

For young people who have experienced a serious event

When you, as a young person, have to endure a serious event, it can be difficult to come to terms with what has happened. It is good to know how you might react, how to help yourself, and what support you might need from others. In this leaflet, you will find information about normal reactions, and some advice to help you feel as good as possible again. Firstly, it's perfectly natural to react after experiencing something frightening, or to not react at all. It is also common to react only after some time has passed. What it will be like for a particular person is hard to know beforehand, and only you can know what it is like for you. The important thing is that you and others around you pay attention to how you feel, and are sensitive to your particular needs, which will help you to feel better again.

Immediate reactions

Immediately after the event, you may feel scared, sad or confused, and your normal sense of security may be lost. And no wonder. These feelings may be so strong that you 'switch off', which can sometimes lead to you being perceived as indifferent, and to you avoiding contact with others. Other people's reactions in the situation also affect you, of course. But how you experienced the danger to yourself or your loved ones also has a big impact on how you feel emotionally, not just how physically injured you or your loved ones have been.

Fear

The feeling that the world is no longer a safe place may make you feel extra vulnerable, and afraid that something new will happen. Many people are easily frightened when something sudden happens, such as loud noises or other things that remind them of the event. Fear of things like darkness, being alone, or being away from parents or friends may also increase. When you have been through something difficult, you may become more worried. Sometimes these feelings can become very strong for a period of time. It is normal to feel sad, to not take pleasure and have an interest in things you used to enjoy doing. Perhaps neither you nor others around you recognise your thinking or behaviour.

Intrusive reminders

Anything that reminds you of the event, including smells and flavours, can bring back past unpleasant experiences against your will. What has happened can come back in the form of images. Sometimes the reminders can be so frightening that you avoid thinking about what happened to avoid getting worried again.

Relationships with others are affected

You may become more active, restless, and find it harder to focus. At the same time, you may become more irritable and angry. Maybe you won't be able to do things you have learned in the past. For some, this can lead to difficulties at school, or conflicts with parents, siblings, friends and other adults. If those around you do not understand that this is your way of dealing with what has happened, there is a risk that you will feel misunderstood and alone.

Sleep problems

Some people may find it difficult to fall asleep at night. You may have trouble sleeping alone, or wake up at night with difficult feelings, sometimes because of nightmares.

Physical reactions

The stress can cause the body to react, and you may get pains in your stomach or head, for example.

Changed thoughts

Thoughts about the fairness of it all may be evoked, for example about you getting away lightly, unlike others. You may also feel that you did not behave as you should have, even though you did what you could. The belief that good things can happen, or that there is a future to plan for, may also weaken for a time. You may be preoccupied by thoughts of your own reactions to what has happened. It is easy to think you're reacting in a different or strange way, even though you are reacting in the same way as many others.

Needs in everyday life

Many people can think about what happened for a while, and then go on to do other, more mundane things. It is important to allow yourself to be the way that suits you, and to remember that your way of being is okay. We need to zoom in and out of the difficult things that have happened and are happening.

Some simple advice

It is normal to react

Remember that it is just as common to feel different for a period of time after a serious event as it is not to feel that way. We react differently, and that is okay. Reacting to what has happened does not necessarily mean that you are sensitive, or that you will have problems in the long term. If you function as usual, it does not mean that you are insensitive. Those who have been through a frightening event may find it hard to believe that things will get better again. Most people start to feel better after a while.

Talking

Make sure that you have an adult to talk to when you need to, someone that you trust. Talking can be important, and it may help you to understand more about what has happened. But talk only when it feels good to you, others have to be available when you want to talk. The important thing is that others are there for you, and that they listen, even if they do not always have advice to give, or answers to your questions. If others ask you to talk when it is not a good time for you, ask to come back to them later. Remember, you do not have to talk to someone you don't want to open up to.

Expressing yourself in different ways

Talking does not suit everyone, and it can be difficult to put what you have been through into words straight after it happened. You can express yourself in other ways by drawing, writing or listening to music. Many people feel good doing their favourite activity. The important thing is that you do what makes you feel good, or a little better for the moment, at least.

Information

It is important that you receive information, and understand what has happened, and what will happen. You may also need to know why others around you react the way they do. Feel free to tell others what you need and want to know. Seeing or reading about the incident in the media can be frightening. Similarly, other people's comments and thoughts, for example on the internet, may make you feel worse. Protect yourself, and get information in a way that suits you.

Allow yourself to seek contact

For a while, closeness and physical contact may be particularly important. At the same time, it may be a good idea to allow yourself to "be little again", at least for short periods of time, to re-energise. If you find that you are unable to do things you are normally able to do, leave it for a while, your abilities will come back again.

Activity and routines help

For most people, getting back into a routine as soon as possible is a great help. It is often good to create a routine for the day, and thereby returning to a new normality. Being together and sharing everyday life with peers and friends.

Physical activity

Physical activity is a good way to reduce internal stress. Exercise may make you feel a bit better. If possible, it can be helpful to get going with physical activity as part of your normal routine.

Participating in rituals

It has been shown that many children and young people benefit from attending funerals or other rituals after the death of a loved one.

Accept support from others

It is important that your parents and other adults know what you are going through, and how you are feeling, so that they can behave in the best possible way towards you. It is also important for them to be able to adjust their expectations of you for a while. It is also a good idea to tell your peers how they can be supportive of you. It may make you feel less alone, which can be helpful in this situation.

Encourage others to accept support

Young people are affected by how the rest of the family feel. If you find that seeing how someone else in your family is feeling makes you feel bad. Tell the person how you feel, and encourage them to seek help. Also, be aware of taking on too much responsibility, which is not good for you in the long run.

Let others read this information leaflet

It may be useful for people close to you to read this information leaflet to get a better understanding of how you, as a young person, may feel and react after a frightening event. It can be helpful for both them and you.

Seek help in time

If you have bothersome and long-lasting reactions that affect your life, you may need help from professionals outside your family and friends. You or your guardians can call 1177 Vårdguiden (the National Healthcare Counselling Service), on telephone number 1177, or contact a healthcare centre for help and support. If or when you go to school, you can also talk to someone in the school's student health team.

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