

Coping with a Traumatic Event

Ways to Find Support

A traumatic event is any sudden or unexpected event that affects people's emotional lives, feelings of safety, and ability to cope. It might be a robbery or assault that occurred in the workplace, a sudden accident or death at work, the murder or suicide of a coworker, or domestic abuse that impacts the workplace. A traumatic event is any event that you are unprepared for, or have little control over, and that has some negative impact on your life or reality.

If you have recently experienced a traumatic event, you may be feeling a number of emotions. You may feel sad, upset, afraid, angry or alone. You may have trouble concentrating, or feel overwhelmed by your emotions. All of these feelings are normal reactions. What's important to remember at this difficult time is that there are steps you can take to seek support for yourself and find help.

Common Reactions

If you have experienced a traumatic event, you may be affected for days, weeks or even months afterward. At first, it's normal to feel overwhelmed. You may have difficulty sleeping, feel distracted or feel afraid or unsafe. You may experience symptoms of stress. The signs and symptoms of stress can be physical, mental or emotional.

- **Physical symptoms can include:** nausea, upset stomach, tremors in your lips or hands, feeling uncoordinated, profuse sweating, chills, diarrhea, dizziness, rapid heartbeat, head and muscle aches, chest pain (should be checked at a hospital immediately).

- **Emotional symptoms can include:** anxiety, fear, guilt, grief, depression, sadness and crying, anger, irritability, shock, loss or abandonment, numbness, denial, isolation or feeling alone, worrying about others, wanting to hide, wanting to limit contact with others.
- **Mental symptoms can include:** slowed thinking, difficulty making decisions, difficulty with problem-solving, confusion, disorientation (especially about place and time), difficulty concentrating, memory problems, difficulty naming common objects, distressing dreams, poor attention span.

What You Can Do

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, it is important that you take steps to help yourself cope and recover.

- **Realize that what you are experiencing is normal.** Feeling fear, shock, anger, confusion or depression is normal, and will usually ease with time.
- **Avoid comparing yourself with others**—everyone is different and reacts differently to a traumatic event.
- **Avoid using alcohol** or non-prescription drugs to cope with your emotions.
- **Don't try to fight recurring thoughts.** They are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful. Do not preserve an event — give yourself a few minutes a day to think about it and then push it out of your mind.
- **Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.** Staying with normal routines can help you recover from a traumatic event.

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- **Use company resources to help you** through this difficult time. Ask your supervisor or HR department about company resources for people coping with a traumatic event.
- **Take care of yourself.** You may be more vulnerable to illness or fatigue when coping with a traumatic event. Eat nutritious food and drink plenty of water, even when you don't feel like it.
- **Exercise.** Physical activity of any kind helps relieve stress.
- **Use a relaxation technique.** You might find help from yoga, meditation or some other relaxation technique.
- **Be alert for signs** that you may need help coping, such as becoming teary frequently.

Finding Support

- **Contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Your EAP can offer free, confidential support 24 hours a day to help you cope with your feelings and reactions to the traumatic event. The EAP program can also provide helpful materials, referrals to local resources, assistance and long-term counseling, if necessary.
- **Talk about your feelings** with coworkers, your manager, family or friends. Don't try to hide or ignore your emotions.
- **Consider seeing a counselor** if your feelings become prolonged, or if you are having trouble coping or handling your feelings.

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