# Understanding and Coping with

# Traumatic Events and Crises

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This pamphlet offers information about caring for your emotional health after a traumatic event. If you have questions about trauma or believe you may benefit from talking to a counselor, feel free to call the Counseling Center at 413-542-2354.

#  Coping with a Traumatic Events

## A traumatic event turns your world upside down.

After surviving a disaster or traumatic event, people may have a variety of emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioral reactions. We hope this brochure will help identify common reactions and strategies to help you and those you care about.

## It will take time before you start to feel better.

You may have strong feelings right away, or you may not notice a change until much later, long after the crisis is over. It is normal to have a variety of reactions, and it will take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to heal.

## Sometimes the stress can be too much to handle alone.

Ask for help if you:

* Are not able to take care of yourself or your children
* Are not able to do your job
* Are using alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems
* Are experiencing significant changes in sleep or appetite
* Are thinking about suicide

## Get help.

If you or someone you know is having trouble dealing with the tragedy, ask for help. Talk to a friend, family members, counselor, or your doctor. Help is available 24 hours a day everyday by calling the numbers below:

**For students**: Amherst College Counseling Center at 413-542-2354

**For Employees and their families**: Amherst College Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) at 800-828-6025

# Common Reactions to Traumatic Events

Trauma events can bring about significant stress, especially if you have experienced a previous disaster or trauma. The following are some of the reactions individuals may experience during or after a traumatic event:

## Possible Emotional Reactions

**Anxiety and Panic:** People may experience a range of nervousness following a traumatic event. Some may experience low levels of chronic nervousness or startle easily, while others may have panic attacks and feel hyper-vigilant. They may frequently cry, be more irritable than usual or have difficulty relaxing or falling asleep.

**Numbness:** When people are overwhelmed, they may experience shock and feel dazed. At times they deny how bad a situation is or disbelieve that something traumatic actually happened. They may feel isolated and disconnected from their own usual feelings.

**Sadness and Depression:** Often people feel sadness and grief following a trauma or disaster, may experience diminished interest in everyday activities, and feel a lack of energy. A sense of despair and hopelessness may be present, and individuals may have frequent crying spells.

**Anger:** Often, people may experience sudden bursts of anger or low levels of chronic irritability. If you act out because of the stress, acknowledge your actions quickly, apologize and make amends. If you feel your anger is out of control and you could hurt others, seek help immediately.

## Possible Cognitive Reactions

**Difficulty Concentrating:** It may be difficulty to concentrate or attend to things as you usually do. Reading, paying attention in class, or holding conversations may be more challenging. Your mind may wander, and you may find yourself day-dreaming at inappropriate times.

**Memory Problems:** You may be more forgetful than usual following a traumatic event or disaster, and you may tend to lose or misplace things more easily.

**Invasive thoughts or flashbacks:** People often re-experience the traumatic event or have invasive memories of the event. Often people can’t stop thinking about the event even though they would like to.

**Nightmares:** People may have bad dreams related to the event. As a result, people may have difficulty sleeping or may avoid sleeping all together, and thus may experience fatigue. If this happens, seek help, as there are strategies that can help you sleep.

## Possible Physical Reactions

Many people manifest stress physically. Here are a few of the most common physical reactions people have following traumatic events:

Aches and pains, such as headaches and backaches

Weakness, dizziness, and fatigue

Heart palpations, profuse sweating and chills

Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or sleeping too much

Changes in appetite and digestive problems

Being easily startled by noises and/or unexpected touch

Increased susceptibility to allergies, colds, or illness

Increased alcohol consumption and/or substance abuse

## Possible Behavioral Reactions

Isolating yourself from others, or needing to be around people all the time

Becoming very alert at times and startling easy

Avoiding things that remind you of the trauma, including places or people that bring back memories

Having increased conflict with family members, friends or co-workers

Keeping excessively busy to avoid thinking about the trauma and what has happened to you

Being overprotective of you and your loved ones’ safety

# Things To Help You Feel Better

## Taking action

Getting ourselves and our lives back in a routine that is comfortable for us takes time.

