



Self-care during difficult times

When we, or people we care about are affected by traumatic events, outside of our control, it can be distressing and upsetting and feel overwhelming.

Whilst you might not be able to change the event itself, there are things you can do during difficult times to look after yourself. These things can make a genuine difference to how well you cope.

FIRST - Understand there are a wide range of reactions that people have....

For example, it is normal to feel:

- Frightened, on-edge, worried, anxious or more alert than usual
- Helpless – that something really bad has happened or is happening, and you can't do anything about it
- Angry – about what has happened and with whoever is responsible
- Guilty – that you have survived or are not injured when others have suffered or died. You may wonder if you could have done anything to prevent what happened.
- Sadness – particularly if people were injured or killed, especially someone you knew.
- Grief – if you've lost something important to you
- Stunned or shocked
- Cut off from what is going on around you as if things aren't real
- Agitated or irritable

It is also normal to experience:

- Distressing dreams or intrusive memories of the event
- Headaches
- Crying
- Changes in appetite, upset stomach
- Aches and pains in your body, tiredness, fatigue
- Feeling that your heart is beating faster
- Not feeling like being with others or doing things you usually enjoy
- Thinking about what has happened repeatedly, finding it difficult to think about other things
- Poor concentration and memory, difficulty thinking clearly and making decisions
- A strong need to talk or a desire not to say much at all
- Acting or feeling as if nothing has happened, which people may see as meaning that you don't care or are being strong, but can be a way of trying to cope.

SECOND - Understand there are some simple things that you can do that will help you cope

Things that help:

- Spend time in places and with people with whom you feel safe and comfortable, if possible
- Get plenty of rest if you feel tired, but try to have some kind of regular routine with your sleep e.g. not sleeping through the day and staying awake at night
- Do things that feel good to you, even if they don't feel as good as they usually do (e.g. read, exercise, watch television, spend time with others, hobbies)
- Think about any coping strategies that you have used to manage difficult situations in the past and use them again
- Be involved with people who are going through or have survived the same experience
- Do some 'normal' things with people where you don't have to talk about what has happened if you don't want to
- Allow some time for yourself – you may want to be alone at times
- Get into a routine, even if you don't feel like eating try to have small healthy snacks regularly and do some light exercise (e.g. walk in the fresh air).
- Give yourself time – it takes weeks or months after a traumatic event has finished for people to accept what has happened and learn how to live with the experience.
- Find out what happened – try to gain information from a few reliable sources, when you are ready, so that you can better understand the reality of the situation.
- Take extra care – when we are going through or have gone through a recent trauma, we can be more vulnerable to accidents, so be mindful when driving
- Talk it over - if you feel ready. It is important, however, not to force yourself or others to tell their story. Some people may need to talk repeatedly about their reactions, other people will cope with it differently, and perhaps not with talking. Sometimes if someone is not able to manage their own feelings or doesn't have the skills to listen openly to your story, they may unintentionally minimise or dismiss by saying "don't cry", "calm down", or "be thankful that it wasn't worse". If this happens when you try to talk, find someone else to speak to who is better able to listen at that time. If you don't have anyone to talk to, you can write down your thoughts and feelings, or consider seeing a counsellor.
- Ask for practical help from family and friends as there is a good chance they want to help but don't know how to. So speak up and let them know what you need. This could include help around the house, help with studies, cooking or whatever practical assistance you need.

Things that don't typically help

Bottling up your feelings - Strong feelings are natural. Don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel, and don't worry if you cry.

Taking on too much - Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think to go over what happened so you can come to terms with it. Take some time to get back to your old routine.

Drinking or using drugs - Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.

Making big life changes - Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgement may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from people you trust.

Withdrawing from others – Although you might feel like being alone and it is OK to spend some extra time by yourself, try not to withdraw completely from other people.

THIRD - Understand that it is OK to seek professional help

Many people find that the experiences they go through after a traumatic event gradually reduce within about one month of a traumatic event ending. If the traumatic event is ongoing, it is normal to experience ongoing reactions. If you feel like things are not getting better, or you cannot manage the experiences you are having, then it is a good idea to seek professional help.

You could make an appointment with one of our GPs - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/health>

AND/OR

Contact our counselling team. To contact us either email us on counselling@flinders.edu.au or through the form on our website - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling/new-client-form>

AND/OR

Check out some of the resources we've collated in our Self-Help Library - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/05/13/counsellinghandouts/>