Coping After Trauma

Self-Help Series
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The recovery process following a severe trauma will necessarily take some time. The purpose of this handout is to provide the Norfolk State University community with some tips for self-care and coping after a traumatic event.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Everyone who is in any way involved with a disaster or traumatic event may experience trauma reactions. You might experience these reactions if you:

- Were a witness or were involved in the event.
- Arrived upon the scene of the event.
- Had a "near miss" or were almost involved in the event.
- Knew or know others who were killed, harmed, or involved in some way.
- Have a relationship with family or friends of victims.
- Have heard a lot about the event through media or friends.
- Are reminded of other traumatic incidents in your life by this event.

It is important to remember that trauma reactions are normal reactions to extremely abnormal circumstances. It is difficult to predict what type of trauma reactions you will experience following a disastrous event. It is important to allow yourself permission to have your reactions, and take care of them both by yourself and by asking for help from others, as best you can. Many people find it helpful to have information about what constitutes a typical reaction to trauma.

TYPICAL REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Not everyone experiences the same set of responses to trauma, but people typically experience reactions that fall into four basic categories. Here are some reactions that you may be experiencing:
Psychological and Emotional

- Heightened anxiety or fear;
- Irritability and restlessness;
- Feelings of sadness, moodiness, more crying than usual;
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness;
- Feelings of numbness or detachment;
- "Survivor guilt", or feelings of self-blame that you escaped the tragedy;
- Re-experiencing of the traumatic event, possibly including: intrusive thoughts or images of the event;
- Distressing dreams or nightmares;
- Flashbacks about the event;
- Distress when exposed to events that remind you of the trauma;
- Feelings of estrangement or isolation from others; and
- Hyper vigilance (feelings especially attuned to events around you, scanning environment for possible danger).

Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating; and
- Feeling confused or distracted, slower thought than normal;

Physical

- Headaches;
- Nausea or upset stomach;
- Exaggerated startle response (tendency to startle easily at loud noises); and
- Fatigue or feeling slowed down.

Behavioral

- Hyperactivity, or less activity;
- Heightened tendency to behave irritably;
- Withdrawal, social isolation
- Avoidance of activities or places that remind you of traumatic event;
- Insomnia or sleeping excessively; and
- Strong need to talk about the event or read accounts about the event;
You may recognize yourself as experiencing some of the above reactions. Remember that your response is normal. Immediately following a traumatic event you will probably feel disrupted, dazed, and somewhat confused. You will notice that you are not behaving as you typically would. It is important to take care of yourself as best you can. Here are some self-care suggestions for you.

**Coping Tips and Strategies:**

- Keep in mind that the grieving/coping process will occur differently for each of us. Be as supportive of yourself in your recovery as possible. Remind yourself that it's normal and fine to take the time you need to work through a severe trauma.

- Be aware that you may have different coping needs at different times. Sometimes you may feel like talking, sometimes you may feel like crying, sometimes you may wish to focus your attention away from the crisis completely.

- Allow yourself to turn off the news and get some distance from the crisis when you need to. It's O.K. (and important) to have time for laughter and fun, even during a time of national grieving.

- Get plenty of rest when you're tired, and use the energy you have if you experience hyperactivity at times. Don't force yourself to be active if you don't have the energy, or rest when you don't feel tired.

- Talk to people as much as you need to. Reach out. You may experience a need to talk repetitively about the trauma. If you can find someone who is willing to listen, use her/him to talk to about how you are feeling.

- Spend time with others, even if you don't feel like talking. It can be very comfortable to know you're not alone. Try to find someone or someplace that feels safe and comforting to you, and spend time there.
• Don't make any major life decisions or big life changes if at all possible. This is not a time to put pressure on yourself to do anything out of the ordinary. Concentrate on taking care of yourself.

• Do things that feel good to yourself -- take baths, read, exercise, watch television, spend time with friends and family, fix yourself a special treat, or whatever else feels self-caring.

• Allow yourself to cry, rage, and express you feelings when you need to. Try not to numb your feelings with alcohol or drugs; this will only complicate your situation.

• Reaching out to others in a supportive way can sometimes be helpful. Such support may include volunteering time in the community. However, do not feel guilty if you do not have the energy to help others when you are coping with a traumatic event.

THE PROCESS OF RECOVERY

It is important to know that recovering from a trauma is a process that may take a long time. The initial response of disruption (perhaps alternating with numbness) may last days, weeks, or longer. Don't be surprised if you continue to experience these reactions for longer than you expected. It is impossible to predict how long you will experience effects of the trauma, but usually trauma reactions gradually decrease over time. If you experience another stressful event while recovering from trauma, you may find that your trauma reactions reappear for a while. This re-activation, or delayed trauma response, is perfectly normal.

At any time during this process, you may find it useful to ask for professional help from a counselor or mental health professional. There are some circumstances under which you should definitely get professional help:

• If you find yourself feeling suicidal or contemplating suicide.
• If you find that your daily functioning continues to be impaired so that you cannot carry out your life tasks.
• If post-trauma fears interfere with your ability to return to certain places or situations that remind you of the trauma.