

# When bad things happen...

When we're involved in or exposed to news of a traumatic event, we can experience a range of reactions which can be intense. These are natural human responses and our way of adjusting to the reality of what's happened.

## Common responses include:

### Physical changes:

- to our eating, sleeping, energy levels, digestion, bowel activity, muscle tension, breathing, and circulation
- We may cry, get headaches, feel sick, get aches and pains, rashes, feel numbness or tingling, and heaviness in our limbs

### Cognitive changes:

- We may be shocked, disbelieve the news or deny the facts
- We may have unpleasant memories or nightmares, become forgetful, confused, have nightmares, trouble concentrating, and lose our motivation
- Our thoughts may be scattered, or we might become preoccupied with memories of the person and our actions

### Emotional changes:

- We may feel shocked, numb, anxious, sad, depressed, quiet, angry, embarrassed, relieved or frustrated
- We might notice mood swings, be more irritated than is normal, or feel confused or guilty
- Our reaction might surprise us, being different to how we'd expect to react
- We may not notice any emotional changes at all

### Behavioural changes:

- We may withdraw and isolate ourselves from family and friends, or we may crave constant contact
- We might be lethargic, or irritable or agitated

**The way/s we react or don't react may surprise or concern us,  
but they're normal**

### What helps:

- Spend time with family or friends who are supportive
- Have time by yourself to process and accept the experience
- Keep your regular sleep routine (we need around 7-9 hours sleep each night)
- Eat healthy meals and snacks, including breakfast. Avoid sugar and junk foods
- Drink lots of water and have less caffeine, energy drinks, alcohol
- Do some gentle exercise each day
- Go about your typical day as much as possible
- Take time out from additional demands
- Monitor your use of drugs and/or alcohol
- If appropriate, limit the amount of media coverage you watch, listen to or read about the actual event or similar events (this includes social media)
- Avoid Googling the issue
- Go easy on yourself...you can't have all the answers, and things always look different with hindsight. Don't expect too much of yourself and don't criticize your reactions, either what you did at the time, or now (they're normal)
- Write down your thoughts...this can help you identify practical steps to take
- Express your reactions in ways that suit you e.g. diary, art
- Do things you normally find enjoyable
- Accept help when it's offered
- Remember you're not alone
- Ritualize the experience in a way that is personally significant for you
- Seek help if your reactions are intense, prolonged or concerning you

### Take a moment to breathe:

- Take a deep gentle breath and hold it for a count of 3
- Let the breath leave your lungs as slowly as possible
- As you breathe out let your shoulders drop and feel your shoulder blades sliding down your back

### Drop anchor:

- Push your feet hard into the floor
- Straighten your spine
- As you do this, take a deep breath
- Look around and notice 5 things you can see
- Listen carefully and notice 5 things you can hear
- Notice where you are and what you are doing

## How you can help someone who's distressed

### Listen

Just listen. Create a safe space for tears. No need to avoid, distract, or minimize what has happened or their responses. It's also important not to force the topic; we all process differently and at our own pace, so let them be.

### Be sensitive

Keep it real. Express how you're actually feeling and how difficult it is to know how to help. Platitudes don't help someone who's experienced a traumatic event, so saying things like "it could have been worse", "at least..." or "count your blessings" don't convey that you care or want to help.

### We're all different

People will respond and grieve differently, including in different time frames. Respect their responses and the time they take. There's no 'normal' way to respond to 'abnormal'/traumatic events

### Give practical help

Cook a meal, babysit etc. Vague offers of help don't work...be specific. People may need support from friends and family members for a considerable amount of time. Don't quit helping after a week or two.

### Choose your news

It can be tempting to focus on news updates or social media coverage, but repeated exposure can be distressing, so consciously choose your news.

### Encourage getting help

If the symptoms are persisting or causing significant distress, encourage extra support from others, such as GP, psychologist, social worker, appropriate faith or community organizations.

### Keep it simple

Helping doesn't have to be complicated. It involves simple gestures like spending time together, having a cup of tea, chatting about 'normal' life, enjoying a laugh together or a hug.

### Take care of yourself

Helping can be tiring and sometimes we forget to look after ourselves. Be aware of your own health – *physical* and *mental* – and seek support as you need... 'fit your own oxygen mask first before assisting others'.

## **HSM**     *Felicity Miller, Manager, Student Health and Wellbeing*

***Free and confidential counselling available on campus, at BIHS, GCUH, Wesley and Tweed, and by phone, email or facetime***

Main campus Bldg 5 Room 1\_14

Phone: +61 7 5595 5645 (office hours)

Mobile: 0437 820 627

Email [fmiller@bond.edu.au](mailto:fmiller@bond.edu.au)

**HSM Reception** +61 7 5595 4469

## **24/7 support**

***Emergency 000 or Lifeline: 131114***

## **Bond University**

***Counselling Service, Medical Clinic, Disability Office***

Level 1, Student Court, Building 9

Appointments available 8:30am-5:00pm Monday to Friday

## **Online Resources**

Australian Psychological Society:

<https://psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-Topics/Trauma>

For Grief and Bereavement: [www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au) <http://www.goodgrief.org.au>

Reach Out: [au.reachout.com/tough-times/loss-and-grief](http://au.reachout.com/tough-times/loss-and-grief)

Beyond Blue: [www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/grief-and-loss](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/grief-and-loss)

## **Recommended reading**

McKissock, D. & McKissock, M. (1995) *Coping with Grief*, ABC Books

Neimeyer, R. (2000) *Lessons of Loss: A guide to coping*, University of Memphis.

Skylight Foundation, *The Challenge of Change*, Wellington, NZ