

WITNESSING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Witnessing a traumatic event can affect you physically, emotionally and mentally. This handout is aimed at helping those who have witnessed a traumatic event and those who want to support them.

How a traumatic event can impact you

A traumatic event can affect you emotionally, physically and mentally. These feelings are normal and will usually pass within a few weeks. Below are some common feelings you may have after a traumatic event.

- > Continued thoughts and images of the event.
- > Wanting to stay away from the scene of the event and/or fear of returning to work.
- > Difficulty concentrating, or feeling dazed or confused.
- > Difficulty handling tasks or making decisions.
- > Increased wandering around or just sitting and staring without direction.
- > Feelings of guilt or wishing you could have done something different.
- > Wanting to separate yourself from family, coworkers and friends.
- > Nightmares and/or trouble sleeping.
- > Headaches or other physical reactions such as stomachaches or feeling tired all the time.
- > Using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings.

How to take care of yourself after a traumatic event

If you have seen or been through a traumatic event, the following may be helpful.

- > **Talk to someone.** Talking about it may feel uncomfortable, but it may help you feel better.
- > **Avoid** using alcohol or drugs as way of coping.
- > **Keep active.** Physical activity is a good way to reduce stress.
- > **Eat well and get enough sleep to feel rested.** Feeling physically healthy can help you feel emotionally strong.
- > **Do something you enjoy.** Spend time with your pets. Keep busy with hobbies. Get away to a spot where you feel your best.
- > **Use your support system.** Talk to friends, your partner, family or a counselor. Talking about it is the number one healing force.
- > **Call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Talk to a professional if your reactions are impacting your work or personal life.

How to support someone who has experienced a traumatic event

It can be hard to know what to say or do when someone has experienced a traumatic event. Here are some ways to be supportive during a difficult time.

- > Listen. Ask questions respectfully. If the person seems uncomfortable talking about it, let them know that you're available if needed.
 - > Don't take the person's reactions (e.g., anger, withdrawal, irritability) personally. These are normal reactions to a traumatic event.
 - > Avoid clichés like "I know how you feel" or "Everything will be all right."
 - > Be honest. If you don't know what to say, simply say that.
 - > Provide a place of safety. Just "be there" for them. Periods of silence can be healing.
- > Allow tears and laughter. They are part of the healing process.
 - > Don't try to fix it. Spending time together is enough.
 - > Lower expectations for a while. Those who have experienced a traumatic event often have a hard time concentrating and making decisions. They may struggle to stay on task and complete their work.
 - > Offer support with simple things, such as picking up some of their workload (with your manager's permission), cooking them a meal or taking them out to dinner, or running errands for them.
 - > If they seem to be having a hard time getting over the event, give them the EAP number and suggest they talk to someone there.

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