

Response to Traumatic Events



Apart from the many stressful events we experience in life, we can be faced with extraordinary circumstances that leave us feeling terrified, powerless, and/or horrified. This experience might result from a threat to us, or a loved one, or it may be our response to witnessing or helping in an event where there was injury or death, particularly if it was a gruesome event.

Sometimes we experience intense emotions during the trauma; more often we “do our job” and “get through” the event then, after a brief or even extended delay, most of us will experience shock and intense feelings and physical reactions related to the trauma.

While everyone responds to trauma differently, there are some typical responses that you can expect to experience. These experiences are not linear and you will likely shift between periods of feeling “fine” and periods of distress; between periods during when you relive the trauma and other periods when you feel numb and want to avoid all thoughts of the trauma. **These experiences are entirely normal.**

How trauma affects your body:

The experience of trauma disrupts the body’s natural equilibrium. It can “freeze” you in a state of hyperarousal and fear. It might feel like your nervous system is stuck in overdrive.

- Trembling or shaking
- Sweating
- Breathing deeply
- Laughing
- Crying
- Stomach rumbling
- Feeling of warmth
- Goosebumps

It is important to debrief to address this imbalance and recover your physical sense of safety. Balance can be achieved by discharging pent-up energy.

Typical emotional responses to trauma:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anxiety and fear for your safety
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling disconnected or numb

Typical physical symptoms of trauma:

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Being startled easily
- Racing heartbeat
- Aches and pains Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Edginess and agitation
- Muscle tension

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Trauma self-help strategies

Stay connected.

Following a trauma, you may want to withdraw from others. But isolation can make things worse. Connecting to others will help you heal, so make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone. You may want to develop a script or way of explaining the trauma and/or managing conversation about the event that you are comfortable with.

Receive support.

It's important to talk honestly about your feelings. If there are others who experienced the trauma, it may prove helpful to share your impressions and experiences with them, including your responses to trauma. Keep family apprised about your feelings – they can be your allies. Negotiating how much you can talk about at any time is a good way to manage family. Especially employ supports when you know you will be encountering “triggers” like an anniversary, return to the scene, and so on.

Maintain your daily routine.

In order to stay grounded after a trauma, it helps to stick to your daily routine, with regular times for waking, sleeping, eating, working, and exercise. Make sure to keep your schedule for relaxing and social activities, too.

Take care of your health.

A healthy body increases your ability to cope with stress. Get plenty of rest, exercise regularly, and eat a well-balanced diet. It's also important to avoid alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs can interfere with your natural ability to process the trauma and their use might mimic feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.

Be mindful of the following changes to your usual beliefs:

- The world is unsafe and unpredictable
- I have been betrayed; I cannot trust anyone
- It's my fault; I should have done x or y
- If I weren't so weak I could handle this....
- This is no big deal; I don't care
- I am angry at the people responsible
- I am furious; I want revenge – I feel guilt for my anger
- I am losing my spiritual faith

Remember:

These are normal and expected responses to trauma. If you find that your experience of trauma is prolonged and causing serious impact on your wellbeing and your relationships – contact professional support through HumanaCare, your Employee Assistance Program.

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