

HOPE NOT HYPE.

Healing after a traumatic event

When a traumatic event occurs, individuals may experience a range of common stress reactions, either immediately, a few days later, weeks later, or even months later.

The following is a list of the most common stress reactions accompanied by recommended ways to cope.

Anxiety

Take time during the day to calm yourself through relaxation exercises. This can make it easier to sleep and concentrate and can give you energy. Try the following breathing exercise:

- Inhale slowly through your nose and comfortably fill your lungs all the way down to your stomach, while saying to yourself, "My body is filled with calmness."
- Exhale slowly through your mouth and comfortably empty your lungs, while silently saying to yourself, "My body is releasing the tension."
- Do this five times slowly, and as many times a day as needed.

Concern or Shame over Your Own Reactions

- Remind yourself that your feelings are understandable and expected, you are not "going crazy," and you are not at fault for either the traumatic event or your reactions to the traumatic event.
- When talking with someone, find the right time and place, and ask if it's okay to talk about your feelings.
- If these feeling persist for a month or more, you may wish to seek professional help.

Fears of Recurrence, Reactions to Reminders

- When you are reminded of the event, try saying to yourself, "I am upset because I am being reminded of the traumatic event, but it is different now because the traumatic event is not happening, and I am safe."
- Then identify coping strategies that would reduce the distress, which may include talking with others, distraction, and humor.
- If applicable, monitor and limit your viewing of media reports so you just get the information that you need.

Changes in Attitude, View of World, and Oneself

- Remember that getting back to a more structured routine can help improve decision-making.
- Remind yourself that going through a traumatic event can have positive effects on what you value and how you spend your time.

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Excessive Anger

- Manage your anger by taking time to cool down, walk away from stressful situations, talk to a friend about what is making you angry, get physical exercise, distract yourself with positive activities, or problem-solve the situation that is making you angry.
- Remind yourself that being angry will not get you what you want and may harm important relationships.
- If you become violent, get immediate help.

Sleep Difficulties

- If possible, try to go to sleep at the same time every day.
- Don't drink caffeinated beverages in the evening.
- Reduce alcohol consumption.
- Increase daytime exercise.
- Relax before bedtime.
- Limit daytime naps to 15 minutes, and do not nap later than 4 pm.

Shifts in Interpersonal Relationships

- Don't withdraw from seeking support just because you feel you might burden someone else. It's OK not to feel OK. Let others know how you feel. Most people do better after a traumatic event with good support from others.
- Understand that other family members, friends or colleagues who may have been affected can be a major form of support during the recovery period.
- It is important to understand and tolerate different courses of recovery among affected family members, friends or colleagues. Don't be afraid to ask them how they are doing. Let them know you understand and offer a supportive ear or lend a helping hand.
- Spend more time talking with family members, friends or colleagues about how they are doing. Say, "You know, the fact that we're emotional is completely normal, given what we've been through. I think we're handling things amazingly. It's a good thing we have each other."

Alcohol / Substance Abuse

- Identify the positives and negatives of using alcohol or drugs to cope, and the anticipated difficulties in changing behavior.
- Remember that substance use and other addictive behaviors can lead to problems with sleep, relationships, jobs, and physical health.
- It's hard to manage urges alone. Get appropriate help from friends/family to help distract, replace, or manage potentially detrimental desires to use alcohol or substances.
- If you've had prior problems with alcohol or substances, consider seeking professional treatment.

This handout is adapted from the Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide.

Chaplain Connect (free and confidential care)

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7 days per week/24 hours per day