

Stress | *Tip sheet*

# Prolonged Stress Reactions: Tips on Coping

After a traumatic event, you can expect that over time life will get back to some sort of normalcy. You'll get back to work, back to sleep and back to feeling safe. However, when an event occurs that's unresolved for many months or even years, you may find that your normal routine keeps getting upset. You might find that you can't settle into a new normal way of being and that life can feel disrupted when memories of the trauma are triggered. This can affect your eating habits, sleep schedule, overall health, relationships and work. Most of all, this continuation of the event can disrupt your usual feelings of safety and security. You may notice feeling on edge, fearing every small event that reminds you of what happened, and feeling a sense of dread you can't explain.

These can be symptoms of a prolonged stress reaction. Prolonged stress reactions can cause you to worry and be anxious on a daily basis. You might also worry about future events which may or may not occur. You anticipate that you will not be able to control a situation or yourself. These thoughts and feelings affect people differently, but in general, when you are anxious, you tend to think about the worst possible outcomes, you feel a sense of fear, and your heart races. The following are some reactions you may have when you feel anxious:

**Body** - headaches, nausea, diarrhea, sweating, rapid breathing, light headed or dizzy feeling, rapid heartbeat, and fatigue.

**Behaviors** - fidgeting, pacing, yelling, rapid speech, increased aggression, eating more or less, change in sleep pattern, avoidance, and substance abuse.

**Emotions** - fear, excessive worry, anger, rage, depression, irritability, agitation, and crying.

**Thoughts** - racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating, negative thoughts, catastrophizing, hopelessness, and helplessness.

You may experience some of the prolonged stress reactions. These can include:

Feeling preoccupied with the incident: feeling like you can't get it out of your mind

Having trouble sleeping, or experiencing nightmares about the traumatic event

Feeling anxious, fearful, irritable or angry

Feeling depressed or low, with unexpected crying bouts

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Feeling helpless or guilty: unrealistically thinking that you should have done something to prevent this event from happening

Feeling the need to reassure family members about your day-to-day safety

The following are some strategies you can use to decrease your own level of reaction.

**Recognize how far you have come.** People often feel stuck and don't realize that they have survived this traumatic event and possibly even thrived in some areas. Even though things aren't exactly where you want them, recognize that your resilience has allowed you to bounce back in most areas of your life.

**Identify what you are grateful for on a daily basis.** Consider starting a gratitude journal.

**Focus on what you do have control over** – your thoughts, your feelings, your physical activity, your interpersonal interactions...yourself.

**Reach out and connect with friends and family.** A sense of community is very healing. This is one of the most important things that you can do.

**Be alert,** but not so alert that you become paranoid.

**Act upon what you do have control over:** your work, redirecting negative thoughts, your health, taking care of yourself and your family, and continuing on with your daily routines and schedule.

**Be prepared,** as recommended by your managers.

**Challenge catastrophic and irrational thoughts:** Stay focused on the present.

**Do not make assumptions about the future** or think about "what if's." Redirect your thoughts from these fears by using positive affirmations.

**At work, respect everyone's differences.** Some people may want to talk a lot about their concerns. Others may want to be silent.

**Try deep breathing.** Practice diaphragmatic breathing by slowly inhaling through the nose allowing your diaphragm to expand and then exhaling even more slowly through your mouth.

**Try some 'soft' stress management activities:** exercise, play or watch sports, engage in your hobbies.

**Monitor how much you expose yourself to news/weather updates.** It's okay to turn off the radio/tv and social media, and just keep up-to-date without having a minute to minute update.

**Use positive images** to form a private sanctuary, a safe place to retreat to for quick "mini-stress breaks". Repeat a short phrase, prayer, or mantra while you are there.

**Express your feelings.**

**Keep your usual routines.**

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