensity of their distress will decrease as time goes on.
- Help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, and looking after their children.
- Give them some private time if needed, particularly if they are asking for it.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't minimize their experience or say things like, "You're lucky it wasn't worse"; statements like these are NOT helpful. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help.
- Do not use this as an opportunity to compare their experiences with a trauma that you have personally experienced or witnessed. These comparisons are not typically helpful, as no two people will have identical reactions to trauma.
- Gently encourage them not to blame themselves for something they did or did not do to survive the trauma: remind them that they coped with the event the best they could at the time.
- If your friend or loved one does not seem to be recovering after several weeks have passed, or if their reactions are particularly intense, they may benefit from seeking out professional support. You may help them by checking into some options for them, if they are open to it.
- Remember to take care of yourself, as a loved one's suffering can be difficult to witness. Don't be afraid to seek support yourself!

\* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: [uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth)