

Survivors and Witnesses

AFTER TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Those who survive or witness an act of violence, social or civil unrest, or domestic terrorism – such as the attack on the Capitol Building – may have witnessed horrific scenes of death, injury, and destruction. They may have narrowly escaped or been injured themselves. They will undoubtedly be changed by the experience and will need guidance for what to do next and how to cope in the days ahead. This document provides Voices Center for Resilience recommendations based on lessons learned from working with thousands of survivors and witnesses since 2001.

What to Do in the Immediate Aftermath

- If you are or may be injured, seek medical help immediately.
- Find a safe place to stay.
- Contact your family and affiliates to let them know your whereabouts, and if you are safe or injured.
- Secure your identification and any other papers you may need, such as insurance, bank, property, and medical records.
- Notify local authorities, such as law enforcement and onsite response teams about your personal experience. It is important for survivors and witnesses to be accounted for and to provide details about the event that will aid in the investigation.
- Avoid speaking to the media right away. Media onsite often approach survivors to provide firsthand accounts at a time when they may be distraught following a life-threatening experience. These clips and images may be replayed for months to come. Consider speaking to media at a time when you can think more clearly.

After You Are in a Safe Place

- Identify trusted family and friends to serve as your intermediary and attend to your basic needs.
- Identify an ongoing resource for accurate information.
- Document important information, such as incoming phone calls, processes, and procedures.
- Limit overexposure to the media, including social media and television reports.
- If established, visit the Family Assistance Center or Reunification Center to obtain accurate information, access to resources, and support services.
- If you left the scene without your personal belongings, file a police report with detailed descriptions of the items you left behind.
- Talk to a counselor, clergy member, friend, or family member that you can depend on for long-term support.



It is common to experience a range of emotions after experiencing a traumatic event, including fear, anger, anxiety, difficulty paying attention, depression, and disrupted sleep. It is important to monitor both your physical and emotional health.

Listed here are some of the most common reactions in the four areas where stress usually shows up. However, you should be alert for ANY unusual stress responses after a traumatic event, and seek professional help if symptoms persist or are troublesome.

Common Emotional Reactions

You may feel:

- Anxious or fearful
- Overwhelmed by sadness
- Angry
- Guilty, even when you had no control over the event
- Heroic, like you can do anything
- Like you have too much energy or no energy at all
- Disconnected, not caring about anything or anyone
- Numb, unable to feel either joy or sadness

“I was eligible for leave, but I didn’t take it, because I was like, ‘I am here, and they aren’t, and I shouldn’t take that help,’ and 3 to 4 years later realized I had pretty heavy survivor’s guilt.”

—9/11 Survivor



Common Physical Reactions

- Stomachaches, nausea, or diarrhea
- Headaches or other physical pains for no clear reason
- Eating too much or too little
- Sweating or having chills
- Tremors (shaking) or muscle twitches
- Being jumpy or easily startled
- Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, sleeping too much, or trouble relaxing
- Racing heartbeat
- Changes in sex drive
- Sensitivity to noises or smells

Common Cognitive Reactions

- You may experience problems in your thinking, such as:
- Trouble remembering things
- Difficulty thinking clearly and concentrating
- Feeling confused
- Worrying a lot
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty talking about what happened or listening to others

Common Behavioral Reactions

- Noticing an increase or decrease in your energy and activity levels
- Using alcohol, tobacco, illegal drugs, or even prescription medications in an attempt to reduce distressing feelings or to forget
- Outbursts of anger, feeling irritated, and blaming other people for everything
- Difficulty accepting help or helping others
- Difficulty trusting others
- Problems at school or work
- Wanting to be alone most of the time and isolating yourself

"Individuals grieve in their own way and in their own time."

—Mary Fetchet, co-founder of
Voices Center for Resilience

Taking Care of Your Mind and Body

- Engage in relaxing activities
- Eat healthy food
- Try to get regular exercise and sleep
- Spend some time outdoors and enjoy nature
- Avoid over-using alcohol or drugs and participating in risky behaviors
- Avoid stimulants like caffeine, sugar, or nicotine



- **Remember that there is no one “right way” to deal with everything you are feeling.** What’s important is to find a way that works for you, and be patient with yourself.
- **Limit news consumption.** Constant replay of a traumatic event can increase stress and anxiety and cause you to relive the event. Reduce your exposure to the news and social media.
- **Express your emotions.** Holding in your feelings can be unhealthy and can prolong the recovery process. Cry when you need to and know that it’s okay to have moments of joy even after a trauma. It does not mean that you are “forgetting” those who suffered or died.
- **Use spirituality, meditation, or relaxation techniques.** Prayer, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, guided imagery, and other relaxing activities can all be effective means of relieving stress.
- **Resume your daily routines.** Reestablishing your normal routines can help you.



Asking for Help

- **Rely on a social support system.** Reach out to family and friends with whom you feel close, or connect with others who have shared a similar situation.
- **Talk or write about your experience.** Express what you are feeling in whatever ways feel comfortable to you. Some examples are keeping a diary, engaging in a creative activity, or talking with people who are empathetic.
- **Don’t hesitate to contact professional help.** Trained professionals will be able to provide the support needed to promote healing and recovery in your life.
- **Speak with a financial advisor.** If you need help or advice in financial matters, reach out to a professional financial advisor to help guide your financial decisions and connect you with useful resources.

More Resources

Voices Center for Resilience
VoicesCenter.org

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