

How to Cope After a Traumatic Event

Traumatic Events

A traumatic event is an unexpected, terrible event that overwhelms your ability to cope. Examples may include:

- abuse: physical, emotional or sexual
- accidents (car, airplane, boat)
- crimes
- discrimination (race, gender, sex)
- drownings
- fires
- medical events (heart attack, stroke)
- military experiences
- rape
- riots
- terrorist attacks
- tornadoes, hurricanes and other natural disasters
- violence.

Not everyone who experiences an unexpected, terrible event feels traumatized by it. However, some people may have trouble coping afterward. This is normal and it is OK to ask for help.

Reactions to Traumatic Events

Everyone responds to traumatic events in a different way. It is helpful to be aware of some of the possible reactions you may have so you can better understand what you are going through and find ways to cope.

You may have many, some or none of the following reactions.

Common physical reactions without a known physical cause include:

- changes in eating habits
- headache
- skin problems (rashes, redness)
- trouble with speech
- upset stomach (nausea).

Common emotional reactions include:

- anger
- fear of being alone (especially being separated from family)
- fear of the event happening again
- feelings of anxiety and nervousness
- feeling irritable
- feeling “numb”
- feeling unsafe or like the event is happening again
- grief
- guilt
- having changes in sexual relationships
- having trouble getting close to others
- having trouble staying positive
- sadness, depression or both
- shame.

(over)

Common spiritual reactions include:

- a feeling of hopelessness or failure
- feeling as if you have lost meaning to your life.

You may also question things you believed to be true in the past.

Common behavioral reactions include:

- avoiding people, places or things that remind you of the event
- being jumpy, jittery or easily startled
- “childish” behavior
- drug abuse, alcohol abuse or both
- “freezing” (not being able to react)
- not being able to fall asleep
- risky behaviors
- violent or aggressive behavior (yelling)
- waking up during the night
- withdrawal from social situations.

Common thinking (cognitive) reactions include:

- confusion or memory loss
- forgetfulness
- losing your sense of direction (disorientation)
- having unwanted thoughts of what happened
- nightmares, flashbacks or both
- poor performance at work or school trouble concentrating
- trouble trusting yourself or others.

How to Cope After a Traumatic Event

- **Take care of yourself.**
Make sure you eat well, drink enough water and get enough sleep.
- **Create a safe space.**
Surround yourself with family and friends. Talk with them about what happened and how you feel. This can help reduce anxiety and stress. Familiar surroundings and routines can help too.
- **Connect with others.**
Take time for social activities with family and friends. Volunteering is a great way to connect with others!
- **Empower yourself!**
Create a few goals and talk with others about how you plan to reach them. Make sure the goals are small and realistic so they are not overwhelming. Completing simple tasks may provide the motivation you need to resume your regular activities. Participate in family activities to help life feel “normal.”
- **Make an appointment to see a mental health care provider.**
A mental health care provider can help you better understand how you are feeling. They will work with you to create a treatment plan that is right for you.

Whom to Call With Questions

Call your primary care provider if you have questions or concerns. They can provide community resources or make a referral to a specialist if needed.

If you are or someone close to you is in crisis, call the free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).