

Stress Reactions and Self-Care Strategies

Living through a traumatic event can be incredibly stressful, but how we react to that stress will be different for each person. Responses to an event can depend on factors such as:

- How physically or psychologically close you were to the event
- Your level of responsibility during the event
- Your current life situation
- Your previous experience with personal crisis
- The availability of support from friends, family and coworkers

We are likely to experience the impact in how we think, act, and feel, both physical and emotionally. Below are some common reactions you could experience:

PHYSICAL	THOUGHTS	EMOTIONAL
Nausea or upset stomach	Continued thoughts and images of the event	Anxiety, fear and worry
Changes in appetite	Fearful thoughts	Sadness, withdrawal
Headaches or muscle aches	Difficulty concentrating	Grief, feelings of helplessness
Difficulty sleeping	Distressing dreams	Anger, irritability
Fatigue	Feeling “dazed” or disoriented	Numbness

You may feel uncomfortable or worried that you aren’t coping better. Remind yourself that the reactions you are having are **normal reactions to an abnormal event**.

Returning to work may be challenging. The impact of a traumatic event doesn’t stop when we go to work. Again, there can be a wide range of reactions that you might notice in yourself or in coworkers, including:

- Being afraid to return to the workplace or being concerned about physical safety in the work environment.
- Altering routines to avoid physical reminders of the traumatic event.
- Experience flashbacks of trauma, which can be triggered by sights, sounds and smells in the environment.
- Decreasing time spent at work through sick leave, vacations and unexplained absences.
- Questioning whether or not to remain at the present job or even the present profession.
- Being distracted from the task at hand (which can lead to accidents or errors).
- Deteriorating work performance and customer relations.
- Being concerned about coworkers’ reactions or their ability to cope and perform their jobs.
- Questioning when things will get back to normal.
- Feeling isolated, as if others do not appear to be as affected as you are by what happened.
- Feeling angry about the behavior of coworkers.
- Loss of a sense of humor.
- Withdrawing from a previous relationship with colleagues.

All of these reactions are usually temporary and pass within a few weeks. You may be able to move through them more easily or quickly by taking good care of yourself. Self-care means making the choice to act in healthy ways rather than just reacting to events. Here are some ways to do this:

Self-care strategies: Physical

- Get enough sleep to feel well rested. It can help to go to bed and get up at regular hours.
- Eat well-balanced meals at consistent times.
- Stay away from mood altering substances, such as alcohol or drugs.
- Get some type of exercise each day. It helps to reduce stress.
- Nurture yourself by spending time each day doing something calming, such as deep breathing, meditation, progressive relaxation or activities that you enjoy.

Self-care strategies: Thoughts

- Get your facts about the event from a reliable, objective source. Don't rely on rumors or guesswork.
- Structure your time. Choose activities that engage your mind and body and keep you focused on the here and now. Set short-term goals to stay on track.
- Remind yourself of challenges you have managed in the past. Think about the strengths and abilities you have that helped you survive and thrive.
- Lower your expectations of what you can accomplish. Reduce the demands that you put on yourself.
- Give your thoughts a break from thinking about what has happened and what might happen next. Try to concentrate on what is positive in your life and the things that make you grateful.

Self-care strategies: Emotional

- Focus on things you have control over and give yourself permission to let go of the rest.
- Reach out to and spend time with loved ones and other supportive people who care about you.
- Talk about what happened and your feelings. Recognize that you may be dealing with many forms of loss, such as loss of expectations for the future or beliefs about your safety. Writing about your thoughts and feelings may help. Some people find comfort in creative activities such as music or painting.
- Understand that the grief we feel after loss doesn't follow an orderly process. You may feel strong and capable one day and overwhelmed the next. Be patient with yourself as you work through this.
- Be aware that anger can sometimes be a surface emotion that is covering up a deeper emotion, such as fear, hurt, or powerlessness.
- Be careful not to take out your hurt and anger on others. This will make it harder for them to be supportive and can create negative feelings for you.
- Your spirituality may be a further resource for you.

For more information, resources, and support, contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).