

If children are involved

Children who have been involved in or exposed to a stressful event will often have troubling memories in the following weeks. They may try to avoid anything that might remind them of it.

And they may also develop separation anxiety, seem nervous and tense and/or have difficulty concentrating for any length of time.

Normal reactions in children after a stressful event

- Uncharacteristic restlessness
- Constantly replaying the experience
- Sudden mood swings: crying, laughter, fooling around
- Irritability
- Wanting to be alone
- Timidity and separation anxiety
- Fear of the dark

How parents and others can help

- Take the child's needs seriously.
- Give them a sense of security and calm.
- Involve them fully in family life.
- Give them the opportunity to talk about their feelings and fears.
- Ease them back into their daily routines as quickly as possible.
- Offer them a lot of shared time with family and friends.
- Give yourself time for your own needs and feelings, too!

Every child will react in their own way to experiencing a stressful event. How best to help and support them will also depend on their age.

When should you seek professional help?

If you are seriously concerned about your child and their reactions, or if these reactions persist and still seem to be adversely affecting their daily life more than four weeks after the stressful event, you should seek professional help.



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CARElink
A guide
to getting over stressful
events for the persons involved
and their family and friends

Stressful events

You have experienced a stressful event. This may cause unexpected reactions in you, now or in the future.

Stress reactions

Sometimes stress reactions or emotional side-effects can develop straight away; sometimes these only manifest themselves after a few hours or days. In some cases, it may be weeks or even months before such reactions occur.

Length

The length of time that such stress reactions persist is very individual, and can range from hours or days to several months. In a few rare cases, they can last even longer.

Support

You may find that the event you have experienced was so exceptionally stressful that you need outside support to come to terms with it. In this case, you may wish to seek the help of a qualified specialist in medicine or psychology.

Common stress reactions

Physical stress reactions

Exhaustion, fatigue, drowsiness, nausea, dizziness, palpitations, nervousness, headaches, sweating, trembling, insomnia.

Mental stress reactions

Difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, nightmares, mental emptiness, wandering thoughts.

Emotional stress reactions

Insensitivity, mood swings, fear, resignation, shame, anger, helplessness, uncertainty, sadness, guilt.

Behavioural stress reactions

Loss of interest, withdrawal, silence, sudden tears, loss of (or increase in) appetite, restlessness, irritability, odd conduct, increased consumption of alcohol or medication.

Possible coping strategies

Talk it through

Talk about what you are experiencing and how you are feeling with someone you trust and feel comfortable with. If you can't sleep or don't have someone to talk to, write your thoughts and feelings down.

Resume your routines

Try and get back into your usual daily and weekly routines. Familiar day-to-day processes can give you a sense of structure and support. Also: spend time doing things that you have enjoyed doing in the past.

Find time for feelings

Take the time to grieve, and to cry if you feel like doing so. Don't put yourself under any pressure to «get back to normal» as soon as possible.

Seek out movement and calm

Engage in physical exercise, such as going for walks or playing sports. But give yourself enough time, too, to just rest and relax.

Eat, drink and sleep well

Make sure you give yourself a balanced diet, that you drink enough fluids and that you get enough sleep.

Take it one step at a time

Don't try to come to terms with what you have been through all at once. Take things step by step, and set yourself small and achievable goals along the way.

Don't mind the memories

Recurring thoughts and memories of what you have experienced are a common reaction to a stressful event. With time, however, these will tend to lessen in both frequency and intensity.

Should your reactions persist long after the stressful event that has caused them, and should they show little sign of growing less frequent or intense, it is best to seek help from a qualified specialist in medicine or psychology.

How family and friends can help

By spending time with the person

Spend time with the person who has experienced the stressful event.

By listening and offering support

Offer support and listen if the person wants to talk about what they have been through. Sometimes it is helpful just to be able to speak about the experience over and over again.

By not taking things personally

Try not to take it personally if the person who has been through the stressful experience becomes angry or aggressive.

By respecting the person's privacy

Give the person affected all the privacy they want, and a place to retreat to if they feel the need.

By encouraging them to take responsibility

Help and encourage the person affected to take responsibility for themselves and their life again.

We each need to
find our own way of
coping.