

## Coping with a Sudden Terrible Event

### What is a traumatic event?

Most of us at some point in our lives will experience a sudden, terrible, overwhelming event. The event or our reactions to it are called a trauma. Examples of such events include an unexpected death or near-death, an automobile or other accident, a disaster such as a fire or earthquake, a physical or sexual assault or other act of violence, or the onset of a significant illness. The event might occur to us or to someone we know or care about, or it might be something we witness.

### What are normal reactions?

Everyone reacts differently to a traumatic event. We are shocked by it, and it can shake us to our foundations. The following are some common and normal reactions:

Physical Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Emotional Reactions
fatigue	difficulty concentrating	helplessness or meaninglessness
changes in sleeping patterns	difficulty making decisions	numbness or hypersensitivity
changes in eating patterns	flashbacks or preoccupation with the event	fear, panic, feeling unsafe
changes in other activities	memory disturbances	moodiness, crying, or depression
digestion problems or stomachaches	a sense that things aren't real	anger or guilt
headaches or dizziness		isolation from other people
physical tension, shakiness or weakness		feeling that your thoughts or emotions are out of control
		neediness, not wanting to be alone

## How can I cope?

- Talking about the event and listening to others talk about it are important ways of understanding and making sense of what happened. Find a context in which you are comfortable – one-to-one, with a group, or writing in a journal or a letter to a friend.
- As much as you can, continue your usual routines. It may feel meaningless or uncomfortable, because "normal" life may not feel so normal any more. But walk through your usual activities as well as you can.
- Allow yourself time to react to the event however you need to. If you need some time alone, take it. If you need to cry, go ahead. If you need company, seek it out.
- Mental or physical activity can be very healing: try taking a walk, exercising, writing in a journal, or reading.
- Be aware of and avoid urges to numb your pain with drugs or alcohol. If you are taking a prescription medication, continue to follow the usual instructions and contact your doctor if you feel a change is in order.
- If you are troubled by any of your physical, cognitive, or emotional reactions, or they do not begin to ease after several weeks, tell someone. A parent, counselor, or advisor can support you in your efforts to cope.

## How can I contact a counselor?

If you would like to speak with a counselor about how things are going for you, you can come to Walk-In Clinic M - Th from 12:30-5:30 and F 12:30-3:30. If you need to talk to someone and it is after-hours or on the weekend, the on-call counselor can be reached by calling 953-5611.

This information above is adapted from resources provided by American University Counseling Center.