

How to cope with stress caused by current events

Anxiety is a normal response to a constant barrage of bad news. Headlines and notifications related to recent events are taking their toll on mental health in what some call “headline stress disorder.”

While this is not a medical diagnosis, the continued anxiety or stress from headlines may cause things like heart palpitations and chest tightness or insomnia. Further progression may lead to physical and mental conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, endocrine disorders or hypertension.¹ The combination of civil unrest, political instability and COVID-19, and the resulting economic uncertainty, has led to an increase in stress and anxiety in society. Both adults and children may struggle to process their feelings and maintain a sense of normalcy.

Here are some tips to help you understand and manage your fears, how to help children deal with traumatic events and how to know when you or someone close might need help.

Understanding the emotional and physical reactions to traumatic events

Emotional reactions

When the initial shock of a traumatic event subsides, normal emotional responses in the hours and days that follow may come in waves and at unpredictable times. These responses include:

- Fear and anxiety
- Sadness and depression
- Guilt, shame or despair
- Anger and irritability
- Emotional numbness

- Feelings of separation from others

Physical reactions

Physical reactions are the result of stress hormones flooding the nervous system. Common physical symptoms include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Fatigue
- Headache, abdominal pain or other physical pain
- Racing heart
- Dizziness or fainting
- Change of appetite

How to help yourself

- Take care of yourself first. Eat healthy foods, get enough rest and exercise regularly. Physical activity can reduce anxiety and promote well-being.
- Talk to people you trust about your concerns. A supportive network is important for emotional health.
- Take time for hobbies and fun activities or find interesting volunteer activities. This can be a healthy distraction from everyday stress.
- Limit your exposure to disruptive TV, radio and social media coverage.
- Practice mindfulness and relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and meditation.

How to help children cope with traumatic events

- Be aware of your own reactions to the event and manage your own stress. Stay calm and offer hugs and reassurance to restore your child's sense of safety and security.
- Share information about the event and answer your child's questions honestly. Listen to your child's fears and let them know that it is okay to share their feelings at any time.

- Restrict or prevent contact with disturbing news and social media coverage of the event. Children who see graphic images or hear disturbing news can be re-traumatized.
- Maintain as many stable routines as possible, including regular meals, bedtimes and exercise.
- Engage in fun activities to help the children relax and get the feeling that life is back to normal.
- Watch for signs of trauma, even after weeks have passed. Children, like adults, cope with trauma in different ways, and may show signs of sadness, anxiety or disruptive behavior weeks or months after the event.

Know when to get help

- Common signs that you or your child may need professional help can include: excessive worrying or fear, extreme mood swings, avoidance of friends, difficulty understanding or relating to other people, changes in eating and sleeping habits and inability to engage in daily activities or deal with daily problems and stress.
- If you are suffering from stress reactions that affect your ability to lead a normal life for six weeks or more, you may need help from a mental health professional. While everyone is different and heals at their own pace, some people develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a traumatic event.
- Signs of PTSD include: disturbing memories, nightmares or flashbacks, suicidal thoughts or feelings, disconnection from others, and trouble functioning at home and work. It is important to seek help if you think you might have symptoms of PTSD.

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7104635/>