

Coping with Stress After a Traumatic Event

Tip Sheet

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

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.

Ways to Relieve Stress

Keep Yourself Healthy:

- Eat healthy foods, and drink water.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol.
- Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs.
- Get enough sleep and rest.
- Get physical exercise.

Use Practical Ways To Relax:

- Relax your body often by things that work for you—take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, wash your face and hands, or engage in pleasurable hobbies.
- Pace yourself between stressful activities, and do a fun thing after a hard task.
- Use time off to relax—eat a good meal, read, listen to music, take a bath, or talk to family.
- Talk about your feelings to loved ones and friends often.

Pay Attention to Your Body, Feelings, and Spirit:

- Recognize and heed early warning signs of stress.
- Recognize how your own past experiences affect your way of handling this event, and think of how you handled past events.
- Know that feeling stressed, depressed, guilty, or angry is common after a traumatic event.
- Connect with other survivors of traumatic events or violent crime, many of whom may experience similar difficulties.
- Take time to renew your spirit through meditation, prayer, or helping others in need.

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. 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
- Alcohol or drug use

If you need further information or assistance, call us at: 1-844-STRONG1 (844-787-6641)

Tips adapted from CDC and SAMHSA Networks



www.maresiliencycenter.org