

For those who have experienced a serious event

It is normal not to know much about how you might react after you have experienced a serious event. When you know what reactions are normal after a serious event, it is often easier to accept both your own and others' reactions. You will also understand that they are natural, given the major stress you have been exposed to. For the same reason, it may be helpful for your family, friends and others to know about these reactions. Although some may react very strongly, this does not mean that everyone does.

Acute reaction – sense of unreality

During the first period after an event, many people have a sense of unreality. You know that the event has taken place, but it still feels unfathomable. Many describe feelings of internal emptiness, and difficulties describing both to themselves and others what they are feeling. It can sometimes be difficult to remember essential parts of what happened. As time goes by, the whole sequence of events becomes clearer and clearer, and at that point the strongest reactions usually occur.

Intrusive memories

It is normal for people to return to what happened in their minds, whether they want to or not. Memories, in the form of visual images, for example, can be so real that it feels like being back in the event again. Such unpleasant memories can recur both when you are awake, and in dreams.

Internal anxiety and vulnerability

Strong internal anxiety and a sense of vulnerability are common. These feelings can become stronger and more painful over time as you relive what happened. It may be hard not to think about the unpleasant experiences you have been through. This internal anxiety can lead to restlessness, problems with relaxing, and problems with focusing on other things. Some become more impatient and irritable than they usually are. Others find it difficult to do anything at all.

Different physical reactions

It is natural to have physical reactions such as trembling, sweating, headaches, palpitations, dizziness and near fainting episodes. Loss of appetite, fatigue or muscle tension and pain, primarily in the chest, shoulders and neck, are also common.

Feeling of disaster

For many, the sense of safety in life can be shattered once they have experienced a serious event. Some people experience increased vigilance, startling at the slightest noise. The anxiety and worry afterwards can also lead to a fear of another catastrophic or unpleasant event, or of someone in your family becoming ill or dying. In children, this can be observed as clinginess and an increased need for closeness.

Sleep problems and nightmares

It may be difficult to fall asleep. As you are falling asleep, the unpleasant memories may appear in your thoughts. Sleep becomes restless, and you may wake up often and early. For some, what happened is repeated as nightmares. Nightmares can also be about other threatening situations than the one you actually experienced. Many people are less troubled by nightmares and horrible memories if they can talk to someone about what happened. Sleeping difficulties also tend to subside as you gain a better understanding of what you have been through.

If sleep is very poor for several nights in a row, you may become tired and irritable. To help you sleep, prescription medication for a brief amount of time may help. In general, you should be cautious about using sleeping medication for an extended period of time.

Survivor's anxiety and guilt

For some people, it may feel uncomfortable that they themselves survived, perhaps even escaping unharmed, while family members, colleagues and others were injured or killed in the event. This can lead to a feeling of guilt and not allowing yourself to feel relief that you have survived and not been harmed. Feelings of guilt can also be connected to wondering, either as a direct victim or as a witness to a serious event, what would have happened if you had acted differently to how you did. Anger and irritation are normal reactions. Anger may also be unintentionally directed at those close to you, which can reinforce feelings of guilt.

Relationships with others are affected

Some people may feel the need to withdraw and be alone. For others, loneliness can be difficult because it leaves them completely at the mercy of their own thoughts and feelings.

Questioning the meaning of life

When you have experienced a tragic and difficult event, it is very normal to start thinking about the purpose and meaning of life. You may re-evaluate much of what you previously felt was self-evident.

Some simple advice

Talk to others

Talk to those closest to you, but also, if possible, to others, such as people who were also present at the event. Even if it is difficult to talk, and you may find that your emotions are being stirred up again, it is often good, and sometimes necessary, to share your experiences, thoughts and feelings with others. By sharing, talking and going through parts of the event with others, you will also gain a better understanding of what happened. You may also suffer less from nightmares and sudden, horrible memories.

For some people, it can be helpful to take a moment, for a few days, to write down their memories and thoughts about what happened. People are different, so it's important to do what works best for you.

Think of the children

Keep in mind that children and young people are not able to understand or interpret their

experiences in the context of a serious event like adults. Having an adult present to go through the following provides them with good support for dealing with what they have experienced, and for understanding that the danger is over for them right now:

- Getting the opportunity to ask questions and share thoughts and concerns.
- Being listened to when they talk about what is happening and has happened, based on their experiences.
- Getting help to return to everyday routines and activities as soon as possible.
- Getting support in doing fun things together – it is ok to zoom in and out of the difficult things that have happened.

Activity and routines help

Physical activity is a good way to reduce internal stress. For most people, getting back into a routine as soon as possible is clearly helpful. It is often good to create a routine for the day, and thereby returning to a new normality. Ask less of yourself and what you can do in the near future.

It is normal to react

For anyone who has experienced a serious event, it is normal to react in the way described here. Usually the reactions subside as you get a chance to think through, understand, and process what you have been through. The memories will not come up as often, and the emotions they evoke are less painful and overwhelming than they were at the beginning.

Let others read this information leaflet

Family members or other people who were not present at the event may be worried by the sometimes strong reactions that can occur afterwards. It may therefore be a support for them, and indirectly for you, if you let them read this information leaflet.

Seek help in time

If you have bothersome and long-lasting reactions that affect your life, you may need professional help. You can call 1177 Vårdguiden (the National Healthcare Counselling Service), on telephone number 1177, or contact a healthcare centre for help and support.

The material has been developed by Crisis and Disaster Psychology Unit, Specialist center within Region Stockholm, Healthcare.