



Coping with Ongoing Traumatic Events

Important things to know about experiencing a traumatic event

Recent traumatic events (local mass shooting, violence and threats of violence on campus, hate speech/graffiti, wildfires, and traumatic events across the nation) have understandably caused people to experience anxiety, distress, and concern about the future. Reactions to traumatic events may be experienced by those who were directly involved in or witnessed a traumatic event first-hand but also those who felt threatened and those who intervened to assist others immediately impacted. Reactions to traumatic events may appear immediately or emerge over time (e.g., hours, days, weeks, months) and can include a variety of experiences, including feeling fearful or unsafe, as well as emotional, physical, behavioral, cognitive, and grief reactions. People often are concerned about how long they may feel the way that they do and whether their level of distress and/or reactions to traumatic events or uncertainty are “normal” or “common.” It’s important to remember that recovering from a traumatic event is a process and takes time. While many people will feel better over time and able to return to their usual routines, for some this will be more of a challenge; each individual is impacted by a traumatic event in their own way.

What you could be experiencing

Feeling afraid or unsafe: may include feeling nervous and easily startled; hypervigilance; flashbacks; nightmares; reminders of violence or threatened violence (e.g., sights, sounds, intrusive thoughts, memories, images, people, places, things, etc.)

Emotional reactions: may include feeling anxiety; fearfulness; sadness; sorrow; anger; guilt; shame; blame; depressed or irritable mood; denial; avoidance; despair; shock; survivor guilt; numbness; disbelief; detachment; disillusionment; helplessness; hopelessness; mood swings; restlessness

Physical reactions: may include (even in the absence of any underlying physical injury or illness) headaches; stomachaches; nausea; digestive problems; change in appetite (e.g., eating less, eating more); diarrhea or constipation; rapid heart rate; sweating; trembling or shakiness; fatigue; lack of energy

Behavioral reactions: may include difficulty relaxing; sleep difficulties (e.g., falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, nightmares); social withdrawal; isolation; crying frequently; use of alcohol, tobacco, substances (including prescription medication); anger outbursts

Cognitive reactions: may include worry; difficulty with concentration and focus; confusion; trouble remembering things; intrusive thoughts

Grief reactions: the experience, impact, and meaning of a loss may vary depending on a variety of factors, for example, family, cultural, or religious/spiritual practices; circumstances of a loss; and support from others

Strategies to Assist with Coping

Connect with others. During times of stress, people sometimes have the urge to isolate themselves and be alone. It's important to talk to and remain connected to supportive others, who may include a family member, partner, friend, professor, academic advisor, resident advisor, coach, co-worker, or counselor. Talking with trusted others about your concerns and experiences may provide you with understanding, care, relief, and comfort, and even may serve to strengthen your resilience. In addition, talking with others who have shared experiences of traumatic events can be helpful in decreasing a sense of aloneness and increasing a sense of understanding; however, for some people it may have the opposite effect and actually increase distress. Also, for those people who are religious and/or spiritual, connecting with a faith leader and engaging in religious/spiritual practices can be helpful. Don't be afraid to ask directly for what you need or want; a hug or a shoulder to cry on might be what you need in a given moment. And, if you are comfortable with animals, pets can provide sources of comfort as well.

Be patient with yourself. It's important to be kind to yourself and patient as you cope with traumatic events. Remind yourself that not everyone experiences stress and distress in the same ways. It can sometimes be helpful to reflect on past experiences of stress or distress and remember coping strategies that have helped you in the past. For some, writing and/or journaling about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, may be helpful.

Limit exposure to news and social media. When you're feeling stressed or worried, you may understandably want to obtain as much information about something as possible. There may be information that is important to obtain; however, compulsively watching the news, seeing traumatic images, and/or checking social media can be detrimental and actually increase your level of anxiety and distress. You also need to be cautious about misinformation and rumors that may circulate through social media or other sources. If utilizing your cell phone or watching television are strategies for you to cope, choose to watch a light-hearted movie or play a game, avoiding prolonged exposure to news.

Engage in healthy habits. Taking care of your physical self is important in your ability to cope with distress. Do your best to eat healthy meals and snacks, stay hydrated, and get a full night of sleep (7-8 hours). Avoid the use of alcohol and substances as they can have a detrimental effect on your coping (for example, intensify your pain or cause you to suppress your emotions). Engage in physical activities/exercise that you enjoy (such as stretching, walking, jogging, hiking, biking, yoga, meditation); these activities can help reduce stress.

Practice relaxation and/or mindfulness. There are a wide range of relaxation methods you can practice, including deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, prayer, yoga, stretching, and massage. These relaxation methods may help reduce your symptoms of distress. Mindfulness practice can also be beneficial. Mindfulness involves paying attention and being fully present in a moment while also accepting whatever you are experiencing without judgment. This can be valuable in many ways, for example, increasing focus and memory as well as reducing stress and emotional reactivity. While most people find relaxation and/or mindfulness practices to be beneficial, some people may experience increased distress through these practices. In these cases, utilizing these practices in small amounts over time may be helpful.

Help others. Helping others during traumatic events can also be helpful to you. During such events, there are often opportunities to get involved as a volunteer in community activities. In addition, if you are concerned about someone else's well-being following a traumatic event, reach out to see how they are coping and if you can provide support or resources.

Have fun. Allow yourself to engage in activities that you have found enjoyable. It can be a part of your healing process to disengage from traumatic experiences and re-engage in positive/fun activities, such as arts and crafts, playing or hearing live music, going to the beach, being with friends, etc.

Seek support from a mental health professional. Please consider reaching out for assistance from a mental health counselor if you are feeling stuck, overwhelmed by intense emotions, and/or having difficulties functioning. People react differently to traumatic events and sometimes people can benefit from professional support to assist them in moving forward following a traumatic event.

