

## Coping after a traumatic event

After a traumatic event, for people directly involved, who have family and friends involved, who work in services that are part of the response to the event, and for the wider community, it is normal to feel distressed, and to experience symptoms of stress. You may have trouble sleeping, feel tense or irritable, or find yourself having repeated thoughts of the event, or images of what you saw. You may also have physical stress symptoms such as being jumpy and easily startled, having headaches or pain from tense muscles, and feeling your heart pounding.



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These kinds of feelings and symptoms are part of our normal reaction to a traumatic event, and for most people they pass over several days or weeks. You may find yourself fearing you are “going crazy” – this is also common, but remember these feelings pass with time

The following dos and don'ts reflect our understanding of what helps recovery, and what doesn't:

### **Dos:**

1. Spend time in places that feel safe and comfortable as much as possible.
2. Tell yourself that how you are feeling is a normal reaction and will pass – it is nothing to be afraid of.
3. Reach out to your usual supports – family and whānau, friends, workmates – sharing how we feel, and offering support to others, is important for recovery.
4. Keep to usual routines – mealtimes, bedtime, exercise, and so on.
5. Keep active – going to work, doing usual leisure activities, seeing friends, and so on, can distract us from any distressing feelings, and is also helpful.
6. HOWEVER, if over the following days and weeks, distress or stress symptoms are escalating, or you feel you are not coping, early access to help and professional support is important. Your GP is a good starting point, or for support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.

### **Don'ts:**

1. Talking about details of the traumatic event repeatedly has been shown to increase distress and delay recovery. Talking about feelings is helpful, but avoid repeatedly talking about what happened, of the detail of the event, what you saw, and so on.
2. Being constantly reminded of the event is not helpful and can increase distress. While the media, Facebook etc are full of the recent traumatic event, spending too much time reading and hearing about what happened is not helpful. Turn off Facebook and watch the news only to the degree you normally would. If watching even normal news is distressing, turn the news off and do something relaxing or enjoyable instead!
3. Major life decisions are best not made at a time of distress – avoid making big decisions until you have recovered.

## Supporting your kids after a traumatic event

How children react to trauma is different from adults – they may withdraw or behave in a more “babyish” way, seem anxious or clingy, be preoccupied with the event in their play or drawing, have problems sleeping or nightmares, or may get physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches.

As with adults, most children will recover with support and love from those around them.

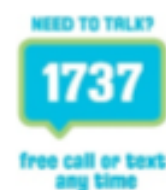
As parents or caregivers you will know your kids best, and what works for them. Some simple dos and don'ts to guide you support a distressed child are:

**Do:**

1. Reassure them that the event is over and they are safe.
2. Encourage them to talk about how they feel about what happened.
3. Tell them they can ask questions, and answer these in plain language appropriate to their age – be honest but avoid details of the trauma.
4. Tell them that feeling upset or afraid is normal, and that telling you how they are feeling will help, that with time they will feel better.
5. Be understanding – they may have problems sleeping, tantrums, wet the bed – be patient and reassuring if this happens – again, with support and care it will pass.
6. Give your children extra love and attention.
7. Remember that children look to their parents to both feel safe and to know how to respond – reassure them, share that you are upset too but that you know you will all be fine together.
8. Try to keep to normal routines – mealtimes, bedtimes etc. – allow them to get out and play, to go to the park etc.
9. HOWEVER if a child's distress is escalating, or they are displaying any worrying behaviours – extreme withdrawal, terror that you cannot comfort them from etc – seek help early. Your GP is a good start, OR For support with grief, anxiety, distress or mental wellbeing, you can call or text 1737 – free, anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - to talk it through with a trained counsellor.

**Don't:**

1. Talking about the details of a traumatic event repeatedly can be harmful. Children may be fascinated/horrified and may want to ask about details, talk about what they saw/experienced.
2. If this is repeated try to refocus them on how they are feeling e.g. what happened is awful, it's normal to feel upset or afraid, how are you feeling?.
3. Don't tell them "don't worry" or "don't be upset" – it is natural to want to protect them from fear and difficult emotions, but they need to have their feelings acknowledged and validated as a normal response.
4. Try not to be over-protective, again this is a natural thing for a parent to do, but as part of keeping normal routines, it is helpful for your child to be distracted by going to the park, playing with friends outdoors etc. This helps them feel that their world is safe again, and that normal life can go on



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