

Coping with Fears Following a Traumatic Event

Overview

The events of September 11, 2001 have resulted in strong feelings of fear for many people, who may have difficulty returning to work, traveling, or resuming other activities.

- Fear and traumatic stress
- Coping with fear
- Coping with fear of flying
- Coping with other fears after a traumatic event

The events of September 11, 2001 have injected intense feelings of fear and shock into the daily lives of people everywhere.

Many people may be experiencing fears about flying in airplanes, traveling away from home, being in tall buildings, or simply returning to work. Fears like these are a reaction to the horror of witnessing these tragic events and wondering if they might happen again. It's important to understand that fear is a normal response to trauma and to seek help coping with it.

Fear and traumatic stress

Fears may develop rapidly after a traumatic event. After the initial feelings of shock and numbness wear off, some people may find that they are still having trouble resuming daily life because of lingering fear.

Fears may revolve around activities directly related to the traumatic event, or they could be about something you have read, heard, or even imagined about the event. Fears can also be related to a resurgence of painful feelings from a past trauma or loss that is triggered by the current situation. As a result of the September 11 attacks, some people may have difficulty:

- allowing a family member or loved one to fly
- saying goodbye when a loved one leaves for work
- traveling in an elevator
- spending time in tall buildings
- visiting tourist sites
- returning to work
- being in large groups of people
- leaving home

It's normal to experience these fears and other responses to traumatic stress like:

- anxiety or nervousness
- irritability
- depression
- anger

- mood swings
- physical symptoms such as chronic aches and pains or difficulty sleeping
- nightmares

The amount of time that people will experience these emotions and fears will vary. It may depend on the nature of your involvement with the traumatic event or whether you've experienced other kinds of trauma or loss in your life. If your reactions persist for a long period of time or are resulting in difficulties at work, you may find that professional help can give you the support you need to regain a sense of control and well-being.

Coping with fear

Some people are able to cope with their fears by talking about them with a trusted friend or loved one. Others may be able to control fear with personal relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or listening to comforting music. Here are some other things you can do to combat fear:

- *Use company resources.* Support and information is available to you through your employee assistance program (EAP). If you do not know how to contact your EAP, ask your supervisor or human resources department.
- *Give yourself time.* It may take a while to recover from the shock of a traumatic event. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient too.
- *Spend extra time with the people you love.* Talk about the recent events and your fears.
- *Try not to compare yourself with others.* Some of your co-workers may not have any trouble resuming business travel, while others may have deep reservations. Everyone responds to trauma differently.
- *Consider joining a support group.* Talking with others who are experiencing fear as a result of a traumatic experience may be helpful. Ask your EAP for help finding a group.
- *Use exercise as a way to keep calm.* Some people find that taking a walk or other forms of exercise may clear the mind, making it easier to face fears.
- *Seek support from your faith community.* Many people find comfort and solace from faith communities when they are grappling with difficult issues.

Coping with new fears about flying

Even if you have never experienced fear of flying, the recent plane hijackings and crashes that claimed so many lives may have resulted in heightened nervousness and new fears about traveling by airplane.

New fears about flying and terrorist hijackings are probably related to a sense of vulnerability -- you may feel like another attack could come at any time in any place.

There are a number of programs across the country that offer courses aimed at combating the fear of flying. Most of these include stress management, deep breathing exercises and other relaxation techniques. If you are interested in taking a fear-of-flying course, contact your EAP for help locating a program.

If you are required to travel by plane and feel nervous or afraid, there are some steps you can take.

- *Learn all that you can about security procedures.* Before a trip, find out what the security guidelines are for the airline and airport you will be using during travel. An understanding of exactly what airline and other officials are doing may make you feel safer.
- *Plan ahead.* Pre-selecting your seat may give you a sense of control. Choose a forward aisle seat on a wide-body plane to minimize noise and allow freedom of movement or any other location that makes you feel more secure.
- *Bring distractions.* Pack items that will keep your mind occupied. Magazines, books, soothing music or relaxation tapes (played only when flight attendants announce that it's allowed), or even work may keep fears at bay.
- *Be careful about what you eat.* Try not to consume a lot of caffeine and don't fly on an empty stomach.
- *Talk to flight attendants about your fear.* They may be able to reassure you throughout the flight.
- *Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to handle your fear.*
- *Use relaxation techniques.* Deep breathing or even saying prayers or poems with personal meaning may be soothing.
- *Bring family photos or other items that comfort you.*

Coping with other fears after a traumatic event

Many people may find that they have other, deep fears as a result of the attacks. Some of these might be connected to returning to work, while others may be related to fears about impending war, discrimination and hate crimes, or even about spending time in tourist destinations.

