

# Coping with Traumatic Events in the News

Traumatic events witnessed on television can be shocking and difficult to view, yet many may find it challenging to turn away.

Traumatic events can have a significant impact on people who have watched them on television or online. It is common for people who have watched tragic events to have strong emotional reactions.



Crisis and Disaster

Understanding normal responses can aid you in coping with your feelings, thoughts and behaviors in a productive way.

## Common Responses

Shock and denial are typical responses to trauma and disaster. Shock is a sudden and intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves not acknowledging that something very stressful has actually happened or not experiencing the full intensity of the event.

As the initial shock subsides, responses can include feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness, changes in appetite and sleep pattern and withdrawal from daily activities.

## The Role of Widespread Media Coverage in Traumatic Events

Research generally finds an association between watching media coverage of traumatic events and stress symptoms. In a national survey of U.S. adults, three to five days after the September 11, 2001 attacks, people reported watching an average of eight hours of television related to the attacks. Those who watched the most coverage had more substantial stress reactions than those who watched less television coverage.

When a traumatic event occurs in the news, images of the event may repeat and play out on the television screen. So while the shock of the event begins to wear off, viewers may now have repeated and vivid reminders of the event, causing them to relive feelings of shock, stress and anxiety. This can be heightened when paired with using social media. With social media, it can be easier for people to engage with news coverage and get news as it's breaking, but using social media after a traumatic event can also be another emotional reminder of the event, causing more stress and anxiety.

## What You Can Do Following the Traumatic Event

- **Set media limits to protect your emotional health.** There's nothing wrong with wanting to know what's going on when something out of the ordinary occurs. However, repeatedly viewing the event for hours without giving yourself time to obtain relief and comfort can be stress-provoking and traumatizing.
- **Limit exposure to media for your children.** Traumatic events affect children as much as adults. Some children may feel confused, scared or helpless from watching the event on television or online.
- **Avoid the use of alcohol and caffeine.** Alcohol is a depressant and as such will intensify the negative reactions experienced following the incident. Caffeine will increase anxiety and negatively impact the ability to sleep.

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# Coping with Traumatic Events in the News (continued)

- **Use quick relaxation techniques to regain control of emotions.**  
Take a slow deep breath by inhaling through the nose, holding the breath for three seconds and exhaling through the mouth. Utilize this technique when you become aware of negative reactions or thoughts beginning to occur.
- **Reestablish a routine.** After a traumatic event, getting back to your normal routine as much as possible will help you minimize stress. Even if you don't feel much like eating, try to have regular meals. Do things that keep your mind occupied (read, watch a movie, cook, play with your kids), so you're not dedicating all your attention to the traumatic event.

## Stress Management Techniques

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma and recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts.
- Relax, be kind to yourself and turn to family or friends for support.
- If stress and anxiety symptoms continue, recognize the need for trained help and call a local mental health center.

Sources

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