* Take care of your safety. Find a safe place to stay and make sure your physical health needs and those of you family are addressed. Seek medical attention, if necessary
* Stay connected with family and friends. Giving and getting support is one of the most important things you can do.
* Eat healthy foods. During times of stress, it is important that you maintain a balanced diet and drink plenty of water.
* Get some rest. With so much to do, it may be difficult to have enough time to rest or get adequate sleep. Giving your body and mind a break can boost your ability to cope with the stress you may be experiencing.
* Be patient with yourself and with those around you. Recognize that everyone is stressed and may need some time to put their feelings and thoughts in order.
* Set priorities. Tackle tasks in small steps.
* Stay positive. Remind yourself of how you’ve successfully gotten through difficult times in the past. Reach out when you need support, and help others when they need it.
* Gather information about assistance and resources that will help you and your family members meet your mental and emotional health needs.

## If you still don’t feel better….

If you find yourself or a loved one experiencing some of the feelings and reactions listed below for 2 weeks or longer, this may be a sign that you need to reach out for additional assistance.

* Crying spells or bursts of anger
* Difficulty eating
* Difficulty sleeping
* Losing interest in things
* Increased physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches
* Fatigue
* Feeling guilty, helpless or hopeless
* Avoiding family and friends

For additional resources, contact the Counseling Center, Health Service, Amherst College EAP, or your local Red Cross Disaster Mental Health.

## Helping family members and others cope

It is difficult to predict how children will react when disasters or traumatic events occur. Some children may not seem to be upset while others may have an emotional reaction or a change in behavior. Changes in emotions and behaviors can occur immediately or after a short delay.

**Regardless of your child’s age, remember to:**

* Always care for yourself first, then help others
* Model coping through calm reactions, even though you may be stressed
* If you feel unable to control your emotions, seek out help and support from family or professionals
* Keep routines as consistent as possible
* Answer questions openly and honestly and at a level they can understand
* Allow your children to talk about the event from their point-of-view. Let them know you will listen to their concerns and questions.
* Help your children label, show, and cope with their feelings. Let them know it is okay if they feel angry or sad.
* Reassure your children that you love and will care for them
* Provide a peaceful household experience
* Provide opportunities to be physically active and play
* Offer reassurances, especially at bedtime

**Ages birth to 5:**

* Children should have limited exposure to media and adult conversation about crisis and disaster
* They should spend ample time with loving, reassuring adults
* Parents should provide plenty of physical contact (for example, hugs and cuddles)

**Ages 6 to 12:**

* Spend ample time with loving, reassuring adults
* Provide verbal and physical reassurance that you are with them and will care for them
* Limit repeated exposure to adult discussions and the news media. Watch with them and talk with them about what they are seeing and hearing, how they feel about it, and what it means for them and the family.

**Ages 13 to 18:**

* Let them know your whereabouts and make sure you know where they will be
* Provide time to talk and interact with peers
* Allow opportunities to contribute in the family or assist others if they are interested
* Give encouragement and support in taking care of themselves
* If you are staying in a shelter or in other unfamiliar surroundings, talk to your teen about staying safe
* Talk with your teen about their feelings and discuss ways to help them cope

## Campus and Community Resources

Amherst College Counseling Center, available to students 24-hours a day: 413-542-2354

Amherst College Employee Assistance Plan (EAP), available to employees and their families 24-hours a day — (800) 828-6025

Amherst College Police Department: 413-542-2111 or 911

Health Services: 413-542-2267

Office of Student Affairs: 413-542-5764

Class Deans: 413-542-2337

Cooley Dickinson Hospital: 413-582-2000 or call 911

American Red Cross of Western Massachusetts: 413-737-4306

Text was adapted from publications of the American Red Cross

and Center for Disease Control & Prevention