



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada

HELPING YOURSELF AND OTHERS AFTER EXPERIENCING A TRAUMATIC EVENT; BUILDING A SELF-CARE PLAN

Stress or anxiety are normal reactions to a traumatic event. Reactions can range from moderate to overwhelming for individuals directly impacted. Possible reactions one might experience include:

- **Re-experiencing the trauma** (recurrent dreams of the event, flashbacks, and intrusive memories)
- **Feelings of uneasiness in situations that bring back memories of the trauma or event**
- **Avoidance behaviour** (such as persistent avoidance of things associated with the event)
- **Emotional numbing** (feeling "not entirely present", preoccupied, distracted)
- **Reduced interest in others and the outside world** (avoiding others and disengaging from activities that normally bring enjoyment, fatigue)
- **Persistent increased arousal** (constant watchfulness, irritability, jumpiness, being easily startled, outbursts of rage, insomnia)

These reactions are normal and are experienced when individuals are in abnormally distressing situations. While most people recover after acute traumatic events on their own or with the assistance of a mental health professional within weeks of the event, it is important to note that some individuals do not experience these reactions until later. In either scenario, it is important to acknowledge your reactions and seek appropriate support.

Self-care techniques

- Prioritize all personal safety and health needs.
- Learn and practice controlled breathing methods (slow, relaxed breathing) to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety, fear, and panic. Avoid breathing too deeply or rapidly as this can cause physical symptoms of panic.
- Get enough sleep.
- Reduce caffeine intake to 300mg or less per day.
- Learn and practice daily relaxation methods to reduce physical symptoms of tension.
- Get regular exercise.
- Identify and challenge exaggerated words and pessimistic thoughts.
- Use evidence-based anxiety websites or self-help books.

Helping another person who has experienced a traumatic event

- 1) Let the person tell their story if they wish. Do not push them to talk if they don't want to. People who have experienced a traumatic event have their own pace for dealing with a trauma. In trying to help the person, it is important to let them set the pace and not force the issue. Forcing someone into a discussion about a traumatic event may actually re-traumatize the person.
- 2) Be a patient and empathetic listener, before offering suggestions. Make personal contact and listen non-judgmentally.
- 3) It is very important to reassure the person that stress reactions are normal responses to abnormal events. Such reactions include shock, fear, grief, emotional numbing, indecisiveness, worry, unwanted memories, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, being easily startled, distrust, and irritability. Explain that is not unusual for these reactions to continue for days or even weeks after a trauma. In time, most people have a normal recovery of their emotions.
- 4) Encourage the person to reach out to other people who can provide support and share feelings about what is happening. Encourage them to talk with family, friends and work colleagues. They should follow their own instincts as to how much they say and with whom they talk. Do not tell the person to stop reliving events and simply forget about the trauma or to "get on with life".
- 5) Advise the person not to use alcohol or drugs to cope. Instead, advise them to use relaxation techniques and reach out to other people who can provide support.
- 6) If the stress reaction has persisted for more than a few weeks, encourage the person to seek professional help. Similarly, they should seek help if they continue to experience distress that interferes with normal functioning.

If you or a person you know is experiencing any of these symptoms, and/or they persist for more than 3-4 weeks, you are encouraged to contact your physician, make use of your company Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or make contact with a health professional by some other means. It is normal to have intense reactions to abnormal events. It is when those reactions persist that medical attention becomes important.

Crisis first aid for acute stress reaction

- 1) Let the person tell their story, if they want
- 2) Be empathetic
- 3) Validate normal responses to abnormal events
- 4) Encourage personal supports (where appropriate)
- 5) Suggest they avoid alcohol or drugs
- 6) Encourage professional help when needed

RESOURCES

For many people, the opportunity to discuss the event (debrief) is an important tool in coping with the experience. Below is a list of resources that you can access for support. Most resources listed below (such as distress lines, clinical supports) are governed by very specific guidelines for the treatment of personal information and ensure that the individual's confidentiality is protected.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada would be pleased to link you to the following services, upon request:

- Critical incidence debriefing and facilitation
- Referral to psychiatric/psychological services
- Mental Health First Aid support

Distress Centre: In Ottawa, the Distress Centre can be reached at 613-238-3311. To contact your local distress line – found inside the front cover of a paper phone book or by searching for “Distress Line NAME OF TOWN/CITY” on the internet.

Kids Help Phone: Provides toll-free, 24 X 7, bilingual and anonymous phone counselling to young people in all provinces and territories in Canada.

Mental Health First Aid: For more information about Mental Health First Aid and to find out how it might be of benefit during this period or in the future, please don't hesitate to contact Mental Health First Aid Canada at mreid@mentalhealthcommission.ca or 613-683-3738.

Online Resources

Sun Life Financial:

http://www.sunlife.ca/Canada/sponsor/Group+benefits/Group+benefits+products+&+services/Mental+Health+in+the+workplace/Support?vgnLocale=en_CA

Public Health Agency of Canada: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/oes-bsu-02/>

Canadian Psychological Association: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/emergencies/Resources/>

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health:

http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/health_information/a_z_mental_health_and_addiction_information/Acute-Stress-Disorder/Pages/default.aspx

Canadian Mental Health Association:

http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/#.VE7BWMntj84

Developing a Self-Care Plan: <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html>

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Guided by [Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada](#), the Mental Health Commission of Canada is a catalyst for improving the mental health system and changing the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians around mental health – at [home](#), [work](#), and [school](#), as well as with the [media](#) and [healthcare providers](#) – from coast to coast to coast. Through its unique mandate from Health Canada, the Commission is Canada’s coordinating agent, bringing together the best and most influential minds in the mental health community. The MHCC is collaborating with hundreds of partners towards a mental health system that is inclusive, adaptable, and supports Canadians living with mental health problems and mental illnesses in their [recovery](#) journey. *Together* we accelerate the change needed to transform the nation’s mental health system and the wellbeing of all. www.mentalhealthcommission.ca | strategy.mentalhealthcommission.ca



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