

# What should I expect after a traumatic event?

Most people go through a traumatic event at some point in their lives. They may experience a single event or continued difficult experiences.

**It is typical to react strongly to these events and need time to recover.** Common experiences after undergoing a traumatic event include the following:

- Emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, numbness, and guilt (even if we have done nothing that justifies feeling guilty);
- Physical difficulties such as our heart racing and difficulty sleeping; and
- Thoughts and images that we experience as intrusive (in other words, thoughts that we don't want and that come into our minds unbidden). These can include upsetting memories and nightmares.

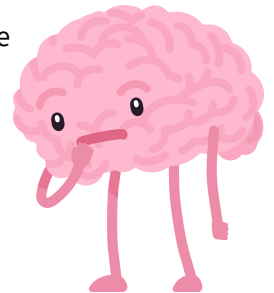


★ **After a traumatic event, feeling upset, having distressing thoughts, and physical reactions is to be expected. For most people, these symptoms don't last.**

These reactions are our brain's way of trying to make sense of the traumatic event(s) and help us manage the accompanying emotions and physical sensations.

Almost everyone has some of these symptoms in the weeks after going through a traumatic event. It is important to know that these reactions are a normal and expected part of the healing process.

We should not be hard on ourselves for having these experiences. Experiencing them – rather than pushing them away – is how we recover.



After a traumatic event, some of us might try to avoid thinking about the event or experiencing the emotions that come with the memories of it. We might think it's a good idea to avoid going to places or seeing people that bring up reminders of the event, or we might want to numb our emotions with alcohol, other drugs, or behaviours that make us feel better in the moment (e.g., gambling, excessive internet use, reckless behaviours). We might think that avoiding the upsetting reminders, thoughts, and emotions is protecting us.

However, avoidance makes things worse in the long run. **When we avoid the thoughts, memories, and emotions associated with traumatic event(s), they only go away temporarily.** And when they come back, which they do when not allowed to run their course, they are more intense. Avoiding traumatic memories is like sweeping dust under a rug – it might look tidy for a while, but over time, it just creates a bigger mess that's harder to clean up.

Avoiding can also make us feel more alone. When we cut ourselves off from the people we care about and the things we enjoy, we end up feeling even more isolated. Using our supports, and often developing additional ones, is very important following a traumatic event.

**Distraction can be helpful in the short term.**

**However, if we do it all the time, it becomes avoidance, which prevents healing.**

Those who have recovered from traumatic events, and experts in the area, suggest the following ways to cope with what happened.



Talking to people we trust, like friends or family. Our relationships give us important feelings of connection. Sometimes we might want to talk about what happened; however, at other times, friends and family might simply provide a welcome distraction. What is important about distraction is that it does not turn into avoidance by doing it all the time.



Another form of distraction, which may also help reduce sad feelings, is engaging in activities we enjoy (or used to enjoy in the past).

Doing things that we find meaningful (learning, physical activity, volunteering, work, contributing to others) gives us a sense of accomplishment and structure, which is important for us in terms of ensuring the traumatic event does not take over our lives.



To cope with physical sensations, such as a racing heart, shortness of breath, and other panic-like sensations it can be helpful to engage in relaxation strategies such as taking slow deep breaths or using a relaxation app.



Disconnecting or reducing exposure to media information about the event can also be helpful. Taking a break from constant news about a traumatic event can give your mind some space to heal and prevent feeling overwhelmed.

While most people recover from trauma with time and support from friends and family, some people go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

If you're still struggling with these feelings for a month or two, they are disruptive to your daily life, or they are overwhelming, it's a good idea to seek professional help.

This is when it is important to talk to a mental health expert who specializes in trauma. They can provide treatment strategies tailored to your individual experiences to help you heal.

Knowing that these reactions are normal and asking for help when needed makes the healing journey easier. Remember, it's both okay and necessary to take care of our mental health and ask for help when we need it.



## Mental Health and Addictions Intake :1-855-922-1122

If you need help with a mental health or addiction concern, our team is here to help.

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