

When we are involved in, or exposed to news of a traumatic event, we can experience a range of reactions, at times intense. Our reactions are natural human responses and our way of adjusting to the reality of what has happened. The ways we react (or do not react) may surprise or concern us.

Let's look at some common responses to traumatic events.

Physical changes

- Changes to our eating, sleeping, energy levels, digestion, bowel activity, muscle tension, breathing, and circulation
- We may cry, get headaches, feel sick, get aches and pains, rashes, feel numbness or tingling, and heaviness in our limbs

Cognitive changes

- We may experience shock, or disbelieve the news and/or deny the facts
- We may have unpleasant memories or nightmares, become forgetful, confused, have nightmares, trouble concentrating, and lose our motivation
- Our thoughts may be scattered or we might become preoccupied with memories of the person and our actions

Emotional changes

- We may feel shocked, numb, anxious, sad, depressed, quiet, angry, embarrassed, relieved, or frustrated
- We might notice mood swings, be more irritated than is normal, or feel confused or guilty
- Our reaction might surprise us, seeming different to how you'd expect to react
- We may not notice any emotional changes at all

Behavioural changes

- We may withdraw and isolate ourselves from family and friends, or we may crave constant contact
- We might be lethargic, or irritable or agitated

How you can support yourself

- Spend time with family and friends; with people who support you
- Have time by yourself to process your response
- Keep your regular sleep routine (we need 7-9 hours' sleep each night)
- Eat healthy meals and snacks, including breakfast. Avoid sugar and junk foods.
- Drink lots of water and have less caffeine, energy drinks, alcohol
- Do some gentle exercise each day
- Maintain your normal daily routine as much as possible
- Take time out from additional demands
- Monitor your use of drugs and/or alcohol
- If appropriate, limit the amount of media coverage you watch, listen to or read about the actual event or similar events (this includes Facebook)
- If appropriate, avoid Googling the issue
- Go easy on yourself... you can't have all the answers. Don't expect too much of yourself and don't criticise your reactions (they're normal).
- Write down your worries. This can help you identify practical steps to take.
- Express your reactions in ways that suit you, e.g. diary, art, music, sports
- Do things you normally find enjoyable
- Accept help when it's offered
- Remember you're not alone
- Ritualise the experience in a way that is personally significant for you
- Seek help if your reactions are intense, prolonged or concerning you

Take a moment to breathe

- Take a deep gentle breath and hold it for a count of three
- Let the breath leave your lungs as slowly as possible
- As you breathe out let your shoulders drop and feel your shoulder blades sliding down your back

'Drop anchor'

- Push your feet hard into the floor
- Straighten your spine
- As you do this, take a deep breath
- Look around and notice five things you can see
- Listen carefully and notice five things you can hear
- Notice where you are and what you are doing

How to help someone who is distressed

Listen. Offer the person a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear. Try not to gloss over or downplay what happened and do not discourage the person from talking about what they're feeling. On the flip-side, it's also important not to press the person to talk about feelings if he/she isn't ready.

Be sensitive. Keep it real. Platitudes don't help someone who's experienced a traumatic event. Saying things like "it could have been worse" or "count your blessings" don't convey that you care or want to help.

We are all different. People will respond and grieve differently, including in different time frames. Respect their responses and the time they take.

Give practical help. Cook a meal, offer to babysit, etc. Vague offers of help and support don't work, so be specific. People may need support from friends and family members for a considerable amount of time. Don't quit helping after a week or two.

Choose your news. It can be tempting to go over the events several times, or focus on news or Facebook coverage, but too much exposure can be upsetting. Encourage them to do something else.

Encourage getting help. If the symptoms are persisting or causing significant distress, encourage the person to seek extra support from others, such as chaplains, psychologists, social workers, support organisations and/or mental health organisations.

Keep it simple. Helping doesn't have to be complicated. It involves simple gestures like spending time together, having a cup of tea, chatting about day-to-day life, enjoying a laugh together or a hug.

Take care of yourself. Helping can be stressful and sometimes; we forget to look after ourselves. Be aware of your own health – physical and mental. If you're feeling run down or stressed, seek support from others.

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 online resources and telephone support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year:

- 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
<http://www.relationships.org.au/>

Online resources

- Australian Psychological Society 'Understanding and managing psychological trauma'
http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/trauma/
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
<http://www.grief.org.au/>

Student Equity and Wellbeing

James Cook University

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

Email studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au

Phone Townsville (07) 478 14711 or Cairns (07) 423 21150

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