

Coping With a Stressful Event

Stressful, disruptive or traumatic events such as the death of a family member or co-worker, a loss suffered by a colleague, or a distressing event in the community can have a serious impact on individuals, work groups, and organizations. However, understanding typical responses and identifying coping strategies proactively can help manage the short- and long-term effects of these events.

Stressful Events

A stressful event is any situation that causes emotional turmoil, physical injury and/or presents a real or perceived threat to one's safety. Examples of such events include:

- Natural disasters or accidents
- Death (natural, accidental, or violent) of a family member, friend, co-worker, or co-worker's loved one
- Serious injury
- Violence or the threat of violence
- Human made disasters, including a terrorist attack
- Suicide of a family member, friend or co-worker
- Robbery (with or without violence)

Some Possible Responses After a Stressful Event

The nature of the event itself, one's own personal characteristics (e.g., resilience to stress, prior history, including traumatic experiences) and one's social supports can impact reactions to a stressful event. Such reactions can take a variety of forms, including physical symptoms, emotional responses, and cognitive and behavioral changes. Common reactions to stress can include:

Common Physical Reactions

- Difficult sleeping/nightmares
- Heightened startle reactions
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Back pain
- Digestive disturbances
- Muscle tremors or tension
- Palpitations or chest pain

Common Behavioral Reactions

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Angry outbursts
- Crying
- Marital/relationship conflict
- Eating too little or too much
- Drinking alcohol or using drugs excessively
- Decreased productivity

Common Emotional Responses

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

Common Cognitive Responses

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

While all of these responses can be typical reactions to disruptive, stressful events, it is important to recognize that everyone responds differently and recovers from stressful events at different rates. Try not to compare your own responses to the reactions of others. Be patient and kind to yourself as you reestablish a sense of safety and balance after the disruptive event.

Coping with Stressful Events

For many people, the effects of a stressful event will subside within a few weeks of the event. Positive coping strategies can help to manage the effects and may prevent long term consequences. Here are some tips to help cope better in the short and long term:

- Take good care of yourself. Eat well, exercise, and get enough rest.

- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, chocolate and nicotine, all of which can increase anxiety.
- Avoid alcohol or other drugs, which can act as depressants and impair judgment.
- Seek out comfortable, familiar surroundings and avoid spending too much time alone.
- Share your thoughts and feelings with those who are supportive and helpful. It can help to talk about the event and your reactions. Don't try to block recollections.
- Communicate your thoughts and feelings clearly. Let others know which of their responses are helpful and which are not. This clear communication helps others know how to respond helpfully and appropriately to you.
- Give yourself time to recover. Difficulties with concentration, memory or decision-making are normal short-term reactions. Focus on concrete, easily achievable tasks.
- Remember that difficulty sleeping, nightmares, flashbacks and the sense of being "hyper-alert" are common and will most likely diminish with time.
- Recognize that anniversary dates of a traumatic event or loss may trigger feelings related to that event. This is normal.
- Seek professional help if your responses are interfering with health, relationships or job responsibilities.

Getting Help Is Crucial

Seeking the assistance of a professional counselor does not imply weakness or an inability to cope; it simply indicates that the particular event was too powerful to manage on your own. MyLife Services can help you identify the right kind of assistance. MyLife Services counselors are available 24/7 to talk with, consult with, and guide you.

MIT MyLife Services is a confidential and free counseling, consultation and work-life resources benefit for all faculty, staff, postdocs and family members. If you need additional information or would like to speak with a counselor, please call MyLife Services at 844-405-5433, email: info@MITMyLifeServices.com or visit: www.MITMyLifeServices.com. MyLife Services counselors are available 24/7 to assist with your concerns.

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