

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:

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

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 differently. However, 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:

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

Common emotional reactions include:

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

(over)

Common spiritual reactions include:

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

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

Common behavioral reactions include:

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

Common thinking (cognitive) reactions include:

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

How to Cope After a Traumatic Event

- **Take care of yourself.**
Make sure you are eating well, drinking enough water and getting enough sleep.
- **Create a safe space.**
Surround yourself with family and friends. Talk with them about what happened and how you are feeling. This can help to 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 too!
- **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 needed to resume your regular activities. Participating in family activities can 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 and 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. He or she 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).