

A photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair and round glasses, wearing a light-colored sweater. She is sitting in a red chair and looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background is a brick wall. A blue gradient overlay covers the bottom half of the image.

# Caring for yourself after a significant event

# Vita Health Group are experienced in delivering support and advice in response to a critical incident or traumatic event in the workplace.

**It is common for people to experience a range of emotions and feelings following an unexpected shock or significant event. This guide gives information about what you might expect, and ways to look after yourself.**

Shock and denial are typical responses to an unexpected, traumatic event, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normally protective reactions.

Shock is a sudden and often intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves you not acknowledging that something very stressful has happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected from life.

As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

- Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- Thoughts and behaviour patterns are affected by the trauma. You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reaction such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate, make decisions or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- Recurring emotional reactions are common. Reminders such as things in the environment that recall the event, can trigger upsetting memories of the experience. These “triggers” may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- Interpersonal relationships often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and co-workers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.
- Physical symptoms may accompany emotional reactions. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.
- Shame and guilt are common responses. We can sometimes run through things that we think we could or should have done differently, or feel ashamed about needing support, or not being “over it” yet. These thoughts can leave you feeling ashamed or guilty.
- Helplessness. Faced with a trauma, many of us are forced to face our limitations in an abrupt manner; this puts us in touch with unpleasant realisations about our lack of absolute strength and invulnerability, not to mention our sense of permanence.
- “What if...” fantasies can follow. Although the incident was bad enough, these thoughts can develop around a worst case scenario. “I might have been killed”, “what if I had been walking in 5 minutes earlier” – these thoughts are normal ways of the brain processing such unusual events, but can lead to heightened fear and anxiety.

## How do people respond differently over time?

It is important to realise that there is not one “standard” pattern of reaction to traumatic experiences. Some people respond immediately, while others have delayed reactions – sometimes months later. Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

Reactions can change over time. Some who have suffered from such an incident are energised initially by the event, helping them with the challenge of coping in the present, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

A number of factors tend to affect the length of time required for recovery, including:

- The degree of intensity and loss. Events that last longer and pose a greater threat, and where loss of life is involved, often take longer to resolve.
- A person’s general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations. Individuals who have handled other difficult, stressful circumstances well may find it easier to cope with a traumatic event.
- Other stressful events preceding the incident. Individuals faced with other emotionally challenging situations, such as serious health problems or family-related difficulties, may have more intense reactions to the new stressful event and need more time to recover.

## How should I help myself?

- There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well-being and a sense of control following a significant event, including the following:
- Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself time to process the events you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathise with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you were also involved in the incident.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you – such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Engage in healthy behaviours to enhance your ability to cope with stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or re-establish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

## When should I seek professional help?

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by traumatic experience by using their own support systems. For some, however, the impact of such an event can persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming anxiety about being in situations that remind them of the event, or experience 'flashbacks': experiences of reliving the event as if it were happening again in the here and now.

Generally significant symptoms will subside in a few weeks, however individuals with prolonged reactions or significant symptoms that disrupt their daily functioning should contact their GP and/or consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional.

Psychological therapists, psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

Remember you can access your EAP Helpline for emotional support and mental health advice 24/7.

