

Dealing with difficult life events

Information and practical advice on
common reactions to difficult events

Which reactions are common?

After a serious or difficult event, it's normal to react strongly. These reactions can occur immediately, or some time later. Soon after such an event, you need to find structure in the chaos that you often experience. With objective information about what has happened and what will happen, you can create structure in your life.

We are all different, and we react differently to difficult events, including the death of someone close. The strength of our reaction can vary. Initially, what has happened often seems unreal, while later it can become painfully real. However as you think through, understand and process what has happened, these reactions normally diminish. Keep in mind that the time required for this varies from person to person.

Examples of common reactions

- ✓ *Anguish, anxiety and fear.* It can be difficult to be alone, and you feel restless and physically worried.
- ✓ *Intrusive memories.* All impressions are gathered and relived, both when you're awake and asleep.
- ✓ *Memory and concentration difficulties.* Your train of thought may be constantly disrupted by thoughts about the incident. Your study performance deteriorates, and the higher the demands, the more difficult it can be to manage your studies.
- ✓ *Sleep disorders* such as difficulty in going to sleep, disturbed sleep, nightmares, difficulty in waking etc.
- ✓ *Physical symptoms* such as nausea, uneven heartbeat, dizziness, muscle pain, headaches, stomach problems etc.
- ✓ *Feelings of guilt* as you think about what you have or have not done.
- ✓ *Sadness/depression.* If you lose someone who was close to you, emotions like loss, pain, longing, and sadness are enhanced.
- ✓ *Irritation and anger* are often directed at helpers, family and friends.
- ✓ *Previous traumas re-emerge.* A good idea is to seek counselling.
- ✓ *Relationships with other people* can suffer, if you become more isolated. You can get lots of attention from people around you, but unfortunately this is often short-lived. It's important that friends and fellow students are aware that you will need support for a long time.

How can I deal with my situation?

Get help from friends and family

Talk about what has happened and how it feels. Every time you verbalise your thoughts, emotions and experiences, you get a chance to process what has happened. Accept that your reactions are normal expressions following a difficult event.

Sometimes friends and classmates can hesitate to get in touch because they are unsure of what to say. If you feel up to it, contact your friends or others who are important to you; it can be helpful.

Stick to your routines

Return to your studies as soon as you feel able, and try to get back into your normal routines. This brings a sense of security, and helps prevent isolation. Accept that your energy levels will be lower for a while, and don't push yourself too hard.

Take care of yourself

Take care of yourself by eating and sleeping well. This is important if you are to function properly. Eat regularly, even if you don't feel hungry.

You'll sleep better if you keep regular hours, especially by getting up at the same time every morning. Relaxation exercises can help you go to sleep. If you can't sleep,

get up for a while, without being active. Physical exercise is good, it reduces muscle tension and helps you sleep better. Plus, it's an opportunity to switch off your thoughts and your grief.

In times of grief, life can seem meaningless. Try to do things that you used to enjoy doing. It's not a good idea to wait until you feel like doing them. Be careful with sedatives and alcohol. Alcohol intensifies depression during periods of grief and can often lead to negative experiences.

Get help with your studies

If you find it difficult to cope with your studies initially, it's important to contact your teacher or study adviser as soon as possible, to deal with the situation. Pushing yourself too hard can negatively affect your ability to process what has happened.



Help with difficult thoughts

If you often or constantly brood over what has happened, try to reserve a time in the early evening when you can focus on these thoughts for 20 to 30 minutes. When the thoughts arise at other times, stop them and refer them to the time you have reserved.

Write down what you have been through, including the thoughts and emotions you had when it happened, and those you're experiencing now. You don't need to write often, but when you do, it should be thorough. It's common to feel worse in the early part of the writing period. Later on, most people feel better, and the writing process brings relief. Remember, you're writing for yourself only.

If disturbing mental images are bothering you, it can help if you move the images as far away in the room as possible, preferably onto the TV screen. Try to switch off the mental images by doing something distracting, listening to music or replacing the images by mentally creating and focussing on a pleasant image.

(Source: PUG, Vrinnevi Hospital, Norrköping, 1998, revised 2011)

How can Student Health help?

You don't need to be alone with your thoughts and emotions! Get in touch with us at the Student Health Care Center if you want someone to talk to, or need help to relax or sleep.

www.student.liu.se/studenthalsan

