

Self Care Tips after a traumatic event

After experiencing or being exposed to an incident which is critical or traumatic, it is normal to have some kind of stress reaction. As individuals, we are all unique and therefore not everyone will have the same reaction or response. There is no right or wrong way to feel or react after a traumatic event. This reaction will take a varying amount of time to dissipate, depending on the individual and the incident. It is normal to feel angry, frustrated, helpless, and afraid. For many people, symptoms of fear, anxiety, re-experiencing, urges to avoid, and heightened sensitivity, if present, will gradually decrease over time.

Self-care during the recovery and healing period is very important. Many people will use the coping skills or strategies which they have learnt in the past, and together with the support of family and friends they will recover. For all of us going through a traumatic event, there is a period of processing or trying to make sense of what has occurred. During this period, many people may learn new skills, make new friends, learn the value of community or learn something new about themselves and others.

Research on individuals with positive responses after a traumatic event indicates that their preferred coping mechanisms are:

- Focus on brief time intervals (e.g., think only about what the next step is), or
- Focus on the big picture of their life (i.e., as one tragic event in a full and meaningful life)
- Maintain a view of oneself as competent and a view of others as willing and able to provide support
- Focus on the current implications of the trauma and avoid regretting past decisions and actions

Some strategies that may assist with coping and self-care are as follows:

1. Use supports

Talk to the people in your life that you feel comfortable speaking with e.g. family or friends. Ask for help and company when needed. If you are struggling, seek professional help either a GP or a counsellor who will be able to reassure you and offer you advice or strategies.

2. Talking to others who have gone through similar experiences.

This can help to alleviate feelings of isolation. Others who have experienced a similar event may be able to 'normalise' and understand your reactions and perhaps share what helped them to cope. Support groups are available.

3. Practicing relaxation methods.

These can include muscular relaxation exercises, breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to quiet music, spending time in nature,

etc. This may be difficult to do on your own initially, using guided relaxation or attending guided meditation is a good place to start.

4. Engage in activities that you enjoy

This can allow for distraction from the constant stress and discomfort caused by the trauma experience. Distraction can be useful short term, especially if you engage in enjoyable activities, which allow you to express your creativity. While distraction is a useful short-term strategy for coping, it should not be used to avoid completely. It is important to process what happened and your feelings.

5. Exercise

During a trauma or incident there is an increase in the flight or fight response which means an increase in adrenalin in the body. Exercise is important to deal with this increase in adrenalin. Exercise can be beneficial to maintain physical health, manage stress and having a sense of doing something positive to take care of self. It also increases the endorphins in the brain which trigger positive feelings in the body.

6. General stress management

This is not a good time to take on new responsibilities or extra work commitments. Manage your work-life balance and focus as much energy on self as on others and work. Eat healthily and try to rest and sleep. The body needs fuel and rest to recover.

7. Delay in making major decisions

There may be a temptation to want to change your life, your job and your friends after a trauma, as you may see the world from a different perspective because of what you have been through. Wait! Give yourself some healing time before making major changes or major decisions.

8. Take time to reflect

When you are ready take time to reflect on and make sense of what you have been through. Writing in a journal or a letter to yourself can be a way to do this.

9. Connect with your own spirituality

This is not necessarily about religion; but finding what you value and what is meaningful to you. Connecting in a meaningful way can be very helpful in finding hope and belief in recovery or in making sense of what has occurred.

10. Seek professional counselling

Often speaking to someone who is completely objective and understands what you are going through without judgement can be very helpful.

Ongoing concerns?

1. Pay attention to any severe reactions or changes in how you are feeling and what you choose to do. If after a month of following the above advice you are finding it difficult to follow normal routines or new symptom develop, then contact your GP
2. Remember processing and healing takes time and most people recover well with support from their family, friends and colleagues.