Students – University Counseling Services (UCS) offers a variety of mental health services for enrolled students. Walk-in urgent care assistance is available at UCS to assist students with urgent situations, emergencies, or serious crises related to psychological concerns, during business hours (8:00 am to 5:00 pm), Monday through Friday, in Bayramian Hall, room 520. After business hours, UCS offers crisis counseling via telephone at (818) 677-2366, option 3. For more information, please visit our website at www.csun.edu/counseling.

- **Faculty and Staff** – CSUN's Life Matters (Employee Assistance Program) offers mental health services for faculty and staff at (800) 367-7474 and/or log on to www.mylifematters.com (password: Matadors); 24/7 crisis intervention services are provided. University Counseling Services' mental health professionals are available to consult with you about any concerns you may have about a student.

Coping with Symptoms of PTSD

Taken from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website
(www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/coping_stress_reactions.asp#two)

Unwanted distressing memories, images, or thoughts

- Remind yourself that they are just that, memories.
- Remind yourself that it's natural to have some memories of the trauma(s).
- Talk about them to someone you trust.
- Remember that, although reminders of trauma can feel overwhelming, they often lessen with time.

Sudden feelings of anxiety or panic

Traumatic stress reactions often include feeling your heart pounding and feeling lightheaded or spacey. This is usually caused by rapid breathing. If this happens, remember that:

- These reactions are not dangerous. If you had them while exercising, they most likely would not worry you.
- These feelings often come with scary thoughts that are not true. For example, you may think, "I'm going to die," "I'm having a heart attack," or "I will lose control." It is the scary thoughts that make these reactions so upsetting.
- Slowing down your breathing may help.
- The sensations will pass soon and then you can go on with what you were doing.

Each time you respond in these positive ways to your anxiety or panic, you will be working toward making it happen less often. Practice will make it easier to cope.

Feeling like the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you and notice where you are.
- Talk to yourself. Remind yourself where you are, what year you're in, and that you are safe. The trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.

- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water and wash your hands.
- Call someone you trust and tell them what is happening.
- Remind yourself that this is a common response after trauma.
- Tell your counselor or doctor about the flashback(s).

Dreams and nightmares related to the trauma

- If you wake up from a nightmare in a panic, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream. Having the dream is why you are in a panic, not because there is real danger now.
- You may want to get up out of bed, regroup, and orient yourself to the here and now.
- Engage in a pleasant, calming activity. For example, listen to some soothing music.
- Talk to someone if possible.
- Talk to your doctor about your nightmares. Certain medicines can be helpful.

Difficulty falling or staying asleep

- Keep to a regular bedtime schedule.
- Avoid heavy exercise for the few hours just before going to bed.
- Avoid using your sleeping area for anything other than sleeping or sex.
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. These harm your ability to sleep.
- Do not lie in bed thinking or worrying. Get up and enjoy something soothing or pleasant. For example, read a calming book, drink a glass of warm milk or herbal tea, or do a quiet hobby.

Irritability, anger, and rage

- Take a time out to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
- Get in the habit of exercise daily. Exercise reduces body tension and relieves stress.
- Remember that staying angry doesn't work. It actually increases your stress and can cause health problems.
- Talk to your counselor or doctor about your anger. Take classes in how to manage anger.
- If you blow up at family members or friends, find time as soon as you can to talk to them about it. Let them know how you feel and what you are doing to cope with your reactions.

Difficulty concentrating or staying focused

- Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on what it is you need to learn or do.
- Write things down. Making "to do" lists may be helpful.
- Break tasks down into small do-able chunks.
- Plan a realistic number of events or tasks for each day.
- You may be depressed. Many people who are depressed have trouble concentrating. Again, this is something you can discuss with your counselor, doctor, or someone close to you.

Trouble feeling or expressing positive emotions

- Remember that this is a common reaction to a traumatic event. You are not doing this on purpose. You should not feel guilty for something you do not want to happen and cannot control.
- Make sure to keep taking part in activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Even if you don't think you will enjoy something, once you get into it, you may well start having feelings of pleasure.
- Take steps to let your loved ones know that you care. You can express your caring in little ways: write a card, leave a small gift, or phone someone and say hello.

References

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (*not just about children*)

www.nctsn.org/

The American Psychological Association

www.apa.org/helpcenter/terror-exposure.aspx

www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-uncertainty.aspx

www.apa.org/helpcenter/mass-shooting.aspx

American Counseling Association

www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/mental-health-resources/trauma-disaster

SAMHSA

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips

www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline

US Department of Veteran Affairs - National Center for PTSD

www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/coping_stress_reactions.asp

Helpful Apps

Calm

www.calm.com

Stop Breathe Think

www.stopbreathethink.com

Headspace

www.headspace.com

[Mindfulness Coach: Mobile App](#)

This app includes mindfulness exercises to practice on your own or with guidance and strategies to help overcome challenges to mindfulness practice. Includes a log and reminders to support your mindfulness practice. Available for iOS and Android.

[PTSD Coach: Mobile App](#)

This mobile app has self-assessments, symptom-tracking, and coping skills to help you address and monitor stress. Available for iOS and Android.

[PTSD Coach Online](#)

A series of online video coaches will guide you through 17 tools to help you manage stress. PTSD Coach Online is used on a computer, rather than a mobile device, and therefore can offer tools that involve writing.

CSUN

University
Counseling
Services

18111 Nordhoff St., BH 520 | Northridge, CA 91330-8217
(818)677-2366, option 1 | Fax (818)677-7910
After Hours Crisis Line: (818)677-2366, option 3
www.csun.edu/counseling | coun@csun.edu
