

When people go through, witness, or vicariously experience sudden tragedy or violent events such as accidents, individual acts of violence, abuse, or war related events, it is common for them to experience traumatic stress.

Understanding the effects of traumatic stress and the normal responses that may follow can help you cope with your thoughts and feelings on the path to recovery.

Following sudden tragedy or violent events, people frequently feel stunned, disoriented or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviors.



WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

If you notice persistent feelings of distress or hopelessness and you feel like you are struggling to get through your daily responsibilities and activities, consult with a licensed mental health professional.

Mental health professionals are trained to help people address emotional reactions to disaster such as disbelief, stress, anxiety and grief and make a plan for moving forward.

Suffolk University offers free, short-term counseling and medical care to students in the Counseling, Health & Wellness Center.

SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY COUNSELING HEALTH & WELLNESS

For Counseling Appointments:
617-573-8226

73 Tremont Street, 5th Floor

General Office Hours:
Mon-Thur 9am-6pm
Fri 9am-5pm

Crisis Counselor Available
Mon-Fri 11am-4pm

To speak with a counselor after hours or on the weekend, call 617-573-8226

suffolk.edu/chw



This information is adapted from the American Psychological Association and can be found at:

www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters.aspx
www.apa.org/helpcenter/disaster/index.aspx

COPING

WITH

TRAGEDY

& VIOLENT

EVENTS

*Common Responses,
Coping Strategies, and
When to Seek Professional Help*



SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY BOSTON

COUNSELING, HEALTH & WELLNESS

COMMON RESPONSES TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Intense or Unpredictable Feelings

You may be anxious, nervous, overwhelmed or grief-stricken. You may also feel more irritable or shifts in mood than usual.

Changes to Thoughts & Behavior Patterns

You might have repeated & vivid memories of the event or may ruminate on images or stories to which you were exposed that relate to the event. These memories may occur for seemingly no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It may also be difficult to concentrate or make decisions, and/or feel safe; sleep/eating patterns can be disrupted.

Sensitivity to Environmental Factors

Sirens, loud noises, burning smells or other environmental sensations may stimulate memories of the event creating heightened anxiety. These "triggers" may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.

Strained Interpersonal Relationships

Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with loved ones and coworkers, can occur. You might also become withdrawn, isolated, or disengaged from your usual social activities.

Stress-Related Physical Symptoms

Headaches, nausea and chest pain may occur and could require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions could be triggered by the stress of a traumatic event.

COPING TIPS & STRATEGIES

Research shows that most people are resilient and over time are able to recover from tragedy.

It is common for people to experience stress in the immediate aftermath, but within a few months most people are able to resume functioning as they did prior to the tragedy. It is important to remember that resilience and recovery are the norm, not prolonged distress.

There are a number of steps you can take to build emotional well-being and gain a sense of control following a tragedy or violence related event:

1 Give yourself time to adjust.

- Anticipate that this may be a difficult time in your life.
- Try to be patient with changes in your emotional states.

2 Ask for support.

- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. Social support is a key component to recovery.
- Loved ones can be an important resources.
- You may want to reach out to those not involved in the event who might be able to provide greater support and objectivity.
- Finding an informal or formally organized support group can be helpful.

3 Communicate your experience.

- Express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you. This could include talking with family or close friends, keeping a diary or engaging in a creative activity (e.g., drawing, molding clay), etc.

4 Limit your viewing or reading regarding news of the event(s).

- Although you may want to stay aware of the news, repeated and prolonged immersion to the news can heighten your anxiety. Be sure to take breaks from the news if possible.

5 Take care of your body to enhance your ability to cope.

- 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 such as gentle breathing and guided meditation.
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs because they can be numbing and can detract from or delay active coping and moving forward from a tragedy.

6 Establish or re-establish routines.

- This can include eating meals at regular times, sleeping and waking on a regular cycle, or following an exercise program.
- Build in some positive routines to have something to look forward to during these distressing times, such as pursuing a hobby, walking through a park, or reading a good book.

7 Avoid making major life decisions.

- Switching careers or jobs or other important decisions tend to be highly stressful in their own right and even harder to take on when recovering from a tragedy.