



Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society

Dealing with Traumatic Experiences

POST INCIDENT STRESS AND HOW TO COPE WITH IT

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS

Some of the stress symptoms that individuals can experience after traumatic incidents are listed below. They are best seen as normal reactions to abnormal circumstances. Having symptoms of stress means your mind and body are going through some adjustments or trying to recover.

Tension:

Tension can be physical and emotional, and is characterized as being excessively "hyper" and unable to relax or sit still for very long.

Sleep Disturbance:

Characterized by the inability to get to sleep, disruptive dreams or nightmares, and/or waking up early.

Intrusive Thoughts and Memories:

Thinking about an incident or some recurring memory associated with the incident when you don't want to.

Negative Feelings:

Unpleasant feelings that may come without warning: profound sadness, helplessness, fear, anxiety, anger, rage, discouragement, frustration, or depression.

A Feeling of Vulnerability or Lack of Control:

Feeling that one is exposed to threat, or not in control of one's life anymore.

Interpersonal Issues:

Characterized as increased irritability, insensitivity, blaming others, and wanting distance instead of closeness.

Increased Problems with Alcohol or Drugs:

"Self-medication" can be a symptom of stress and can cause long-term issues.

A Vague Feeling of Self-Blame:

Usually this fixes on some particular aspect of the incident.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- The first step is to recognize that you have been through a highly stressful experience and acknowledge that you will have a psychological reaction to it. Refusing to accept your feelings can delay the recovery process.
- Seek out other people's support. Talk about your feelings to people who will understand, particularly those who have had a similar experience. Discussing your reactions is part of the natural healing process and will help you accept what has happened.
- Do not try to block out thoughts of the incident or avoid reminders of it. You will need to think and talk about it. Confronting the reality bit by bit will help you to come to terms with the experience. Recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease and become less painful in time.
- Following a traumatic experience, people are more vulnerable to accidents and physical illness. It's important to look after yourself and be more careful than usual, for example when driving.
- You may feel unmotivated and apathetic, but try to push yourself to do some of the things listed here. They will help to re-motivate you and assist in the recovery process.

SPECIFIC WAYS TO COPE SUCCESSFULLY

The following are some procedures that have been used successfully to cope with stress. Some may work for you while others may not. Use these procedures on an experimental basis and stick with the ones that work best for you.

Expressing Feelings

Share your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust, even though it may be painful to do so. Make sure the other person understands you're not asking for a solution to your feelings, just an opportunity to express how you feel.

Facing the Pain

Painful and fearful thoughts and memories come back when you don't want them to. That's normal, but our first reaction is to keep this from happening. This procedure says let the memory or thought come back, so that some of the release of tension can take place, and then decide when you want to stop it. You can even say to yourself, "Okay, that's enough!" Gradually you will gain more control over these intrusive thoughts and feelings.

Dreams and Nightmares

Nightmares are a very common reaction to traumatic stress. Although they can never be controlled completely, some people have learned to diminish nightmares by deliberately thinking about the trauma before they go to sleep and then saying to themselves, "Okay, that's enough, dream about something else".

Recognizing Self-Blame and Survivors' Guilt

It's normal to feel some blame for surviving a traumatic incident, especially if other people were killed or severely injured. Recognize this for what it is, an irrational thought. It's okay to have survived.

Changing the Memory

Remember that what's upsetting after a traumatic incident is not the incident itself, but your memory of it. If it's a memory, you can change what you recall. If some particularly upsetting scene keeps coming back to you, try substituting some other memory of the incident that has less painful emotions associated with it. For example, remember when someone was helped or got to safety.

Exercise

Strenuous exercise afterwards is very useful, especially if you are already in good shape. However, don't overdo it and cause more harm than good.

Getting Back to Work

Get back to work when it is realistic, but accept the jitters that you will feel with reminders of the incident. These are normal and will go away with time.