Work-related fears

Following the recent attacks, some people may have fears about returning to work because so many people were killed in their offices. It is normal to be worried about returning to work after such a traumatic event, but if your fears

are very strong, you will need to talk to your supervisor about them. You can also

- *Contact your EAP for resources and support.*
- *Find a work “buddy.”* Try to team up with a work friend to offer each other support. You can ride the elevator together, eat lunch together, or simply talk about your fears.
- *Try to stay focused on the task at hand.* If possible, focus your attention on your work. You may be able to limit fearful feelings if you’re concentrating on other things.
- *Try to give yourself something to look forward to at work.* An afternoon break, a lunch out with co-workers, or anything that gives you pleasure may make the work day easier to handle.
- *Do something to improve office morale.* It’s likely that many people in your office have been traumatized by recent events. Bringing co-workers together with a plate of brownies or other snack that can be shared or even an office fundraiser may remind people of the positive things happening at work.

Other fears

Other fears that people may have include fears about being in certain locations, such as tall buildings, elevators, or crowded areas. If these kinds of fears are making it difficult for you to handle your daily life, you may want to consider consulting a professional counselor. Other things you can do to control fears include:

- *Relaxation techniques.* Deep breathing exercises and other relaxation techniques may help you negotiate situations that spark fear. To find out about relaxation techniques, go to the library or Internet for books and Web sites.
- *Take it slow.* Deep-seated fears won’t disappear overnight. If you have fears about being at the top of a tall building, start out by going up to middle floors. Once you feel comfortable doing this, then move up to higher floors. Slowly exposing yourself to the things that cause fears may help you control your fear.

Fears related to prejudice or discrimination

Some people may find that they are fearful of people of different races, religions, and cultures after the September 11 attacks. This kind of fear is common during times of crisis, but discrimination -- the unfavorable treatment of others based on prejudice -- does nothing to promote healing or unity, and also may have serious legal consequences.

If you find yourself feeling afraid of other people because of their race, religion, or culture, there are steps you can take.

5 • Coping with Fears Following a Traumatic Event

- *Resist making judgments without complete information.* Your friends, relatives, co-workers, and commentators on the radio or TV may have theories about who is responsible for the acts of violence. But until accurate information from a trustworthy and reliable source is available, resist the rush to judgment. It is often weeks or months before authorities know for certain what individuals or organizations are responsible for acts of terrorism or violence.
- *Avoid attributing the acts of violence or terrorism of a few individuals to an entire race, religion, or group of people.*
- *Avoid listening to or spreading rumors.*
- *Learn more about people of other races, religions, and cultures.* Many acts of discrimination or harassment are a result of a lack of understanding or knowledge of a culture that's different from our own. Accurate information about people of other races, religions, political systems, and cultures will help you better understand today's changing world. Read articles from reputable newspapers and magazines and talk with knowledgeable people.
- *Try to see people as individuals and not just as members of a cultural, racial, or other group.* Avoid stereotypes, which are grossly exaggerated assumptions about a group. Stereotypes can cause mistrust and misunderstandings. Think about your own racial or ethnic background and about some of the negative and incorrect stereotypes others may have of your "group." Consider the many ways you are different from others who share the same racial, religious, or cultural group identity.

Some people may fear that they will be a victim of discrimination or hate crimes as a result of increased tension after an act of violence or terrorism. If you are worried about discrimination, you can:

- *Seek support from community organizations.* Contact local support groups, organizations, or your faith community for support.
- *If you are concerned that your child may be the victim of discrimination, talk with school authorities about your concerns.* Ask for support from your child's teacher, administrators, and the school psychologist. It is important to make teachers and school officials aware of your concerns. Offer to speak with teachers or children to help them learn more about your culture. Urge school officials to look for opportunities to deepen understanding among faculty and students about diverse cultural attitudes and behaviors and racial and gender stereotyping.

6 • Coping with Fears Following a Traumatic Event

- *Talk with your child and allow him to express any fears or concerns he might have.* Let your child know that discrimination is wrong. Consider talking with a therapist or counselor if your child is having behavioral problems or trouble coping.

If you are experiencing fears following the recent terrorist attacks, try to remember that they will pass with time. However, if your fears linger for months or if they are making daily life overwhelming, it's important to seek professional.