

Coping After a Critical Incident or Traumatic Event: Coping after the incident



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A critical incident or traumatic event such as a robbery in the workplace, a sudden death, a natural disaster, or an act of violence close to home or far away, can be distressing and have an impact both immediately and in the days and weeks afterward. This article series provides information to help you cope and find support during this time.

This is the second in a two-part series of articles on coping after a critical incident. Read the previous article, [“Common reactions after a traumatic event.”](#)

Coping after the incident

In the initial aftermath, there are actions you can take to help you cope with and manage the experience you’ve been through and your emotional reactions to it. Listed below are some common do’s and don’ts that you may find helpful.

Do’s:

Have someone stay with you for at least a few hours after the traumatic event.

Realize that the feelings you are experiencing are not uncommon. There are no right or wrong ways to feel after a traumatic event. You might feel very upset or you may not feel anything at all. These feelings are normal and will usually ease with time.

Talk about the experience and your feelings with family, friends, and colleagues when you feel ready.

Make use of the support provided by your organization including your employee assistance program (EAP) or other confidential counselling service available to you and ask for additional assistance if you need it.

Be easy on yourself in the days and weeks after the event. Where possible, avoid stressful situations and be aware that it will take time to process and come to terms with the incident.

Try to lead as normal a life as possible by maintaining your routines. It is important to get sufficient sleep.

Be especially careful driving as your concentration may not be as good for a few days or weeks after the event. If in doubt, do not drive.

Return to normal working routines as soon as you feel able.

Physically look after yourself. Exercise, eating properly and sleeping properly will all help you regain your equilibrium.

Avoid television programs and other media that upset you or remind you of the incident.

Remember that there may be others who shared your experience or have had similar experiences in the past. Others around you may be experiencing similar feelings just now.

Don'ts:

Avoid behaving as though the incident has not affected you. Try not to bottle up your feelings. Share your experience and feelings with colleagues, family and friends.

Avoid dwelling on what you might have done or what might have happened.

Avoid blaming yourself for anything you did or didn't do during the incident or the feelings you have had since.

Avoid using alcohol or illicit drugs to handle your emotions.

Try not put yourself under pressure too soon. It can take a few weeks until you are back to normal.

Avoid making any major decisions or life changes until you feel back to normal.

When to seek further help

The emotions following a traumatic event generally ease gradually in intensity over a period of four to six weeks. Some people, however, may need extra help with coming to terms with the experience. Be alert for signs that you may need help coping, such as becoming teary all the time.

If your fears or emotions are impacting your work, personal life, or daily routines, seek additional help.

If your fears or emotions are impacting your work, personal life, or daily routines, seek additional help. Contact your EAP for emotional and practical support. Talk with your manager or HR representative if you could use support at work. Your EAP or your health care provider can also help you find a counsellor or other mental health professional for additional support. Most people who have gone through a traumatic event need support from others. You don't have to go through this alone.

Reviewed June 20, 2018 by Vince Citano, MA, Manager of Organizational Services at LifeWorks.

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