

Practicing Self-Care After Traumatic Events

Exposure to traumatic events can have a major impact on our emotions, behaviors, cognitive functioning, and physical well-being. People experience a range of reactions. It is common for them to report being more fearful, withdrawing from friends and family, feeling easily distracted or even frustrated by memory lapses, or failing to complete simple tasks.

The most common reaction people exposed to trauma or extreme stress report is the powerful impact on our bodies. Initially we may feel anxious, sense our hearts racing, or experience an adrenaline rush. After a few days, we may feel exhausted but have difficulty sleeping, notice that we startle easily, be more hypervigilant, or feel numb or detached. Often people report they cannot stop thinking about the traumatic event, watching it on television, or reading about it in the news.

The good news is humans are resilient and most everyone will recover in a short amount of time – usually a few weeks. To speed our recovery, we need to remember self-care is important and find ways to take care of ourselves on a daily basis. Here are a few things you can do to promote a return to normalcy:

- 1) **Maintain social connections:** When we experience a loss or a tragedy, it is easy to isolate or withdraw from our network of friends and family. But in a time of crisis, these support networks are more important than ever. Reach out to those who can support you. Make plans to see friends and stay connected in-person or on the phone. You may decide you want to temporarily avoid people who are not being supportive. And remember, that it is okay to take time out for yourself to rest and recharge.
- 2) **Engage in health-promoting behaviors:** Exercise several times a week and try and maintain a healthy diet. Our healthy routines and good eating habits disappear during emergencies, so we need to find ways to carve out time to go for a walk, swim, or whatever exercise you enjoy. Do not overdo it. If you are pressed for time, a short walk is fine. Do not be hard on yourself. Right now may not be the time to start a diet or quit smoking. Stay hydrated. When we are stressed we tend to use up more water than normal, and our bodies do not always give us the signals that we are thirsty, so it is important to drink a lot of water.
- 3) **Maintain good sleep hygiene:** Traumatic events often disrupt our sleep. Some people report nightmares or find that nights are harder for them. Try to maintain regular sleep routines and get eight hours of sleep a night. Stay away from caffeine in the evening. Recent studies support turning off all electronics – televisions, phones, and computers – at least one hour before bedtime.
- 4) **Find balance in your life:** During a crisis people often report excessive behaviors – working too much, eating too much, sleeping too much, and even drinking too much. Avoid excessively watching television reports of the event. Set limits for yourself on activities and make sure you are taking care of yourself in all areas – social, behavioral, and spiritual. Our assumptions about the world being a safe place are shattered and anything we can do that gives our life meaning or gives us a plan of action will help speed our recovery.