

Coping with Fears Following a Traumatic Event

It's normal to feel anxious and afraid after experiencing a traumatic events, such as a natural disaster, a catastrophic accident, a sudden loss, or an act of violence.

Following a trauma, you may have fears about driving, flying, fires, being in tall buildings, or leaving your home. You may also experience other fears, either for your safety or a loved one's safety, that are not even directly related to the traumatic events. Reminders and events can act as triggers and bring back painful memories and emotions long after the event is over. Here are some ways to cope with these feelings:

Coping with fear and anxiety after a trauma

It's normal to feel fearful for weeks, months, or even years after a trauma. If you've experienced a personal tragedy or hardship, such as the death of a loved one, difficult emotions can feel even more intense and unmanageable. Here are some ways to cope:

Remember that most people are not quite their usual selves after a trauma. It's normal to have some or all of the following symptoms for some time following a trauma:

- sadness and crying
- inability to concentrate
- fear and anxiety
- inability to sleep or sleeping all the time
- distressing dreams
- a general sense of uneasiness
- irritability or outbursts of anger
- eating too much or not enough
- extreme reactions to loud noises
- returning to old habits or vices, such as increased use of alcohol or other substances

Realize that your mood and feelings may be intense and constantly changing. You may be more irritable than usual, or your mood may change dramatically during the course of the day or from one day to the next.

Take care of yourself. Get enough sleep and eat well-balanced meals. Try to maintain normal routines and keep to a regular pattern of eating and sleeping to ensure that you have the strength to cope with stress. You may even want to create new routines.

Get as much exercise as possible. Exercise helps relieve stress, even if it's just a quick walk around the block, both by making you feel better physically and by distracting you from your concerns for a while.

Seek support from your faith community. Many people find comfort in their religious beliefs and from their faith communities during difficult times.

Talk with a counsellor or other mental health professional if your fears or emotions are affecting your personal or work life. For example, if you notice that you are very irritable or have little patience with others or if your fears are interfering with your ability to cope from day-to-day, you would probably benefit from professional help. Your doctor can help you find a

mental health professional. Or, contact your employee assistance program (EAP) or human resources (HR) representative.

If you have nightmares of past traumatic events or overwhelming feelings of sadness, grief, or fear, seek support from a mental health professional. Traumatic events can trigger memories of past losses. Your EAP or doctor can help you find a therapist or counsellor who has experience with treating concerns like yours.

Keeping your fears in check

The best ways to manage fear are to seek support and to spend time with people you trust. It's important to:

Seek support from others. Talk with people you trust – friends, relatives, co-workers, and others. Share your anxieties and concerns with them.

Limit your exposure to news coverage. Too much coverage can heighten your anxiety. If news stories make you anxious, limit yourself to one newscast a day. Or eliminate watching the news altogether and just read the newspaper. Limit the amount of TV news your child watches, as well. You may even want to stop reading newspapers and watching TV news to see if that makes you feel better.

Hide, mute, or unfollow upsetting social media feeds. You can often anticipate which TV or radio programs will have disturbing news. But you never know which of your Facebook, Twitter, or other social media contacts will post or link to upsetting content. You can avoid some unpleasant surprises by temporarily unfollowing some people or organizations. On Facebook, you also can click “hide this post” to avoid seeing a post with unwelcome content every time you log on. On Twitter, you can stop seeing certain people's posts without unfollowing them by using the “mute” function that's available to all users.

Avoid watching disturbing programs just before bedtime. If you watch television as a way to unwind, remember that certain kinds of programs – news coverage, for example, or suspense and action programs – can make it hard to fall asleep. Try tuning in to news earlier in the day – on the way home from work, for example, or early in the evening.

Show your children that you are able to cope during this time. If children see you keeping your fears in perspective and finding positive ways to cope, they'll learn to do the same. Stress that you are there to help protect and take care of them. Remember to say, “I love you. I'm here to take care of you.” If you think your children might be having a difficult time coping, you can get an individual referral to a mental health professional for them as well.

Avoid using alcohol or illegal drugs to handle your emotions. Although alcohol and drugs may provide a temporary escape from unpleasant emotions, they can also lead to an unhealthy dependence rather than discovering more positive and long-lasting ways to cope with difficult emotions. Also, alcohol is a depressant and can lead you to feel even more depressed.

Practice stress-relief techniques that work for you. Taking a walk, exercising, listening to music, or reading for pleasure are all ways to relieve stress.

Avoid spending time with people who make you feel anxious. Know which people you find most supportive and spend more of your time with them.

Try not to jump to terrible conclusions. Instead, spend your energy gathering reliable information from people and sources you trust. It's normal after a traumatic event to feel jumpy and unsettled and to fear the worst. For example, the sight of fire trucks in your neighbourhood might leave you feeling overly anxious. Try to remain calm and clear-headed, and remind yourself that the world is basically a safe place.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to ask for help from friends or family. Tell them what you need from them. Most people who have gone through a traumatic event need support from others. You don't have to go through this alone. Eventually you will find you can rise above the traumatic event and bring about something good for yourself and those around you.

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Noi Quao
Director
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