

Managing Stress and Fear Following a Traumatic Event

Overview

The stress and fear resulting from terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and unfolding news stories are affecting everyone and may last for some time.

- Vicarious trauma
- Resurfacing feelings of grief and anxiety
- Vicarious trauma and children

As more information about the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C becomes available to people across the United States, many people may find that they are experiencing a prolonged reaction to the catastrophic and ongoing events that have struck our nation. The terrorist acts are affecting each and every person, including those who did not lose a loved one or were not present for the events.

Vicarious trauma

Because news coverage is so instantaneous, the death and destruction resulting from the plane crashes at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania, has come into our homes, schools, and places of work and made everyone a witness to these terrible events.

Graphic images and the continuous release of more information about the terrorist attacks may result in vicarious trauma for some people. This kind of trauma is the result of a massive disaster that affects many people very deeply and common reactions include

- prolonged sadness and crying
- the inability to concentrate
- nausea or headaches
- fear
- anxiety
- distressing dreams
- a general sense of uneasiness
- disorientation

All who witnessed Tuesday's events and continue to watch and listen to breaking news may be experiencing these and other physical or emotional reactions to this national disaster. These reactions are normal, and may continue for days, weeks, or even months.

Resurfacing feelings of grief and anxiety

Some people may be especially vulnerable to vicarious trauma, including those who have recently experienced a loss or life transition and those who have experienced wars or other major crises.

Traumatic events may trigger memories of past losses or events that happened many years ago. If you have lived through other traumatic events or have lost loved ones, the tragedy of these latest terrorist attacks may bring back feelings of grief, terror, and sadness. If you are experiencing a resurgence of emotions about past events as a result of the recent terrorist acts, remember that this is normal.

- *Spend extra time with the people you love.* Talk about the recent events and about past losses or experiences that may be affecting you now.
- *Talk about your fears and concerns with co-workers.* Fears and concerns may interfere with work and it's important to talk about them with your work friends and colleagues. However, respect the fact that some people may feel better not talking about the terrorist acts or related events.
- *Expect that your mood and feelings may be intense and constantly changing.* You could be more irritable than usual or your mood could change very dramatically from day to day or hour to hour.
- *Your sleep or eating patterns may be disturbed.* It may be difficult to maintain a normal schedule if you are experiencing trauma, but it is important to try and keep to a regular pattern of eating and sleeping to ensure that you have the strength to cope with stress.

If you or a loved one is dealing with a medical illness, a psychological disorder, or any recent stress or loss, it may be very difficult to cope with the trauma associated with the terrorist acts. It may be necessary to limit exposure to news coverage of the events and spend extra time talking with friends, family, or professional counselors.

It's also normal for people to become fearful about returning to their normal schedule after a disaster like the terrorist attacks that have gripped our nation. You or your children may feel afraid to return to school or work. People may also have continued fears about flying, fires, being in tall buildings, or other concerns that may not even be directly related to the terrorist acts.

Vicarious trauma and children

Children who see repeated images of the violence and terror on television or in newspapers may have continued fears about their own safety and that of their family. Children who have recently lost a pet, experienced a separation or divorce, or loss of a loved one may be deeply affected. If your child is having difficulty coping with trauma you can

- *Let your child be more dependent on you.* Physical and emotional dependence may be a sign that your child needs your support during the difficult period.

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- *Spend more time with your child.* Cancel upcoming events and plans that call for you to be away from your child. Try to make an effort to keep to family routines and simply be together when you are at home.
- *Continue talking to your child about the events and any new information she might hear.* As time goes on, more news reports, photos, and information will become available about the September 11 attacks. Continue asking your child what she has heard, answer her questions, and dispel misinformation.