

What should I NOT do?

- Don't bottle up your feelings. It is natural to have strong emotions under these circumstances. Bottling them up will make you feel worse.
- Do not use drugs or drink alcohol. Both help ease emotions but may prevent you from coming to terms with what has happened. If you need some medication contact a doctor.
- You should not make any major decisions regarding your life under these circumstances. Your judgement is not at it's best, and you might make choices which you later regret.

When do I need professional help?

Most people find that stress and strong emotions will fade as time goes by, though - it should be pointed out again - this will depend on the individual. If any of the symptoms listed below have not subsided after a period of 4-6 weeks and continue to be of concern to you, you should consider professional help.

- If you still cannot handle your emotions and feel overwhelmed by stress, emptiness and exhaustion
- If you lack personal initiative or feel the need to keep yourself occupied to stop thinking about the event
- If you continue to have nightmares or trouble sleeping
- If the consequences of the event have a serious impact on your marriage/ relationship, e.g. affecting your sexual life
- If you feel you are prone to mishaps
- If you start drinking or using medication excessively
- If your capacity to work is not back to normal
- If you want to talk about your feelings and experiences but there is no one you can turn to

Where can I get professional help?

You can contact the Iceland Red Cross on their emergency telephone number **1717** around the clock. There you will receive either direct assistance or information on where to go. The calls are free of charge, and anonymity and confidentiality will be fully maintained.



Icelandic Red Cross

The Icelandic Red Cross is designated to render mass care and social relief under an agreement with the Icelandic Civil Protection Department. Its branches open mass care shelters during disasters and emergencies where people receive basic first help in the way of information, food and clothing, while measures are taken to keep families together. The Icelandic Red Cross also provides assistance during sudden catastrophic events besides mass disasters, such as fires or flooding of homes.

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Psychological Support

> *Coping with Trauma*



Reaction to traumatic events

Traumatic events such as accidents, serious bodily injuries, violent assaults, natural disasters, suicide or rape are unforeseen, and therefore people are never prepared for them.

If you have experienced an event of this kind or been a witness, you will most likely have been influenced by it. It is hard to say to how people are affected because it depends on the individual concerned. You might feel that all your hopes are dashed, you might not know how to cope with your strong emotions and might therefore feel depressed and very anxious. These reactions will, in the beginning, have a strong impact on your everyday life.

As a rule, these strong reactions will subside as time goes by, through your own efforts and with the help of your family, friends or others close to you. It is, however, not unusual for flashbacks to occur, even though the traumatic event happened quite some time ago. Flashbacks can be triggered by places, images, sounds, smells, or talk about similar events.

What can I expect?

It is normal for you to experience stress and for the symptoms to prevail for several weeks. The amount of stress will depend on the seriousness of the event, your level of tolerance and the circumstances in which you find yourself. The closer you are to the traumatic event, the more you will feel its impact. The event can also deeply upset your friends and relatives.

Typical reactions immediately after a traumatic event

Shock

- Feeling of numbness, unclear thinking, disturbed sense of reality, emptiness
- Being cut off from your own feelings and from what is going on around you

Denial

- Finding it difficult to accept what happened
- Acting as if nothing had happened

After a few hours or days these symptoms will fade and other reactions set in.

Typical reactions during the first weeks after the event

Weeping and sorrow – what happened is painful; loss triggers deep sadness

Fear and anxiety – will something terrible happen again? what will be ... ? what, if...?

Numbness and/or dream-like state – the pain is too much to endure.

Nightmares, trouble sleeping – flashbacks during dreams, too much stress

Intrusive thoughts about the event – unwanted recurrent images, sounds and smells

Fatigue – body systems under immense stress

Helplessness and lack of initiative – stress affecting thoughts and emotions

Anger – can be used to overcome fear connected with the event

Avoiding people and places reminding you of the event – fleeing from stress situations

Guilt of having survived, self-blame - thinking under stress

Poor concentration – your mind is upset

Headaches and physical discomfort – stress also affects your physical health

The above emotions are understandable and natural. They can vary in strength and duration, but as time goes on, they will subside. In order to cope with these feelings you must let them come out. Allowing your feelings to surface does not mean that you will be losing control and endure even more pain. Bottling them up can, on the other hand, lead to other and even more complicated problems.

What CAN I do?

Take life one day at a time. It is important to recover your sense of security and safety. The following advice can help you.

- Give yourself time – it can take weeks and months to learn to live with what has happened
- Go back to your daily routine like work or school, as soon as possible
- Be involved with family, friends and others who can support you
- It is helpful to meet with people who have been through the same experience as you
- Attend memorial services and funerals
- Get enough sleep, sound nourishment and exercise
- Talk about the event and its consequences when you are ready
- Don't worry if you cry or get upset when you talk about the event
- Take care! People who have gone through a serious trauma, are more prone to accidents.

How can I help my child?

- Stay close, and assure the child that there is no impending danger, help it to feel secure.
- Be honest and take consideration to the child's age and understanding when explaining the facts. The child's emotional recovery is affected by the information it receives.
- Give the child the opportunity to express its feelings in playing, drawing and talking.
- Try to keep to the child's daily routine. Keep regular hours for meals, sleep, school attendance, outdoor activities and hobbies.
- Take time to have fun together. It helps reduce fear and anxiety.

Children, unlike adults, do not express strong emotional reactions for long periods of time. They can be sad and anxious for a while but soon forget when they start playing. Take note that some reactions do not appear immediately and others can reappear after a long time. Do not hesitate to seek professional guidance and support if you are unsure or the necessity arises.