



HELPING YOURSELF & OTHERS DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

There are times in our lives when we experience an event which is more difficult or stressful than usual, where we need to apply deliberate coping skills and accept support from our social network. Some people can experience a string of bad luck and stressful situations in a row. Others may experience a very sudden traumatic or sad event in their life. Both of these scenarios are highly disruptive and can overwhelm our usual coping strategies and impact on our physical and mental wellbeing.

As humans we all have the capacity to build resilience to stress and maintain our wellbeing during difficult times. A range of proven strategies for helping yourself and others during difficult times follows in four broad areas:

- Understanding Normal Reactions to Stressful Events
- Tips for Helping Yourself
- Tips for Helping Others
- Tips for Building Stress Resilience

UNDERSTANDING NORMAL REACTIONS TO STRESSFUL EVENTS

Common (early) reactions to difficult times or stressful events may include:

1. Shock, disbelief, surprise
2. Sadness and despair
3. A sense of loss or grief
4. Worry, anxiety, fear, apprehension
5. Confusion, uncertainty
6. Frustration and anger
7. Stress and generalised tension
8. Overwhelmed and numb

These can lead to further effects, noticeable at home or at work:

- Tiredness, poor sleep
- Tension, headaches
- Feeling ill, agitated, restless
- Memory, decision making or concentration difficulties
- Withdrawing from others
- Worrying about the future, about what will happen next, or about other work mates
- Getting out of step with routine work and life (e.g. not eating or exercising well, forgetting to relax, take time out etc.)
- Thinking negatively
- Diminished work focus and productivity
- At work - staff/team members:
 - may talk more or talk less
 - may find that morale becomes higher or lower (depending on the situation)



- may feel more connected or may feel more isolated

These are seen as **common reactions to uncommon situations**. Therefore, if you recognise some of these reactions in yourself or others, it does not mean that you are ‘not coping’ or ‘have problems’. These feelings are valid and it’s important to acknowledge and share them. The severity of these reactions will depend on the individual person, their existing coping skills and the severity and nature of the situation they’re facing.

Emotional reactions are part of moving forward through important events, because the adrenaline involved helps to stimulate energy for action. However, if strong emotions persist for too long or are too intense, they can exhaust us and may reduce our capacity to fully engage in home and work life.

Most people cope most of the time with most events. However sometimes we require the support of others to move on and to manage our challenges.

TIPS FOR HELPING YOURSELF

- Accept that you may be affected emotionally by the event. Periods of anxiety, tears, frustration or feeling down are natural and can be managed. It doesn’t mean you’ll fall apart and not cope with the situation in the long term
- Accept that it can take time to wade through the challenges and feel in control, but breaking things down into manageable chunks can do this. People can also often describe feelings of positive coping, pride, and gratitude as they work through the tough times
- Ask for help or accept help from your social network - this is an important resource for coping
- Keep to your routine as much as possible and try not to make any big changes or decisions in the short-term unless they are necessary
- Look after yourself physically by maintaining physical activity, eating three meals a day, drinking water and NOT overdoing the alcohol or stimulants (like caffeine and cigarettes)
- Try to reduce the tendency to worry too long about the future, or make conclusions or assumptions without the chance to sit down and have a good think or talk
- Focus on what you can do, problem solve and plan for situations which are clearly issues for you (short or long term), i.e. work on what is in your control
- Write down what you need to do and the things that are worrying you. Then work through what you can do first. This helps to build a sense of order and control over your situation
- Seek peer support or family support. Talk with others and share your feelings
- Try to slow down your conversations if you’re feeling tense. During times of change, when frustration, misunderstandings and mis-communications can escalate, it is important to actively use your listening and communication skills with others
- Remember that you can adjust to the events and will feel better in time



TIPS FOR HELPING OTHERS

- Accept that people facing difficult times will experience emotional reactions, which is normal
- It is also normal for people to experience ‘triggers’ from conversations, TV or events which remind them of the stressful experience and may produce a fresh wave of ‘emotions’. This is unavoidable and, ultimately, will help the person cope over time
- Listen to them and acknowledge their challenges and feelings
- Don’t feel that you have to solve all of their problems, as this may lead you to feel overly responsible
- You can be of great help to them, but it’s best to ASK how you help and clarify this (some people just need a listening ear, others want practical or social support and so on)
- Instill hope for the future, and encourage them to take steps to take charge of the events that are happening (where this is possible)
- Remember that stressful events in people’s lives can create great disruption to normal routine and therefore flow on effects for how that person can be available and able to function or perform at normal levels - e.g. the event that’s occurred could affect the person’s finances, or ability to go to the gym and stay fit, not being able to work as many hours, or pick up the kids from school. Such things can be very frustrating for the person and family coping with a difficult event, so be mindful about expectations
- Be yourself and also try to help the person stick to a reasonable routine - i.e. you should not try to tip-toe around them as most people want a sense of ‘normality’ in their life to help adjust
- Respect that some people actually want some quiet time to help cope while others may want to talk a lot about the recent difficulty - if you’re unsure about how to keep being of assistance the general rule of thumb is to ASK and to stay in touch with them periodically (even if by a quick phone call) over the weeks and months (if needed) following the difficult event
- Keep an eye out for reactions which may indicate they are experiencing depression or hopelessness about the future and help them to access professional counselling or an appointment with a doctor for help. Signs may include persisting withdrawal, depressed feelings, comments about death or dying, hopelessness, lack of pleasure in normal events, problems eating or sleeping, agitation and anxiety and avoidance. These reactions may be part of a normal ‘grief’ response in the short term, but could indicate a depressive condition.

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING STRESS RESILIENCE

Resilience is a term used to describe our ability to bounce back or recover from times of stress, change, hardship and illness. Developing a state of mental and physical resilience can be achieved with practical strategies, which can be taught and learned over time. Resilience provides a buffer to the effects of life’s challenges and can help prevent burnout and mental strain and to recover from these, should they occur.

Conditions that make people more resilient to stress are:



1. Proactive stress management skills
2. Keeping fit and healthy
3. Good social support and contact
4. Responding to signs early and getting the right help
5. Positive attitude and realistic expectations
6. Maintaining good energy levels

The following evidence-based strategies can be used every day with little or no preparation and will help support BOTH physical and mental resilience!

Five tips for physical resilience:

1. Walk or exercise for 20 minutes
2. Drink more water and less alcohol
3. Eat three healthy meals a day
4. Utilise deep breathing or relaxation techniques
5. Create a consistent sleep pattern

Five tips for mental health & resilience:

1. Take 10 minutes to plan the day and tasks
2. Create a positive personal motto and say it!
3. Write down the positives you are grateful for
4. Record multiple solutions to any problem
5. Focus on one task at a time and its purpose

FURTHER HELP:

For confidential advice and personal strategies, contact us on 1800 808 374.

For extra reading, please visit the 'resources' section on our website: assureprograms.com.au.