



Taking Care of Yourself: The Mind-Body Response to a Traumatic Event

Before the event

Our body responds to images created in our mind. That is why we feel agitated when we interpret an event (regardless of whether these images arise out of a real or imaginary threat) as a big problem. Over the short-term, this stress or agitation may mobilize us to take action. But if our anxiety level remains high or increases over a *prolonged period of time* and nothing is done to manage it, we begin to "burn out" from functioning non-stop on "red-alert."

After the event

Feelings of shock, disbelief, denial, guilt and depression arise out of the trauma of losing something important, and being unable to prevent the loss. You may already be familiar with the stages of loss:

- Initially, we feel stunned, confused, and unable to accept the situation and/or deny that the event has actually happened.
- Next, anger arises because we were powerless to prevent the loss of something really important: our anger is an outgrowth of our frustration.
- At some point, we may feel guilty and responsible for the loss; that somehow, we could have prevented it. We play endless "If only..." scenarios in our mind.
- Depression arises when we stop resisting reality, and the implications of the loss "hit home."
- Eventually, we accept the situation - *if* we have given ourselves time and permission to feel and deal with negative emotions. We have only enough energy for facing forward toward the future or backward toward the past, not both. In this stage, an understanding of the price we pay for hanging on *indefinitely* to angry, depressed feelings can help move us into a period of revitalization.

Suggestions from the Experts:

1. Keep things in perspective

- Ask yourself:
 - I've been through change before; what have I learned that can help me now?
 - What area of my life can I turn to for support?

2. Maintain your physical fitness

- Get exercise:
 - A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress.
 - Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after you stop exercising.
 - Exercise can stimulate the release of chemicals in the brain called endorphins, which reduce depression and stress.
- Eat right:
 - What you eat directly affects the way you feel.
 - Limit your intake of caffeine.
 - Eat smaller portions: you'll be able to digest your food more easily.
 - Resist the temptation to turn to alcohol and drugs.

3. Practice relaxation techniques

- Body scan:
 - Scan your body, looking for tension.
 - At each tense place, take a deep, full breath and imagine the tension being swept away as you exhale.
 - Repeat a relaxing phrase to yourself (e.g.: I feel peaceful and still).

4. Get the support of others

- Let those close to you know that you're adjusting to a difficult change.
- Seek professional help if the effects of stress interfere with your ability to function normally. The Village Employee Assistance Program can provide individual, family and financial counseling (1-800-627-8220).