

In the Aftermath of a Traumatic Event: What to Expect

A traumatic event is likely to set off a chain of reactions that can be confusing, painful, and life-changing for an individual, group, or community.

Definitions

- Trauma—an experience that is emotionally painful, distressful, or shocking, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects
- Traumatic event—a life-threatening or shocking occurrence that is witnessed or experienced by an individual; it often involves:
 - A major change we don't choose
 - An intense loss we don't anticipate
 - A feeling of deep uncertainty which challenges our sense of being safe and in control
- Resilience—the ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, adversity, hardship, and ongoing significant life stressors

Time Lines

The Immediate Shock: Expected Reactions

- When a traumatic event occurs immediate responses often include shock and numbness, a sense of being overwhelmed and in disbelief, or even separated from reality.
- Whereas a stressor may cause some of the same reactions, the reactions to trauma will be of greater magnitude and intensity.
- Immediate reactions to a traumatic event may include both physiological and emotional symptoms:
 - **Physical**
 - Loss of appetite
 - Headaches, chest pain
 - Diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea
 - Hyperactivity or feeling edgy
 - Nightmares
 - Inability to sleep
 - Fatigue, low energy
 - Worsening of existent health conditions
 - **Psychological or Emotional**
 - Feeling stunned, numb, or overwhelmed
 - Reliving the event in your mind
 - Fear
 - Feeling helpless
 - Sadness and grief
 - Guilt
 - Anxiety
 - Self-blame and blaming others
 - Hyper-alertness
 - Denial
 - Isolation, withdrawal
 - Agitation
 - Concentration and memory problems

After the Immediate Shock: Day-to-Day Experiences

- As days turn into weeks, many people will guardedly begin to feel more like themselves. The intensity of some of the initial reactions will abate, and/or the duration of periods of feeling out-of-sorts will slowly decrease.

- There will still be times of intensity and periods when the experience is similar to how it felt right after the traumatic event, but generally, for most people, there is a slow but steady improvement in daily life. One thing that is particularly helpful in this process is having a strong support system.
- For some individuals, emotional and/or physical reactions will linger for a more extended period. There still may be a positive trajectory, but the process will be slower. Knowing how you react to stress in general may also give you guidance in understanding and accepting that you just need more time.
- Some individuals may continue to suffer from emotional and physical reactions that get in the way of their daily lives. It is crucial to pay attention to your reactions, and to listen to loved ones when they express concern. For example:
 - You may find it hard to concentrate at work, or you may find yourself consistently irritable at home, or your hyper-alertness never allows you to take a break.
 - You may find that you avoid places, people, or any possible external triggers of the event.
 - You may find that your symptoms extend to your physical health, including an inability to sleep well or a change in appetite.
 - You may begin isolating yourself.
 - You may begin to increase your use of alcohol and other drugs or begin engaging in other harmful behavior.
 - You may find yourself believing that it is pointless to reach out or that you do not need support.

Over the Long Run: Learning to Trust

- Resilience is a remarkable trait of human beings, and the reality is that most individuals will adapt and thrive beyond the traumatic event, and settle into a “new normal.”
- Initially this is hard to believe, and it is not something that is always helpful to hear in the throes of a tragedy. At the same time, knowing that people do recover, even though it may take a while, can be an important touchstone as time goes by.
- When a traumatic event occurs, there is a great loss of trust about what is “expectable,” about the routine of our everyday lives. The event is understandably momentous and looms large in the moment, and in the aftermath.
- With time, with support, and sometimes with outside help, the event shrinks in size, and most people can establish a new footing and grounding as they slowly begin to trust the environment once again.
- Those affected never forget and sometimes get overwhelmed (for example, on anniversary dates or when experiencing other losses), but ultimately it is entirely possible to learn to live once again in the present moment.

What to Expect: A Final Note

- From the initial event and onward, remember to reach out to family, friends, colleagues, communities and professionals. Indeed, social support may be the most crucial factor in building, promoting, and sustaining recovery and resilience.

Federal Occupational Health's (FOH) Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program is available 24/7 to provide support to federal employees. Professionally trained counselors can help minimize the impact of a stressful or disturbing event and help promote resilience. The program provides counseling, problem solving, coaching, and support to assist employees and their family members with a wide range of issues or concerns.

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FEDERAL OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH
 Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 (800) 222-0364 | (888) 262-7848 (TTY)
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