

How a traumatic event can affect you

A traumatic event is any situation that causes a person to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with their ability to function normally at work or at home.



How we react to specific events depends on many things. For example, personal proximity to this traumatic event, if you have previously experienced a traumatic event in your life, or if your present life circumstances are stressful or unstable, you may react more strongly than others. You may find that you have reactions even though you have not been directly involved in the incident.

Recognizing the normal and natural reactions to traumatic events is the first step to being able to cope with the personal aftermath of trauma. The following information will help you understand the reactions you may be experiencing right now and may encounter in the coming days and weeks, and includes helpful strategies to help you get through this challenging period.

Different stages of coping

- Immediately after the experience, you are likely to be in shock, experiencing numbness and feeling out of touch with reality.
- You may become fearful and feel exhausted. This may last a few days or up to a week.
- After a while, you may believe you have mastered your feelings, but later find that the same early emotions keep returning from time to time. Some people describe this feeling as though they are on an emotional roller-coaster. Gradually, feelings of fear decrease in intensity and return less frequently.

Common reactions

- Feeling exhausted for no particular reason

- Difficult or broken sleep patterns
- Lack of energy for normal activities
- Difficulty concentrating on or remember everyday tasks
- Feeling that the normal demands of work and home are overwhelming so you have time to collect your thoughts
- Easily irritated by little things, such as noise
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs, particularly in reaction to difficult emotions or for help in falling asleep

Learning to cope

- Engage in activities you enjoy
- Spend time with good friends and loved ones
- Eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest
- Exercise regularly and listen to your body's needs
- Refrain from using cigarettes, alcohol and drugs
- Talk to others who have experienced a similar event
- Reach out to spiritual leaders and doctors who can also provide good sources of support
- Talk about your feelings with family and friends and share the above information with them so they can also understand your experience
- Talk to others who experienced the event as they may have similar feelings and insight

Taking care after a traumatic event

A traumatic event is any situation that causes a person to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with their ability to function normally at work or at home.



When you are involved in or witness a traumatic event, your actions and the actions of those around you can be crucial in reducing the effects of the trauma. The 24 to 48 hours after an incident will ultimately affect the amount of reactive stress you'll experience. It can also impact the time needed to recover.

If the traumatic event affects your entire workplace, you may find comfort in knowing that you are not alone in your feelings. The attitude and support of both colleagues and supervisors in the workplace can be a critical aid to recovery.

Tips and tools you can use

If you are personally impacted by trauma and experience immense emotional pain, severe physical symptoms or have difficulty coping, talk to a health professional. While the effects of a traumatic event may sometimes last months or even years, there are some steps that can be taken immediately to help reduce the negative impact. Here are some points to think about:

- Try to maintain a normal routine as much as possible. This will help you rebuild a sense of security and safety.
- Try to exercise within the first 24 hours.
- Cut down on caffeine and tobacco and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Reduce or limit your sugar intake. This will help you avoid the “slump” experienced after an already high-energy response.
- Eat food at regular mealtimes, even if you don't feel hungry.
- Aim for small helpings of nourishing foods.
- If your sleep is disturbed, get up and do something.

- Realize that emotional responses are normal reactions to a traumatic event. Whether you are angry, fearful, anxious, sad or disoriented, what you are experiencing is common.

You and your family

- Give yourselves time to heal.
- Ask for support from your family and friends.
- Keep a diary.
- Join a local support group.
- Establish or re-establish your routines.
- Avoid major life decisions.
- Become knowledgeable about the feelings you'll likely encounter as time goes by.

Reactions after the initial shock subsides

- Feelings may continue to be intense and unpredictable. Many people feel depressed or more irritable than usual.
- Repeated and vivid memories of the event are common.
- There may be continued difficulty concentrating or making decisions.
- Sleep and eating patterns may be disrupted.
- Recurring emotional reactions, like the sound of sirens, are common.
- Relationships may be strained.
- Social withdrawal may occur.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the stress.

Tips for helping your child through a traumatic event



Children do not have the ability to communicate worries or concerns through words. They just don't have the vocabulary. Teens have the vocabulary, however, they may lack the maturity and life experience to properly identify the feelings that they are having. Both children and teens are impacted by the influences that surround them.

For a parent or guardian, a traumatic event is frightening. It can be even more frightening and unsettling for children. Like the adults around them, they too experienced the same event. The children in your life have also been exposed to the same photographs, stories in print media and television images.

Children are like sponges, taking in the world. They are very aware when the adults around them are having a strong emotional reaction. They need to have their feelings validated. It is important to remember that a child not talking about an event does not mean that the event is forgotten or has no importance. Children and teens are more likely to express their reactions through their actions rather than words. Be attentive and take special care through this time of chaos and instability.

The children in your life need your reassurance that they are safe with you. It is important to let them know that it is healthy to express emotions and to let them out. During this time, children will likely be highly sensitive and attentive to the adult responses surrounding them.

The children in your care will need reassurance that their safety and security will be taken care of by the adults in their lives. They will need encouragement to express their concerns. An extra hug, talk time or five more minutes before bedtime are some examples of what you can do to encourage and reassure them. Let them tell you what they need by paying attention to what they are doing or asking for.

Potential reactions that you might see in your child

- Irritability, agitation, confusion
- Withdrawn, denial, sadness
- Sleep disturbance, nightmares

- Increased anxiety, intense fear
- Changes in appetite
- Distress due to work or travel related parental absence
- Testing house rules-dress, curfew, chores
- Quietness, less communicative
- Feelings of helplessness or anger
- More prone to accidents/clumsiness
- Verbal outbursts
- Poor concentration
- Return/increase of bed-wetting or other regressive behaviour

The reactions are usually temporary and will often subside in three to six weeks. In the meantime though, these reactions can be uncomfortable, impacting concentration, productivity and even disrupting sleep patterns.

What you can do

- Don't leave your child alone in a new place
- Talk to your child about the disaster
- Encourage your child to talk
- Say it is OK to be afraid
- Tell your child about your plans each day
- Be attentive to media coverage adding to you and your child's anxiety/stress level
- Put order in your day as best you can
- Stay together to show you won't go away

- Hold and hug
- Listen
- Let them know that you were afraid too
- Reassure them that they're in a safe place
- As long as it can be done safely, let your child help clean up
- Explain, talk and listen frequently

Bedtime may be difficult. Your child may be afraid of the dark, not want to sleep away from you and/or may have nightmares or begin to wet the bed again.

What you can do at bedtime

- Explain why it gets dark
- Praise the child for good things
- Leave the light on and the door ajar
- Read to your child
- Talk about dreams
- Don't yell
- Agree on a time for your child to go to bed
- Tell a story about something good that happened that day

It is important to help your child externalize the feelings. Keeping reactions inside will only serve to have them go into hiding and come back when least expected. Also speak with other parents, caregivers, your child's teacher or school principal to discuss other ideas and suggestions, support and resources.