

Coping After a Traumatic Event

Traumatic events are events that disrupt our safety, often they are unexpected, intense, and abnormally stressful experiences. Some examples of traumatic events are natural disasters, traffic accidents, the sudden loss of a loved one, or having yourself or someone close to you be the victim of a violent crime. Depending on how the event has impacted you, you may also be grieving a loss.

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is common to have strong emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions. Some reactions occur immediately after the event, while other reactions may occur over time, as you are able to process what happened and have time to reflect on the impact of the event. Reactions to trauma and grief can be unpredictable. The recent event may remind us of prior losses and traumas. While considered normal, the range of emotional reactions to trauma might feel disturbing or be uncomfortable. You could experience some of the following:

Emotional Reactions: shock, sadness, anger, fear, guilt, numbness, grief, helplessness, overwhelmed

Cognitive Reactions: difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, confusion, disbelief, indecision, lack of interest, changed view of the world or others

Physical Reactions: heart pounding, shortness of breath, fatigue, sleep disruption, headaches, nausea, tight muscles, pain, lack of appetite, nervous energy

If you are involved in helping others through the event, your own reaction may be heightened as you witness how the trauma is impacting others. You also may find that your own personal reaction is delayed, as your initial focus is on helping others and completing immediate practical tasks that require your attention.

The Employee Assistance Program is available to provide short term counseling at no charge. Make an appointment if:

- you are having difficulty functioning.
- you have questions about how you are reacting.
- you find your reactions are not lessening over time.
- you think it would be helpful to talk about your reactions.
- you want to know how to support someone else.

Our phone number is 471-3366 and our website is www.utexas.edu/hr/eap We are located in the UTA Building (1616 Guadalupe), Suite 2.304.

Taking Care of Yourself After a Traumatic Event

- Make it a priority to take care of yourself. For example, try to eat balanced meals even if you are not hungry, exercise even if it is brief, and sleep or rest if you can't actually sleep. Avoid using drugs and alcohol as a way to cope. Be sure to take time to pay attention to your own reaction and do things that are soothing to you. You may be surprised by your reaction and may have to try some new things to find something that helps.
- Accept your own reactions and the reactions of others without judgement. Expect the unexpected. Reactions to trauma and grief can be unpredictable, feelings and needs can change on a daily basis. Find a way to express your feelings, such as sharing with others or writing about your experience. Over time, your reactions should decrease. Be patient as you heal and adapt over time.
- Connecting with supportive others is one of the best ways to care for yourself in stressful times. Assess your support systems- family, friends, significant others, peers, workgroup, community and church groups, to name a few. Reach out and ask for what you need. Often people are afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing but are relieved if you are able to tell them what is helpful for you.
- Take control of what you can control, such as what you want to share with others about your experience. You don't have to repeat your experiences with everyone. Be prepared to say, "I need to not talk about this right now." Respect that everyone needs to deal with things in their own way and own time.
- In times of turbulence, it's easy to notice what has changed; however, even after the most traumatic of events, there are many things that have remained the same. Pay attention to those things that are familiar. Return to a "normal" schedule as much as possible. Get up at a regular time, go to work if possible, and continue with regular activities.
- As you are able, help others by listening non-judgmentally, being available for support, and helping people connect with resources. Be supportive of other coworkers, friends, or family members when you see someone else struggling. Recognize that the fear of saying "the wrong thing" is normal. Listening well can be one of the most powerful ways to help.
- Limit the amount of exposure that you have to post-crisis media coverage. In this world of instant messaging and round-the-clock information, this is sometimes difficult to do. However, you will need to take control of this as much as possible by changing the channel on your television, listening to alternative radio stations, not checking groups online, etc. It is o.k. to take a break from the information.
- It is normal not to know what you need, as you probably have never been through anything just like this or felt quite this way before. If you want help understanding your reaction or sorting through coping mechanisms, please call the EAP at 471-3366 to make an appointment with a counselor or get a referral for a community counselor.