

## How to Cope When an Unexpected Traumatic Event Occurs

When something unexpected and stressful happens, we may feel a strong surge of emotions and physical reactions that may be very intense. It is difficult to know what to do next and we may even feel that something is off, or that we may be losing control. This is an expected response from our body when something traumatic and unexpected happens, and it is what we know as psychological shock. By being able to recognize this reaction, we may be able to look after ourselves and others and make better and safer decisions.

### The types of events that can trigger psychological shock reactions may include:

- Receiving bad news.
- A life-threatening event, like an accident or near miss.
- Witnessing or hearing about something traumatic happening to someone else – even if is in the news. E.g.: a friend's parents having a car accident.
- Something that would usually cause you fear (e.g. airplane turbulence, spiders)
- Unexpected daily stressing situations (being sued, being made redundant).

Your reaction will depend on how closely you are connected to the event. Something happening to a close relative or a loved one may heighten your response. However, even if you do not have a personal connection with the event that has happened, you may experience a strong psychological shock or fear reaction. This is called vicarious trauma.

### What would I feel?

- A surge of adrenalin.
- Feeling jittery or feeling like you may be sick (vomiting or diarrhea).
- It is difficult to think straight and to make decisions. Your mind may feel foggy.
- Feeling like you are looking at things from outside of your body, or like you are watching a movie.
- Feeling like this is not real or is not happening.
- You may feel your chest tighten, or have difficulties breathing.
- You may feel strong waves of feelings e.g. anger, fear, terror, sadness.
- You may feel like you want to escape as soon as possible.
- You may find it hard to determine what is a risk or a hazard and what is not.

### Why am I feeling this way?

This is part of your “fight, flight or freeze” response. This response starts automatically when we feel like our lives or sense of safety may be threatened, and it is what prepares us for fast, immediate action. When we are feeling like this it is very hard to make good decisions that may help keep us and our loved ones safe.

For example:

- If you want to run – that is your flight reaction.
- If you want to throw things or kick something – that is your fight reaction.
- If you feel unable to do anything – that is your freeze reaction.

All of these are temporary responses and they will pass, eventually.

**The right help at the right time in the right way**

## What can I do?

- ✓ Make sure you are safe and there is no immediate action is needed.
- ✓ Stay calm. Once you can recognise the signals, you can accept that you need to give yourself space and time to think before you act or before making decisions.
- ✓ Do not act on the flight, fight or freeze urges – unless there is an immediate real threat for your safety.
- ✓ Breathe. Even if it feels difficult to get the air in, do it slowly but steadily.
- ✓ Try to relax your muscles. Walk-it off, squeeze your hands as tight as you can and then release the pressure. Do the same with other muscles, like legs, toes and tummy. This will get the blood circulating in your system.
- ✓ Keep focused on the things you can control.
- ✓ If you have to wait, focus on what is immediately in front of you that you can do something about; like having a drink or eating something. When your mind is clear, plan for what you will do next.
- ✓ Be mindful of others who may be feeling in a similar way. Neither of you might be thinking clearly in this difficult situation, so give yourself and others time to regain your balance and perspective.

## What can I expect to happen next?

The shock response or “flight, fight or freeze” response is triggered by many hormones that are in your body and staying in that mode uses a lot of energy. Once the threat or risk passes, it may take a few hours before your body finds it’s natural balance.

You may feel:

- pain in different places e.g. stiffness, feeling light-headed, headaches, thirst.
- emotional reactions e.g. crying or laughing.
- Restless and having difficulties sleeping etc.

You can help yourself while your body and mind recover:

- ✓ Drink plenty of water.
- ✓ Give yourself time to rest.
- ✓ Turn-off the news and social media.
- ✓ Spend time with friends and loved-ones.
- ✓ Do not pressure yourself or other to go “back to normal”. This is different for everybody, so take the time you need.
- ✓ Spend time in nature if possible, maybe go for a walk. It will help by keeping yourself active and it will kick the anti-stress response in your body.

If you need further information or have any questions, please visit Skylight Resilience Hub [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)

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