Accept Enjoyment and Diversion

It's okay to enjoy yourself and distract yourself from the incident. Be kind to yourself, go to a movie, get involved in a ballgame, etc.

Don't Expect Miracle Cures

Working through post-traumatic stress takes a long time. Try to accept this part of you and put it in proper perspective with time.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line in dealing with traumatic stress is to face it. If it can be faced squarely and dealt with in some constructive way, that's half the battle.

If Necessary, Ask for Professional Help – 1800 498 6898 (Assist)

Sometimes the traumatic stress is so severe that professional help is necessary for working through it. This is the smart thing to do, not a sign of weakness. It takes a lot of courage to work with a professional to face your own pain and fear. Be proud of yourself and not apologetic.

Look After Yourself

- Get plenty of rest, even if you can't sleep.
- Try to eat regular and well-balanced meals.
- Regular exercise, such as walking, cycling or jogging, helps reduce physical effects of stress and trauma.
- Reduce use of stimulants such as coffee, chocolate and cigarettes. These substances could add to the stress your body is experiencing.
- Do not try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol; this will lead to more problems in the long term.
- Make time for relaxation. Techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga or breathing exercises are helpful and available on our website [here](#).

Adjust Your Lifestyle

- Resume a normal routine as quickly as possible, but take it easy. Don't throw yourself into activities in an attempt to avoid unpleasant feelings and memories.
- Sometimes you will want to be alone, but try not to become too isolated. Contact friends and, if necessary, have someone stay with you for a few hours each day.
- Do things you enjoy and be nice to yourself. Try to schedule at least one pleasurable activity each day.
- Helping out others who have been through similar situations could prove to be important to them and therapeutic for you too.
- Don't make any major discretionary life decisions, such as moving from house or changing jobs, in the period following the trauma. However, do make as many smaller, daily decisions as possible. This will help to establish a feeling of control over your life.
- Some people find that keeping a journal or diary is helpful. Writing down your feelings can be almost as good as talking about them.

How Family Members and Friends Can Help

- Spend time with the traumatised person and reassure them that they are safe. Offer support and a listening ear.
- Assist with everyday tasks like cooking and caring for children.
- Don't take it personally if they want to be alone sometimes or seem angry.
- Statements like "You're lucky it wasn't worse", or "pull yourself together" are not helpful. Instead, say that you're sorry the event occurred and want to understand and assist them.

Above all, remember you are having a normal reaction to an abnormal experience; don't label yourself as crazy or weak. Feeling bad is unpleasant, however we can cope with these emotions for limited periods.

As difficult as it is to hear, going through a traumatic experience could have positive aspects. People can come out wiser, stronger and better able to cope with the stresses of everyday life. An event like this can also be a turning point when you re-evaluate your life and appreciate little things that are often taken for granted.

NORMAL VS. DANGER SIGNS

	Normal Reactions (for which professional and self-help is available, if needed)	Danger Signs (for which professional help is highly recommended)
Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shock • Numbness • Psychological pain • Sadness • Anger • Guilt • Anxiety • Loneliness • Yearning • Relief • Emancipation • Mood swings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A time lapse where two or more days are not recalled • Denial for more than a month • Persistent physical pain • Depression (i.e. inability to get out of bed, inability to eat, inability to carry out basic hygiene practices) • Physically violent actions • Destructive actions • Persistent anxiety attacks • Recurrent suicidal thoughts • Refusal to see people
Physical Sensations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hollowness in stomach • Tightness in chest and throat • Dry mouth • Loss of energy • Fatigue or weakness • Oversensitivity to noise • Depersonalization 	
Cognitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disbelief • Confusion • Preoccupation with deceased • Sense of presence • Disorientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hallucinations: visual and auditory
Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disturbances • Absent-mindedness • Helplessness • Felt loss of control • Loss of appetite • Social withdrawal • Dreams of deceased • Sighing • Restless over-activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaving uncontrollably for a period of time • Significant weight loss or gain • Continuation of symptoms for more than one month