

Coping with Trauma

Most of us experience at least one trauma in the course of our lives. A traumatic event can be a natural disaster or caused by humans, as widespread as an earthquake or as personal as a death in the family. Other examples include a physical assault, a burglary in your home, a death in your department, or a fire in your neighborhood. For widespread or very public traumas, even those who haven't directly experienced the crisis may be affected.

Understanding the nature and impact of the experience is a major part of coping. Most people will experience some emotional and/or physical after-effects.

Common Reactions to Trauma

- Denial, shock, numbness
- Feeling vulnerable, unsafe
- Anxiety, panic, worry
- Difficulty concentrating
- Withdrawal, isolation
- Remembering other life traumas
- Headaches, fatigue, sleep disturbances
- Helplessness, hopelessness
- Sadness, crying, despair
- Irritability, anger
- Appetite changes
- Being hyper-alert

People have different reasons for feeling troubled during and after a crisis. The following describes some of these concerns:

The Death of a Loved One

Traumatic events often include injury and death. You may have known someone who died during the event. The death of a pet can also be traumatic. Symptoms of grief and loss are similar to the post-trauma symptoms listed above, and many of the coping strategies listed below can help for grief as well.

Post-Trauma at the Workplace

After a traumatic event on or surrounding the campus, your colleagues and co-workers may also experience some of the reactions listed above. Worksite group meetings to discuss individual experiences and plans for the future can be very helpful.

Remember that each person can experience trauma differently. By extending patience and understanding you can support yourself and others in readjusting to life after a crisis.

The Effects of Cumulative Trauma

Psychologically, we connect traumas. If you experience a new trauma before you've had enough time to heal from previous trauma, you may experience the separate events as related. This can lead to intensified symptoms and prolonged recovery time. As a result of multiple traumatic incidents you may experience a greater sense of disconnectedness from yourself, others and your work. To restore for yourself a sense of order and control, you may create your own "story" explaining a series of traumatic events.

Traumatized Children

Children who have experienced a trauma first- or second-hand need special attention. Children's symptoms may include excessive fears, unwillingness to go to school, nightmares, and increases in regressive behaviors. Allow your child to ask questions, and respond in age-appropriate ways.

Remember that your child may hear others talk about the trauma, and that without clear information, s/her can gain a distorted view of the crisis. Reassure your child by increasing physical contact, keeping in touch, and making plans to do things together.

Coping Strategies

Whatever your specific situation, there are several ways to help yourself cope with feelings and reactions.

1. Talk about your feelings

Even when the trauma is something that is being talked about publicly, it's important to talk to others about how you feel and are affected.

2. Take care of yourself

Feeling threatened can make you feel more impulsive. Take care of your body by watching what/how much you eat; your use of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and medicine and by practicing safe sex. Be sure to do some regular exercise and be more attentive when driving.

3. Take action

Find ways to express your feelings about the trauma. It could be talking to a loved one, immersing yourself in political action or turning inwards to your spiritual practice.

4. Take time

This includes time to relax, reflect, and replenish in ways that are comfortable to you. Give yourself and others permission to experience post-trauma reactions. You may need time alone to pamper yourself or you may need to be with family or friends. Ask for emotional support from people you trust.

5. Moderate your news intake

If the trauma is widely publicized, be mindful of how the media reports affect you. While having information is helpful for some crises, some people may want to limit how much they read, listen to, or watch the news.

Re-experiencing a Trauma Anniversary

Using the anniversary of a trauma as a milestone helps one to recognize the amount of healing that has already occurred. While it may be painful to look back, it may also be comforting to recognize how far one has come. At the same time, it is normal to feel a “backward slide” as an anniversary approaches.

After a year of coping, some people may notice more of the reactions they originally experienced after the crisis, or may begin to experience new ones. The new realities of life, and the strain of coping with them, may provoke stronger reactions that were felt at first.

Have patience with the healing process. It can take many years to fully recover from a trauma. Remember that the coping skills mentioned above are crucial to ongoing recovery and will aid in the re-adjustments still ahead.

Employee Assistance staff are available to meet with employees or family members who are experiencing difficulties. Call for a free, confidential appointment at 510-643-7754



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