

Being involved in, or exposed to, a traumatic event can lead to a range of reactions. Our reactions are natural and instinctual responses, designed to keep us safe and help us adjust to the reality of what has happened. Sometimes our reactions may seem surprising or concerning.

Some typical responses to traumatic events include:

## ***Physical changes***

- Changes to your usual eating or sleeping patterns
- Breathing problems
- Headaches, nausea or aches and pains
- Fatigue or lethargy
- Pounding heart
- Muscle tension
- Heaviness or tingling in our limbs

## ***Cognitive changes***

- Unpleasant memories or nightmares
- Forgetfulness or confusion
- Difficulties with concentration and focus
- Scattered or racing thoughts
- Preoccupation with thoughts about what happened
- Dissociation

## ***Emotional changes***

- Intense feelings of sadness, anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, irritability or numbness
- Mood swings such as shifting from a state of agitation to one of deep sorrow

## ***Behavioural changes***

- Withdrawing from others socially
- Craving constant contact
- Not enjoying your usual activities or hobbies

## **How you can support yourself**

- Give yourself time and space to process what has happened
- Connect with your family and friends
- Eat healthy and regularly, avoiding excess sugar. Be sure to drink lots of water
- Stick to a consistent sleep routine, aiming for 8 hours sleep each night
- Avoid alcohol and drugs; they can numb your feelings in the short term, but may not allow you to process your experience
- Try to do some gentle exercise each day, even just for 15 minutes
- Maintain your usual daily routine as much as possible
- Take time out from extra responsibilities or additional demands
- Limit your exposure to any media coverage surrounding the event or similar events
- Go easy on yourself. It is okay if you do not have all the answers. Don't expect too much of yourself as you process your experience
- Write down your worries to help you identify practical steps to take
- Consider using art to express how you are feeling (e.g., draw, write, sing or dance)
- Do things you normally find enjoyable
- Accept any help that is offered
- Remember you are not alone
- Seek help if your reactions are intense or prolonged

## ***Take a moment to breathe***

- Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds
- Hold your breath for 2 seconds
- Breathe out through your mouth for 6 seconds
- Repeat for 5 minutes each day

## **'Drop anchor'**

- Push your feet hard into the floor and feel the ground beneath you
- Straighten your back and notice the chair supporting you
- Take a deep breath and notice where you are and how you feel connected to your surroundings

## **How to help someone who is distressed**

**Listen.** Offer a safe, non-judgmental and supportive environment for the person to share how they are feeling. You do not need to have all the answers; you just need to be there. Remember not to downplay their experience or press them to talk about what happened if they are not ready.

**Be sensitive.** Keep it real. Platitudes are often perceived as unhelpful or even hurtful. It is okay if you don't know what to say. Start by acknowledging their experience and letting them know you care.

**We are all different.** Recognise that everyone responds to trauma and grief differently. Respect their reactions and the time they take to process their experience.

**Provide practical support.** People may need help with practical tasks so that they have time and space to process their experience. Offer to lighten the load by cooking, cleaning or child minding. Remember to be specific about what support you can provide; vague offers of help can be overwhelming. Continue practical support for as long as needed.

**Choose your news.** It can be tempting to explore media coverage about the event, but too much exposure can be upsetting. Encourage those around you to focus on other things.

**Seek help together.** If someone is particularly distressed about an event, help them to seek professional support. They may need you to be by their side as they take those steps.

**Keep it simple.** Don't over-complicate things. Helping someone may involve simple gestures, like having a cup of tea together and chatting about day-to-day life. The little things often mean the most.

**Take care of yourself.** We sometimes forget to look after ourselves when we are busy helping others. Be aware of your own health and wellbeing, both physically and mentally. Helping someone can be stressful and exhausting. Check in with yourself and take time to rest if needed.

**Seek support and assistance.** Contact JCU Student Equity and Wellbeing: <https://www.jcu.edu.au/student-equity-and-wellbeing>. Alternatively, see your doctor or GP, or other mental health professional. International students may contact the International Students Assistance Helpline after hours and on weekends and public holidays on 1800 754 185. JCU Staff may contact the JCU Employee Assistance Program, available from Davidson Trahaire Corpsych 24 hours a day, 365 days a year (Phone 1300 360 364).

# When bad things happen

## Supportive community organisations

For telephone support:

- Beyond Blue – Phone 1300 22 46 36  
<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/>
- eheadspace – Phone 1800 650 890  
<https://www.eheadspace.org.au/>
- Kids Helpline – Phone 1800 55 1800  
<https://kidshelpline.com.au/>
- Lifeline – Phone 13 11 14  
<https://www.lifeline.org.au/>
- Relationships Australia – Phone 1300 364 277  
<https://relationships.org.au/>

## Online resources

- Australian Psychological Society 'Understanding and managing psychological trauma'  
[http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip\\_sheets/trauma/](http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/trauma/)
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement  
<http://www.grief.org.au/>

## Outreach, Careers and Wellbeing

**James Cook University**

**Web** <https://www.jcu.edu.au/student-equity-and-wellbeing>

**Email** [studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au](mailto:studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au)

**Phone** 1800 246 446 (option 2)

**In person** Level 1 of the Library in Townsville and Cairns

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Reviewed & Updated September, 2023