
Coping with a stressful event

One of the important services your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides is help for employees who are coping with the impact of a traumatic event such as the death of a family member or coworker, a loss suffered by a colleague, a distressing event in the community, or violence that affects you personally or has an effect on someone close to you. Contacting your EAP as soon as possible can minimize the negative impact of the event and promote a return to normal functioning. You may also find the information provided below helpful in both managing the immediate consequences of a stressful event and understanding an event's potential short- and long-term effects.

Stressful events

- Stressful or traumatic events that can have a serious impact on individuals may include the following:
- Natural disasters or accidents
- Death (natural, accidental, or violent) of a family member, friend, coworker, or coworker's loved one
- Serious injury
- Violence or the threat of violence
- Terrorist attack
- Suicide of a family member, friend, or coworker
- Robbery (with or without violence)

Typical responses to a stressful event

When a stressful event occurs, the normal tendency is to try and stop the flood of feelings that ensues. People affected typically try to "build a wall" around the incident in an attempt to keep it removed from the rest of life. It is as if you are saying: "If I can keep this event out of my awareness, then it will not affect my work, my home life, my relationships, or my peace of mind."

In reality, attempts to use denial as a strategy do not have the desired result. The facts of a traumatic event can be painful and disturbing, but will do far less damage if you can deal with them directly and openly, thus giving yourself an opportunity to acknowledge and come to terms with the impact of the event in a healthy way.

Getting help is crucial

Emotional turmoil resulting from a highly stressful event can leave lasting scars. However, getting help as soon as possible from your EAP or other provider of personal support can help ensure a positive outcome. The turmoil you are experiencing will surface sooner or later. If normal feelings of grief, loss, fear and even guilt and anger are expressed at the time of the incident, the emotional impact of the event can be diminished.

However, if your feelings are not allowed expression, they can appear later in more serious and damaging forms such as increased illness, depression, anxiety, damaged relationships, and decreased productivity.

What to expect after a stressful event

Depending upon the event itself and your own personal characteristics (such as resilience to stress, prior traumatic experiences), your reactions to the event can range from disruptive to extreme. You may find yourself feeling anxious and/or depressed. You may have difficulty

sleeping or eating. Common reactions are listed below. Please note that all of these responses are "normal reactions" to trauma. However, it is important to recognize that different people respond differently and recover at different rates. For most people, the effects of the event will subside within a few weeks of the event. For others, the symptoms may become worse. If the latter is the case, you should definitely seek some individual counseling assistance.

Common physical reactions

- Difficult sleeping/nightmares
- Startle reactions (for example, anxiety responses to loud noises)
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Back pain
- Digestive disturbances
- Muscle tremors or tension
- Palpitations
- Chest pain

Common behavioral reactions

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Angry outbursts
- Crying
- Irritability
- Decreased energy/ambition
- Marital/relationship conflict
- Increased alcohol/drug use
- Eating too little or too much
- Decreased productivity

Common emotional responses

- Shock or numbness
- Anger toward others involved
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Guilt/frustration
- Sadness
- Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
- Loneliness
- Feeling overwhelmed

Common psychological responses

- Difficulty concentrating
- Confusion
- Difficulty remembering details of the event
- Flashbacks

Tips for coping with stressful events

Recognize that if you are experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, you are having a common reaction to a traumatic event. Do not measure your own response by the reactions of others. We are all different. With time and the emotional support of others, these stress reactions will pass more quickly.

- Take advantage of professional counseling through PAS or other well-being resource. Participating in counseling does not imply weakness or insanity. It simply indicates that you are resourceful in finding support during an event was too powerful for you to manage on your own.
- Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise, and get enough rest.
- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, chocolate, and nicotine, as well as depressants such as alcohol.
- Seek out comfortable, familiar surroundings and avoid spending too much time alone.

- Share your thoughts and feelings with those who are supportive and helpful. Don't try to block recollections of the event; it helps to talk about them. Feel free to set boundaries with people who have not been helpful in the past.
- Give yourself time to recover. Difficulties with concentration, memory or decision-making are common but short-term reactions.
- Seek professional help from PAS if your responses are interfering with job responsibilities.
- Focus on concrete, easily achievable tasks.
- Remember that difficulty sleeping, nightmares, flashbacks, and feelings of being "hyper-alert" are common and will diminish with time.
- Communicate your feelings clearly. If you don't, others may not know how to respond to you appropriately. Let others know which responses are helpful and which are not.
- Recognize that anniversary dates of a traumatic event may trigger feelings related to that event. This is normal.
- Seek help from a professional counselor if symptoms worsen or do not seem to be decreasing with time.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cdc.gov

HelpGuide.org

Healthcentral.com