

Coping with Stress After a Traumatic Event

Tip Sheet

2017



Traumatic events take different forms—natural disasters (earthquakes, tornados, wildfires), personal loss, school shootings, and community violence—and their effects on us vary. People may feel sad, confused, scared, or worried. Others may feel numb or even happy to be alive and safe. Reactions to traumatic events can be had by those directly impacted as well as by friends and family of victims, first responders, and people learning about the events from the news.

Feeling stressed before or after a traumatic event is normal. But, this stress becomes a problem when we are unable to cope well with it and when the stress gets in the way of taking care of ourselves and family, going to school, or doing our jobs. Coping well with stress begins with recognizing how we are reacting and then by taking steps to manage our reactions in a healthy way.



Common Stress Reactions to a Traumatic Event

Emotional and physical stress reactions may occur immediately around the time of a traumatic event. For some people, signs of stress may take days or weeks to appear. Some stress reactions are:

- Disbelief and shock
- Feeling sad, frustrated, helpless, and numb
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Feeling guilty
- Anger, tension, and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Crying
- Reduced interest in usual activities
- Wanting to be alone
- No desire for food or loss of appetite
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Nightmares or bad memories
- Reoccurring thoughts of the event
- Headaches, back pains, and stomach problems
- Increased heart rate and difficulty breathing
- Increased smoking or use of alcohol or drugs



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Ways to Cope with Stress After a Traumatic Event

A traumatic event can turn your world upside down. There is no simple fix to feeling better right way. Feeling better will take time. Healthy activities can help you, your family, and community heal.

- **Follow a normal routine as much as possible.** Wake up and go to sleep at your usual times. Eat meals at regular times. Continue to go to work and school and do activities with friends and family.
- **Take care of yourself.** Do healthy activities, like eating well-balanced meals, getting plenty of rest, and exercising—even a short walk can clear your head and give you energy. If you are having trouble sleeping, do not drink caffeine or alcohol before going to bed and do not watch TV or use your cell phone or computer in bed. Avoid other things that can hurt you, like smoking, drinking alcohol, or using drugs.
- **Talk about your feelings and accept help.** Feeling stress after a traumatic event is normal. Talking to someone about how you are doing and receiving support can make you feel better. Others who have shared your experience may also be struggling and giving them support can also help you.
- **Turn it off and take a break.** Staying up-to-date about a traumatic event can keep you informed, but pictures and stories on television, in newspapers, and on the Internet can increase or bring back your stress. Schedule information breaks. If you are feeling upset when getting the news, turn it off and focus on something you enjoy.
- **Get out and help others.** Volunteer or contribute to your community in other ways. This community support can be connected to the disaster-related needs or to anything else that you care about. Supporting your community can help you and others heal and see that things are going to get better.

Signs that More Help May Be Needed

Sometimes taking healthy steps on your own to lower stress after a traumatic event is not enough. Getting additional care and support is sometimes needed to feel better and to figure out a way to move forward. This help may come from a licensed mental health professional, doctor, or community or faith-based organization. Signs that more help is needed include:

- Having symptoms of stress, like feeling sad or depressed, for more than two weeks
- Not being able to take care of yourself or family
- Not being able to do your job or go to school because of your stress
- Alcohol or drug use
- Thinking about suicide

Where to Get Immediate Help

Disaster Distress Helpline

1-800-985-5990 (or text TalkWithUs to 66746)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
1-800-273-8255

Youth Mental Health Line

1-888-568-1112

Child-Help USA

1-800-422-4453

Where to Learn More

CDC Division of Violence Prevention

www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/coping_with_stress_tips.html

SAMHSA Disaster Distress

www.disasterdistress.samhsa.gov

American Psychological Association

www.apa.org/helpcenter/disaster/index.aspx

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/