

R3 CONTINUUM



Taking Care of Yourself After Traumatic Events

A traumatic event can be any experience that someone was involved in or witnessed that posed a serious or perceived threat to someone's life. When someone experiences a traumatic event their brain tries to make sense of what happened. Sometimes people may experience intense emotions and have difficulty thinking. It is important to understand that these reactions are a normal response to an abnormal event. These are some of the most common reactions, things to keep in mind, and coping strategies to use following a traumatic event.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- If you are unable to care for yourself or your children
- Experience significant impairment in ability to function at work or in relationships
- Feel intense sadness or depression for more than two weeks
- Have increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Have thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or harming others

COMMON REACTIONS

- Shock and denial - feeling that this is "unreal" or could not have happened
- Anger - may be at victims, perpetrator, situation, or others
- Confusion or making difficulty thinking clearly
- Difficulty making decisions
- Poor concentration
- Going over and over the event in your mind
- Wondering "what if" - thinking about how things might have been if you acted differently
- Guilt - may be over own survival, or ideas about what you could have done differently
- Depression or sadness
- Anxiety or fear that a robbery will happen again
- Sense of own mortality - "this could happen to me/my family"
- Hypersensitivity - alert to anything that reminds you of the event
- Unpredictable emotions
- Irritability
- Difficulty sleeping or eating
- Blaming - the people involved, the organization, or God
- Physical reactions, such as: rapid breathing, increased heart rate, headache, stomach ache, or shakiness

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- During a traumatic event, our body's natural survival mechanisms kick in. Our brain sends chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol to help us react in a way that would increase our chances of survival. Our brain also stores the memory of the threat, so it can react more quickly if a similar event is encountered. Keep in mind:
 - Adrenaline can make time seem to slow down, which can make the traumatic event seem to last much longer than it really did
 - Anything that reminds our brain of the threat, such as sight, sounds, or smell, can trigger our adrenaline and survival mechanisms, even if there is no real threat present.
 - Our brain will try to figure out the event by way of flashbacks, dreams, and thinking about the event over and over again - don't be alarmed if this happens
 - Adrenaline and cortisol may tell our body to freeze, temporarily taking away our ability to react to the event in the way we may have wished
- Be cautious of consuming caffeine or other stimulants, as they can increase anxiety and interfere with sleep
- Don't be surprised if this trauma brings up past traumas, even if you have worked through those already. This is common and often diminished as time passes



It is important to understand that these reactions are a normal response to an abnormal event

- Because our brain is trying to make sense of the traumatic event, it can slow down our recovery process if we try to deny our feelings or fight reactions. It may be helpful to realize that if flashbacks or dreams occur, it is a normal part of recovery and will usually diminish over time. If we are able to accept our reactions and not fight them, they typically go away faster
- Everyone reacts to a traumatic event their own way and with varying intensities. Factors that impact how we react, include: previous experiences with trauma (especially if unresolved), physical and/or mental health status prior to the event, relationship to others involved in the event, the specifics of the event (how threatening or dangerous, presence of a weapon, degree of injury caused, etc.) social supports and coping strategies, religious beliefs, and other life stressors
- Expect recovery. With the help of social supports and coping skills most people begin to feel better within a few weeks, and functioning often returns to normal within 6 months. It takes time to recover so be patient with yourself, but know that most people who experience a traumatic event do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope, as they prevent your ability to work through the thoughts and emotions brought up by the trauma. They also interfere with sleep, which makes it harder for your body to recover from stress



COPING STRATEGIES

- Try to maintain your usual sleep routine - if having trouble sleeping, get up and do a relaxing activity for a little while to distract your mind from worries
- Eat healthy and drink lots of water - your body and mind need the nutrients to recover from stress and expel the stress chemicals
- Engage in regular exercise - this helps to boost chemicals that improve mood, reduce stress, and improve sleep
- Help someone else - check in with coworkers (both those staying and those no longer with your department), talk with them, offer practical assistance, or invite them out to coffee or lunch
- Do some things you enjoy - part of taking care of yourself is making time to relax and have fun; this gives you a break from stress and helps to maintain balance
- Talk to someone - family, friends, coworkers, a counselor, faith mentor, or anyone else whom you feel comfortable sharing your feelings with and is helpful to you
- Return to routine - as soon as you are able to, engage in your normal routine, this may help you regain your sense of control and predictability of life
- Think about other times - when you have coped with difficult situations. What positive coping strategies worked for you then? Can you practice those now?