

Coping after a traumatic event

After a traumatic event it is normal to feel distressed and to experience symptoms of stress

After a traumatic event, for people directly involved, who have family and friends involved, who work in services that are part of the response to the event, and for the wider community, it is normal to feel distressed, and to experience symptoms of stress. You may have trouble sleeping, feel tense or irritable, or find yourself having repeated thoughts of the event, or images of what you saw. You may also have physical stress symptoms such as being jumpy and easily startled, having headaches or pain from tense muscles, and feeling your heart pounding.

These kinds of feelings and symptoms are part of our normal reaction to a traumatic event, and for most people they pass over several days or weeks. You may find yourself fearing you are “going crazy” – this is also common, but remember these feelings pass with time.

The following *dos* and *don'ts* reflect our understanding of what *helps* recovery, and what *doesn't*:

Dos:

1. **Spend time in places that feel safe and comfortable** as much as possible.
2. **Tell yourself that how you are feeling is a normal reaction and will pass** – it is nothing to be afraid of.
3. **Reach out to your usual supports** – family and whānau, friends, workmates – sharing how we feel, and offering support to others, is important for recovery.
4. **Keep to usual routines** – mealtimes, bedtime, exercise, and so on.
5. **Keep active** – going to work, doing usual leisure activities, seeing friends, and so on, can distract us from any distressing feelings, and is also helpful.
6. **HOWEVER, if over the following days and weeks, distress or stress symptoms are escalating, or you feel you are not coping, early access to help and professional support is important. Your GP is a good starting point, or for support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.**

Don'ts:

1. **Talking about details of the traumatic event repeatedly has been shown to increase distress** and delay recovery. Talking about feelings is helpful, but avoid repeatedly talking about what happened, of the detail of the event, what you saw, and so on.
2. **Being constantly reminded of the event is not helpful** and can increase distress. While the media, Facebook etc are full of the recent traumatic event, spending too much time reading and hearing about what happened is not helpful. Turn off Facebook, and watch the news only to the degree you normally would. If watching even normal news is distressing, turn the news off and do something relaxing or enjoyable instead!
3. **Major life decisions are best not made at a time of distress** – avoid making big decisions until you have recovered.