



Coping with a Traumatic Event

By Military OneSource. Public Domain. Last Reviewed: December 2016

It's normal to feel anxious and afraid after experiencing a trauma like an act of violence, a catastrophic accident or a sudden loss. Following a traumatic event, you may have fears about driving, flying, being in crowds or other concerns for your safety or that of loved ones. You may also want to help support affected family members or friends but may not know how.

Coping with a traumatic event can be complicated for you and those you love. Reminders and events can act as triggers and bring back painful memories and emotions for months or even years after the trauma. You or a loved one may need to consider professional help to heal emotionally from the experience. This article lists common reactions to trauma, suggests some coping mechanisms, suggests ways to support others who've been affected and provides additional resources for further information and help.

Common feelings and reactions following a trauma

Traumatic events may leave you or your loved ones experiencing a wide variety of feelings, like sadness, fear, anxiety, anger or irritability. You may also experience other reactions resulting from the event, such as an inability to concentrate, disruption of sleep patterns or eating problems (like a loss of appetite or increased eating as a way to self-comfort). Although these feelings and reactions are normal, you can help yourself and your loved ones to cope with and manage them so that they don't become overwhelming or incapacitating.

Potential coping mechanisms

Anxiety, depression and other feelings/reactions to trauma can make your day-to-day duties and activities more difficult for you, but there are coping strategies that can help. If you find yourself having trouble functioning or coping, try these tips yourself, or share them with a loved one to connect with that person and help him or her recover following a traumatic event:

Spend time with people you love. It might be helpful to talk about the recent events and about how you are feeling. Sometimes just sharing your feelings can help put things in perspective and make everything feel more manageable. Being with the people you care about can also help focus you on those positive relationships as opposed to the traumatic event.

Take care of yourself. When you are feeling well physically, you are better able to manage your feelings and reactions to the traumatic event. As much as you can, eat healthfully, exercise moderately, get an adequate amount of sleep and continue taking necessary medications (remind loved ones who may forget to take medications in the aftermath of a trauma). Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope. They may make you feel better in the moment, but will make things worse over time.

Try to maintain your routine. Maintaining a level of normalcy can be a healthy distraction from feelings following a traumatic event. In addition, following through with responsibilities at home and at work can renew a sense of importance and diminish feelings of isolation.



Practice stress-relieving techniques that work for you. Many people find that exercise, journaling, meditation, listening to music and deep breathing techniques help relieve stress by focusing your mind on something other than the traumatic event.

Limit your exposure to media related to the trauma. Too many reminders of or a fixation on the traumatic event can heighten your anxiety. You may need to avoid television and radio news programs for a little while.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to seek help from friends or family or to see a professional if you are having trouble coping. Many people find comfort in their religious beliefs and faith communities in difficult times.

In addition to caring for yourself, you may feel responsible for or wish to reach out and support an affected friend or family member. This can be of help and comfort both to you and the person you're trying to help, and there are many ways to offer your support.

Extending help during times of crisis

For many reasons, some people may not have the opportunity to talk about their experiences and feelings relating to a traumatic event. They may feel that sharing their feelings isn't necessary or believe that something is wrong with them because they're having trouble coping. If you have a friend or relative who has been deeply affected by a traumatic event, you can help by:

Reassuring him or her that these emotions are a normal reaction to a traumatic event. Remind your loved one that fear, anger, hopelessness and shock are all normal feelings or reactions that others, possibly even yourself, have had.

Sharing your feelings. You may have experienced something similar, and your insights may be comforting to your friend or relative.

Extending an invitation to a ceremony, vigil, religious service or fundraising event.

Participating in efforts to remember or aid victims of a tragedy and their families can provide solace for your loved one and can foster a sense of community with people in similar situations. Sometimes just being with other people who have experienced the same trauma can make you feel less emotionally isolated.

Including him or her in your family events, even if it's only normal daily activities.

Making sure your loved one feels included can help reduce feelings of isolation.

Watching news coverage of the tragedy together so that your friend or relative won't watch it alone. Use the coverage as a springboard for conversation, during which you listen and offer your support.

Encouraging and helping them to seek professional help if and when they need it.

When attempting any of these support avenues, be patient while your friend or relative copes, and expect to encounter a variety of emotions from your loved one, including isolation, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, anger, depression or irritability. Reassure your friend or relative that you're available for support throughout the coping process. Check in periodically, and be patient as he or she copes because each person reacts differently to trauma.

Resources and support

No one has to struggle alone. Sharing your feelings with family and friends and reaching out to clergy or counselors can be productive and therapeutic. Keep in mind that, though friends and family can provide an enormous amount of support, you may find that you wish to talk with a counselor or a professional therapist instead. There is no shame or weakness in acknowledging difficulty in coping.

