

# Critical Event Stress

When we experience a traumatic event, the impact on our mental and physical health can be drastic. Even when the event has passed you may still experience emotional and physical distress.

It is very common to feel strong and unsettling emotions; we all process trauma differently and there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding or remedying the impact of trauma. So, your reactions and feelings are likely to be completely normal.

Sometimes emotional stress reactions can appear immediately at the time of the event. For others, the impact on your physical and mental health may manifest hours or days later as 'aftershocks'. While for others, minimal or no symptoms or adverse reaction occur. Sustained impact and symptoms from trauma may require professional help to work through the effects that may continue unabated or surface months after.

Depending on the severity of the event, assistance, and support from a close network of friends and family may help you overcome the impact of the event quickly, but if not, that may be completely okay too. When improvement and return to normality is slow or remains 'stuck', assistance from a trained and qualified professional may be necessary such as a psychologist, mental health nurse, social worker, or counsellor.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNS OF TRAUMA INDUCED STRESS

### Physical signs

The physical signs of trauma-induced stress are many and varied, and may include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea and dizziness
- Muscle spasm, pain, twitches or tremors
- Elevated blood pressure
- Rapid heart rate
- Excessive thirst
- Nausea or vomiting
- Grinding of teeth
- Profound sweating and chills
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, or feeling like fainting
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Fainting or changes in consciousness

***For some symptoms that are more serious and even potentially life-threatening, urgent medical help may be needed — call 000 immediately.***



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## Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural signs

Trauma can evoke many different cognitive, emotional, and behavioural signs and symptoms that vary in severity. People with a history — or family history — of mental illness, substance abuse, and/or past exposure to trauma may need more, in-depth help. However, it's essential to understand and be aware of the adverse emotions that may be a natural symptom of trauma, which may manifest as:

- Feeling stressed or unusually anxious
- Feeling flat or even depressed
- Poor or disturbed sleep patterns
- Unusually strong feelings of guilt, denial, fear
- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Inability to rest or sit still
- Changes in appetite
- Inability to regulate emotions including emotional outbursts
- Atypical intense anger, agitation, and irritability
- Antisocial or atypical emotional responses generally
- Withdrawal from social situations

## Possible coping strategies

Although the below suggestions may be helpful for some, it's vital to remember that each person will need different coping strategies to overcome trauma. Ultimately, your experience and subsequent reaction will require different levels of support.

Here are some, small steps you can take to begin your recovery and accelerate your transition back to a normal state for you.

- **Avoid alcohol:** alcohol is a depressant drug that hinders the speeds at which the brain messages travel through the body. Given that trauma engenders a heightened possibility of depression, it's best to avoid depressants.
- **Avoid non-prescribed drugs and substances** as their interaction with your mental health and physical wellbeing is highly unpredictable and may be detrimental.
- **Maintain routines:** this can be mealtimes, daily exercise, creating regular sleep patterns, schooling, and many more daily routines and habits that you maintained prior to the traumatic event.
- **Take the time to exercise:** emerging and established research shows that keeping active is an effective treatment for anxiety and depression and for many has a significant positive impact.
- **Take your time:** don't rush it! Take the time to grieve and understand the emotional and physical fallout of your traumatic experience. It's a marathon, not a sprint. Set realistic recovery goals and give yourself permission to take things slowly and incrementally.
- **Seek professional support early** if you need extra help: Don't wait to be in crisis, reach out to a professional mental health worker, or access your company's EAP if there is any aspect of your recovery you are concerned about.

