

WITNESSING A TRAUMATIC EVENT



This handout may be helpful for those who have witnessed a traumatic event and those who support them.

How a traumatic event can impact you

A traumatic event can affect you emotionally, physically and mentally. These reactions are normal and will usually pass within a few weeks. Below are some common feelings you may have after a traumatic event.

- › Continued thoughts and images of the event.
- › Wanting to stay away from the scene of the event and/or fear of returning to work.
- › Difficulty concentrating, or feeling dazed or confused.
- › Difficulty handling tasks or making decisions.
- › Aimless wandering or just sitting and staring without direction.
- › Feelings of guilt or wishing you could have done something different.
- › Wanting to separate yourself from family, coworkers and friends.
- › Nightmares and/or trouble sleeping.
- › Headaches or other physical reactions such as an upset stomach or feeling tired all the time.
- › Using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings.

How to take care of yourself after a traumatic event

If you have seen or been through a traumatic event, it may take time to return to activities you enjoy. The following may be helpful as you move forward.

- › **Talk to someone.** Talking about it may feel uncomfortable, but it may help you feel better.
- › **Avoid** using alcohol or drugs as way of coping.
- › **Limit exposure to news stories** about the event.
- › **Keep active.** Physical activity can be a good way to reduce stress.
- › **Eat well and get enough sleep to feel rested.** Feeling physically healthy can help you feel emotionally strong.
- › **Do something comforting for yourself.** Take time for yourself and activities that feel calming. For example, keep busy with hobbies. Spend time with pets. Get away to a spot where you feel your best.
- › **Use your support system.** Reach out to friends, your partner, family, spiritual community, or a counselor. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- › **Call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Talk to a professional if your reactions are impacting your work or personal life.

How to support someone who has experienced a traumatic event

It can be hard to know what to say or do when someone has experienced a traumatic event. Here are some ways to be supportive during a difficult time.

- › Listen. Ask questions respectfully. If the person seems uncomfortable talking about it, let them know that you're available if they want to talk.
- › Don't take the person's reactions (e.g., anger, withdrawal, irritability) personally. These are normal reactions to a traumatic event.
- › Avoid clichés like "I know how you feel" or "Everything will be all right." "Everything happens for a reason."
- › Be honest. If you don't know what to say, simply say that.
- › Provide a place of safety. Just "be there" for them. Periods of silence can be soothing.
- › Allow them to react in their own way. There is no "right" response. Tears and even laughter can help us release emotions and move toward balance.
- › Don't try to fix it. Spending time together is enough.
- › Lower expectations for a while. Those who have experienced a traumatic event often have a hard time concentrating and making decisions. They may struggle to stay on task and complete their work.
- › Offer support with simple things, such as picking up some of their workload (with your manager's permission), cooking a meal, taking them out to dinner, or running errands for them.
- › If they seem to be having a hard time dealing with the event or moving forward, remind them about the EAP and the share the phone number with them.

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