

Helping yourself after a major event

We live in an increasingly turbulent world where adverse weather events, large scale accidents, and local and global conflict are becoming regular events. No matter how frequently they occur, or whether we have dealt with similar events before, they still have the potential to take a significant physical, emotional and financial toll. It is as important to look after yourself during these times as it is to look after others.

Common reactions to a major event

When a major event occurs, it is common to experience a range of emotions, behaviours and physical responses – these can be confusing and increase the distress being experienced because of the major event. Everyone will experience and process major events differently however, there are some common responses. While these may feel confusing or unpleasant, all responses are normal when reacting to a traumatic event.

Some common reactions you might have include:

- ◆ Disbelief
- ◆ Confusion or disorientation
- ◆ Feeling numb
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Anger
- ◆ Feeling overwhelmed
- ◆ Poor memory and decreased concentration
- ◆ Difficulty sleeping, sleeping too much, or nightmares
- ◆ Guilt
- ◆ Denial
- ◆ Difficulty breathing
- ◆ Social withdrawal
- ◆ Increased heart rate
- ◆ Sadness or grief
- ◆ Appetite changes
- ◆ Feeling sick including nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, shaking, dizziness
- ◆ Lack of interest in activities

Remember, all reactions to a major event are normal, and are in no way an indication of weakness. Usually reactions are more intense in the first few weeks following a major event and will slowly dissipate, although for some people they could last for a longer period. If your reactions are having a seriously impact on your ability to function and participate in day to day activities, you should seek professional help and support.

Looking after yourself

Major events can cause physical, psychological and emotional distress. It is important to have a sense of control so your wellbeing can improve, you can feel safe and the process of recovering from the stress of the event. You may find it helpful to talk to others and allow them to help you – you may also need to speak and interact with organisations and services who will help you rebuild following the event.

Some things that might help make the recovery process easier for yourself and those around you include:

- ◆ **Social contact** – even if you feel like isolating yourself, keep in contact and spend time with family and friends, and allow them to support you
- ◆ **Accept help** – if it is offered, allow others to help you through your recovery
- ◆ **Routine** – try to get back to a normal routine as soon as possible to regain a sense of control, especially if you have children
- ◆ **Media coverage** – try to keep your exposure to media coverage of the event to a minimum
- ◆ **Stay healthy** – keep a balanced, healthy diet and try to get regular exercise (a short walk is a great place to start); if you can't sleep, try to get plenty of rest and sleep when you can
- ◆ **Limit stimulants** – try to keep your intake of caffeine and high sugar foods and drinks including tea, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and other stimulants including cigarettes
- ◆ **Enjoy yourself** – while it may be challenging, try to take some time for yourself to do something you enjoy – even if it's something small. For example, you might go to a yoga class, read a book, take a bath, paint or draw, or catch up with a friend
- ◆ **Put pen to paper** – if you are finding it difficult to talk about your experience, you may find it therapeutic to write it down
- ◆ **Take care** – as you recover, you may have trouble concentrating so take extra care when driving, cooking or using machinery

During your recovery, you might be tempted to engage in activities that seem helpful but might make it more difficult. Try to avoid things like:

- ◆ Using alcohol or other substances as a coping mechanism
- ◆ Making major decision that could have a long term impact on your life
- ◆ Withdrawing from your social support network – try to not spend too much time alone and allow your family and friends to support you
- ◆ Excessive time at work – it's important to stay busy and keep your mind occupied, but don't go overboard
- ◆ Not participating in enjoyable activities – you have experienced a challenging event, but it's okay (and a positive step) to take time to enjoy yourself while you recover
- ◆ Stressful situations – this can be difficult but, where possible, try to avoid or reduce stressful interactions at home and at work

It's okay to get help

Recovering from a major or traumatic event can be challenging and will take time. Some people will be able to recover with a small support system and minimal help, but for other the process may be more difficult. There are some symptoms that indicate professional help might be needed. It's okay to need help. If you experience any of the following symptoms, you should seek immediate assistance.

- ◆ Loss of hope
- ◆ Lack of interest in the future
- ◆ Feeling overwhelming fear without a clear or obvious reason
- ◆ Excessive guilt
- ◆ Extreme anger
- ◆ Symptoms of panic including difficulty breathing, increased heart rate, trembling or dizziness
- ◆ If day to day activities are too distressing for you to participate
- ◆ Avoiding things or places associated with the event to the point that it impacts your ability to complete day to day tasks
- ◆ Thoughts of harm to yourself or others

While it takes time, most people recover from major events with support from their family, friends and colleagues. Some also access support from specialist services including their GP or EAP provider. Although this is a challenging time, remember that you are not alone. There is support and help available to you while you navigate through your recovery.