

# Coping with Traumatic Events

## Common Responses

Most people involved in a frightening event experience a strong emotional reaction. Some of your experiences can be direct – through the loss of life, injury, damage and loss of property, or indirect through the media reports of highly distressing events.

Although each person's experience is different, there are a number of common responses that are experienced by the majority of those involved. It is reassuring to know that, even though these feelings may be very unpleasant, they are normal reactions in a normal person to an abnormal event. You are not losing your mind or going crazy if you have these feelings. It is often difficult for those who were not involved to understand what the survivor is going through; you may wish to show this pamphlet to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them. Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to trauma.

### Emotional

- Shock**
  - disbelief at what happened
  - feeling numb, as if things are unreal
- Fear**
  - of a recurrence
  - for the safety of oneself or one's family
  - apparently unrelated fears
- Anger**
  - at who caused it or "allowed it to happen"
  - at the injustice and senselessness of it all
  - generalised anger and irritability
- Sadness**
  - about the losses, both human and material
  - about the loss of feelings of safety and security
  - feeling depressed for no reason
- Shame**
  - for having appeared helpless or emotional
  - for not behaving as you would have liked

### Physical

- Sleep**
  - difficulty getting off to sleep because of intrusive thoughts
  - restless and disturbed sleep
  - feeling tired and fatigued
- Physical Problems**
  - easily startled by noises
  - general agitation and muscle tension
  - palpitations, trembling or sweating
  - breathing difficulties
  - headaches or general aches and pains
  - nausea, diarrhoea or constipation
  - many other physical signs and symptoms

### Thinking

- Memories**
  - frequent thoughts or images of the incident
  - thoughts or images of other frightening events
  - flashbacks or feelings of "reliving" the experience
  - attempts to shut-out the painful memories
  - pictures of what happened jumping into your head
- Dreams**
  - dreams and nightmares about what happened
  - unpleasant dreams of other frightening things
- Confusion**
  - difficulty making simple decisions
  - inability to concentrate and memory problems

### Behaviour

- Social**
  - withdrawal from others and a need to be alone
  - easily irritated by other people
  - feelings of detachment from others
  - loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies
- Work**
  - not wanting to go to work, poor motivation
  - poor concentration and attention
- Habits**
  - increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
  - loss of appetite or increased eating
  - loss of interest in enjoyable activities
  - loss of sexual interest

The signs and symptoms described above are common reactions to a traumatic experience, although occasionally they may not appear until some time after the event. Most of them are part of the normal process of recovery and help the person adapt to the trauma. They can, however, be very unpleasant for those affected and their families.

Usually they will diminish over a period of a few weeks, although some may last for months or even years, especially if the experience was particularly frightening. You may also find that the feelings get worse when you are reminded of the event or when you discuss your experiences with other people. Try not to let that stop you from talking about it – in the long term, sharing your experiences and feelings with others will help.

Some people benefit from extra help in overcoming the effects of a traumatic experience. Do not be afraid to get help if you think you need it: it is not a sign of weakness or an indication that you are losing your mind. Often, the help you receive will be short and simple, and will prevent you from having longer term problems.

### More Information

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You may need further assistance if:

- The problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than five or six weeks
- You feel numb or empty and do not have appropriate feelings; you may find yourself keeping busy all the time in order to avoid the unpleasant thoughts and feelings
- You have no friends / family to whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel
- You are using alcohol or drugs to help you cope
- If you have any other concerns about the way you or your family are coping and you would like to discuss the matter
- If you have not already been made aware of where to seek assistance, contact your local GP, family doctor or Community Health Centre

## Coping Suggestions

- Give yourself permission and time to grieve/adjust
- Focus on your strengths and coping skills
- Do something special for yourself every day
- Ask for support and help from your family, friends, church or other community resources. Join or develop support groups
- Redefine your priorities and focus your energy and resources on those priorities
- Set small realistic goals to help tackle obstacles. For example, reestablish daily routines for yourself and your family
- Remember that men and women react differently. Women tend to be caretakers and put others first. Men have difficulty acknowledging and expressing feelings of helplessness and sadness and believe in "toughing it out"
- Remember each person will react differently and will find different strategies useful, depending on their personality and life experiences
- Eat healthy meals and exercise
- Avoid too much coffee and tea to help you sleep at night.
- Avoid numbing the pain with alcohol (or other drugs)
- Get enough rest to increase your reserve strength
- Acknowledge unresolved issues and use the hurt and pain as a motivator to make the necessary changes to heal
- Continue to educate yourself and family about normal reactions to a traumatic event

- Talk to your family members and friends. Be supportive to others. Set an example by expressing your feelings and showing problem solving skills in dealing with family problems
- Outdoor activities, such as going for a walk or gardening take you away from the stress, and refresh you mentally
- Exercise, such as swimming, walking and team games, will produce chemicals called endorphins in the body which help to counteract depression and make you feel good. The exercise does not need to be strenuous. If you have doubts about your fitness consult your doctor
- Relaxation: meditation, massage, music
- A relaxing pre-sleep routine: winding down before bed and not watching television
- Remember that you are not alone
- Consulting the doctor about physical symptoms, for a blood pressure check, for practical help, for medical certificates, and for help with the grief

## More Information

**Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health Psychosocial Support in Disasters portal**  
<http://www.psid.org.au/public>

**Australian Psychological Society | Psychological Preparation for Natural Disasters:**  
[http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/disasters/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/disasters/)

**Australian author, Thomas Shapcott, gives a personal account of living through the 1974 floods in Brisbane:**  
<http://www.theage.com.au/environment/weather/nowhere-to-hidefrom-the-mayhem-when-the-river-comes-looking-for-you-20110114-19rcl.html>

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