

Coping With Crisis

Taking Care of Yourself After A Traumatic Event

When you experience a disruptive or traumatic event, your body and brain go into high alert to help you respond. As a result, most people experience some stress and trauma reactions in the days and weeks following a traumatic event.

These are normal reactions that occur in response to abnormal and unusually intense experiences. They will likely run their course and subside of their own accord.

However, there are also things you can do to help your body and brain along on this journey, so that you don't stay in that high-alert state for longer than necessary.

Here are some tips for coping with the physical, mental, and emotional symptoms you may be experiencing after a traumatic event.

Things that can help

Reviewing information about stress, trauma, and coping: This will help you understand what is causing your reactions and why you are having them.

Resting: Take time to rest even if you cannot sleep. Sleep disturbances and changes in sleeping patterns are common during this time.

Exercising: Our stress chemicals are designed to prepare us for action, so exercise that raises your heart rate and makes you sweat will help use up some of those stress chemicals floating around in your bloodstream and leave you feeling calmer and better able to relax.

Eating healthy: Feeding your body healthy food is extra-important when you are under stress. If you do not feel hungry, try to eat small amounts regularly.

Avoiding tasks that require focus: Avoid tasks and activities that are too demanding or require intense concentration. After a traumatic event you may not be able to focus and concentrate normally, and your risk of making mistakes is higher than normal.

Doing some of your normal-life things: Treat yourself gently and yourself permission to skip the extras for a while. However, accomplishing some normal and practical tasks (like caring for children or work) can provide some helpful structure and a sense of normalcy.

Spending time with others: It can be very helpful to spend some time connecting with supportive family and friends. However, also give yourself permission to avoid people you find draining and depressing. It is okay to let phone calls go to the answering machine. This is your time to take care of yourself first.

Talking with people you trust: It can be very helpful to talk about how you are feeling with people you trust. However, it is okay to tell people that you would rather talk about something else if you do not feel like discussing what happened. You do not have to discuss the incident or your feelings when you do not want to.

Doing things you enjoy: Do things you usually enjoy—things that make you happy or help you relax (e.g., reading, writing, cooking, exercising, gardening, visiting someplace beautiful, watching TV).

Practicing relaxation strategies. Practice or experiment with various relaxation strategies (e.g., massage, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, warm baths, and yoga.) The CALM App and others can help with this.

Counseling: Contacting a mental health professional if you wish to discuss things with a trained professional or feel especially overwhelmed and in need of some extra support during this time. You may be able to access counseling for free via your Employee Resilience Program.

Feeling overwhelmed or upset? Try these things...

These things may help you feel better if you are feeling overwhelmed, stuck, or upset:

- ✓ Go for a walk or get exercise some other way.
- ✓ Spend some time in nature.
- ✓ Talk to a counselor, trusted friend, or family member.
- ✓ Write, draw, or do something else that allows you to express your feelings.
- ✓ Do a repetitive activity that you find absorbing and soothing (e.g., try solitaire, computer/iPad games, puzzles, Sudoku, gardening, or cross-stitching.)
- ✓ Watch TV or a movie (it is even better if you can do this with others).
- ✓ Allow yourself to cry.
- ✓ Read a light-hearted novel.
- ✓ Visualize putting the distress in a container, closing the lid, and putting it somewhere safe so that you can come back to it at another time.
- ✓ Visualize yourself in the safest and most peaceful place you know.
- ✓ Focus on your breathing, and practice deep-breathing exercises. If you don't know any, focus on breathing slowly, deeply, and deliberately from your stomach.
- ✓ Hold an object that's special to you and that soothes you.
- ✓ Listen to relaxing music.
- ✓ Take a warm bath or shower.

Try to avoid...

1. **Worrying if you are having some stress and trauma reactions:** Remind yourself that it is normal to experience stress reactions following highly stressful events. Having some reactions means your brain and body have been doing their job and trying to keep you safe.
2. **Making big life decisions or changes:** During the first days or weeks after a traumatic event, try to avoid making important decisions like quitting your job, moving, getting divorced, or getting married. After a traumatic event, our thoughts are usually focused on our immediate needs, and we may not be able to consider all the long-term consequences of our decisions. If you must make important decisions, discuss them with people you trust.
3. **"Overdosing" on self-soothing:** Some things we do to make ourselves feel better can feel very effective in the short term but are high-risk in the long run. For example, drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, eating, and shopping can all boost our mood, give us something else to focus on, and provide short-term relief from tension. In the long run, however, these self-comfort strategies can backfire and exacerbate problems (or create new ones). So, remember that you will probably feel tempted to increase your use of alcohol and other self-soothing strategies, and make a plan to limit their use.
4. **Using too much caffeine and other stimulants:** These substances will only increase your level of arousal and activation. Instead, do things to try to help your body relax.
5. **Consuming intense movies, TV shows, or books:** Intense movies or books (especially those that contain violence or content related to the events you experienced) can trigger additional distress. Instead, choose media and other distractions that are absorbing, but feel soothing and restful.
6. **Trying to "just forget" about the event:** Do not try to avoid or deny reoccurring thoughts or feelings about what happened by working more than usual or doing other things to stay distracted all the time. These thoughts are normal, and their frequency and intensity will decrease over time. Instead, try to allow these thoughts to come and go, and seek support and help if you feel too distressed and overwhelmed.
7. **Cutting yourself off from those close to you:** Do not spend all your time alone, even if you want to or you feel exhausted. Instead, spend some of your time with people you love and trust. This is helpful even if you don't talk to them about what happened.