

# Coping after a traumatic event

## After a traumatic event it is normal to feel distressed and to experience symptoms of stress

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.

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.

# Grief after the loss of a loved one – a family member or friend

For people who have had a family member or friend injured or killed in this tragedy, the thoughts and good wishes of all Kiwis are with you at this time.

You will likely be experiencing a mix of trauma yourself, plus grief. Trauma and grief are different, but together can mean a mix of complex thoughts and feelings. It is common to find yourself having persistent thoughts such as “why did this terrible thing happen?”, “why was this not prevented?”, “what did my loved one suffer?”, and “what is the meaning or purpose of this tragedy?”. You may find yourself questioning your faith.

## It is also common to feel a range of changing emotions

It is also common to feel a range of changing emotions from numbness and a feeling of unreality, to anger, to grief and sadness, to hopelessness. You may feel guilt that you survived and your loved one did not, or blame yourself for having not been able to protect your loved one. You may find yourself struggling to sleep, withdrawing from others, and you are likely to also experience a range of physical symptoms. Feeling a weight in your chest – literally a “breaking heart” – is a very common symptom of grief.

## Coping after a traumatic death is difficult for everyone

Coping after a traumatic death is difficult for everyone. The general advice above will be helpful. We know that support from others is critical, so take time out when you need it, but make sure reach out especially to those family and friends who have not lost a loved one, and accept offers of help and support.

Grieving is a process that unfolds over a number of months and sometimes years, but with time it does get easier. It is important to remember it is a very individual process – we all go through it at some times of our lives, but how grief affects us is very individual.

Staying active in your faith, whatever that may be, and prayer, are helpful and protective – even if you do find yourself questioning your faith – “Why did this happen?”

**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.**