

Trauma: Tips for Coping

How people respond to trauma varies somewhat from person to person. Individual factors such as how you usually handle stressful situations and what kind of support you have both at work and in your personal life may influence both your short-term and long-term reactions.

Your reaction may be acute (immediate) or delayed. You may experience symptoms that are physical, emotional, or cognitive (involving your thinking ability).

Those who have experienced traumatic incident at their workplace report having a variety of responses. These may include:

FEARS: ...leaving their home or office building, returning to work, being in public, being re-victimized, fear that situation may occur again.

HYPERALERTNESS: ...easily startled; “jump” at loud/unexpected noises or when suddenly approached by others.

GUILT: ... “could have/should have” done something differently. If not there at the time: “I should have been there...”

ANGER: ...and rage. Could be a repressed emotion or apparent, and perhaps misdirected. Life has been disrupted...no longer feel safe or in control.

ISOLATION: ...am I doing worse than the others? Family and friends may not understand or want to continue to listen., Withdrawing and “toughing it out” are not healthy for very long.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REALIZE THAT THESE ARE NORMAL RESPONSES TO AN ABNORMAL EVENT.

As you are able to talk about your experience and as you receive support from your co-workers and other people in your life, these responses will begin to diminish.

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COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF TRAUMA

Awareness and understanding are crucial in beginning to deal effectively with this event in your life. You can begin by being aware that you will react to some degree, perhaps in some of the ways described below. Remember that your reactions are normal.

COMMON RESPONSES FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

PHYSICAL

Nausea/sweating
Dizziness
Increased heart rate
Hyperventilation
Sleep disruption
Headaches
Stomach discomfort
Fatigue/exhaustion

EMOTIONAL

Crying
Anxiety/fear
Grief
Lost/isolated feelings
Withdrawal
Anger/irritability
Numbness
Overwhelmed

COGNITIVE

Impaired thinking
Difficulty making decisions
Short-term memory problems
Intrusive thoughts/memories
Poor attention
Forgetfulness

WHAT TO DO FOR YOURSELF:

- Take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Pay attention to your need for good nutrition and adequate sleep. Monitor and curtail your intake of alcohol and caffeine.
- Get a medical examination if you have not had one recently or if you are experiencing insomnia, fatigue, change in appetite or other physical symptoms.
- A moderate physical exercise program is one way to work out those anxious or angry feelings. A massage can be comforting and a release for feelings. Exercise alternated with relaxation will help physical reactions.
- Remember that you are experiencing normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Be aware of messages you may be giving yourself by the words you use. You are not “falling apart”, or “going to pieces”; you are not “weak”. You are experiencing normal responses to an abnormal event.

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WHAT TO DO FOR YOURSELF (CONT.):

- Talk about your feelings. Use your support systems (co-workers, family, significant others). Let them know you just need to talk and they don't have to "fix" you.
- Accept support - from loved ones, friends and neighbors. People do care.
- Let others know what you need from them. It is likely that others do not know how they can help you.
- Feel your feelings. They will be intense, but you will survive them.
- Take precautions that will make you feel safer and more in control. Discuss your safety needs and ideas with your family and co-workers.
- Give yourself time to heal. It's a process and it takes time. Meanwhile, continue to do what is fun and relaxing for you. Be good to yourself.

FOR FRIENDS / COWORKERS:

- Don't minimize the fear or the seriousness of this event. Allow your loved one to talk about feelings or cry as needed. That's part of the healing process. If more help is needed, be supportive of professional counseling.
- Listen and empathize. A non-judgmental listener is important.
- Spend time with the traumatized person. There is no substitute for personal presence.
- Offer assistance and compassion. Voiced support is critical.
- Re-assure others they are safe.
- Do not tell traumatized people that they are "lucky it wasn't worse." Such statements do not console the traumatized people. Tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred, and that you want to understand and assist them.
- Respect other's need for privacy and private grief.