

Common Reactions to a Traumatic Event:

- trouble concentrating or remembering things
- recurrent dreams, nightmares, or flashbacks
- mentally reconstructing the event to come out differently
- a sense of helplessness
- questioning beliefs, meaning
- feeling numb or disconnected
- sad or depressed feelings
- bursts of anger or irritability
- lack of enjoyment in everyday activities
- digestive problems or appetite fluctuations
- hypervigilance, startling easily
- changes in sexual interest
- sleep irregularities
- avoiding associations with the event
- trying to keep busy or distracted to avoid thinking about the event
- memories of past traumas or difficult experiences

COUNSELLING SERVICES at Wilfrid Laurier University provides professional, confidential counselling (and post-trauma debriefing) to members of the Laurier community. As your campus consultants in personal development and performance, we offer a safe, non-judgmental place to discuss personal issues. Counselling Services is also able to assist students in linking to other community supports if needed.

Our office is located in the Student Services Centre (upper floor), in the heart of campus across the hall from Health Services. Regular office hours are 8:30am - 8:00pm Monday through Thursday, and 8:30am - 4:30pm Fridays. (Our evening hours are reduced during spring/summer sessions). We can be reached by calling 519-884-0710 extension 2338 during office hours, or by leaving a voice mail message anytime.

Counselling Services

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Coping With a Traumatic Event

Counselling Services Wilfrid Laurier University



Supporting Personal Development
and Student Performance

www.mylaurier.ca/counselling

When You Experience a Traumatic Event:

Extremely stressful experiences that include injury or threat of injury - to oneself or someone close by - are considered to be traumatic events.

Being involved in a traumatic incident can remind us that we are all vulnerable to tragedy and remove our sense of safety. Our protective belief that “nothing terrible could happen to me or to people around me” can be shattered. During a traumatic event and in the following 24 hours you may experience initial shock reactions that range from intense fear or anger to numbness or detachment.

In the days following the stressful event, you may experience many different thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and behaviours that vary in intensity and duration. Some of these could be upsetting if you are not prepared to expect such **normal** reactions to the abnormal event just experienced. Experiencing a traumatic event can be particularly difficult if you have a history of other traumas/hard experiences.

Most post-traumatic stress reactions are likely to subside within a few days or weeks, depending on individual circumstances. If reactions feel excessive or persist, it may be important to consult with a counsellor regarding coping.

Healthy Coping Strategies:

Most people find that stress responses decrease over time by using healthy coping strategies. It is important during times of high stress to make an extra effort to care for yourself:

- Try to keep most of your personal routines in place, such as regular meals or other everyday rituals; these can re-establish some order when your life has been temporarily turned upside down.
- Just do what you can do: even if you have little appetite, eat something healthy to keep yourself going. Even if your concentration is poor, it may still be wise to go to class (or work) or look at a book versus doing nothing at all. If you aren't in a party mood but you do want to go out to be with friends, they should be fine with that if you let them know your wishes.
- When you can, allow yourself to feel emotions such as sadness, anger, or grief over what happened. Talking to others about your feelings is important. Make that long-distance call or write your experience down - whatever helps your mind digest this experience and put it behind you.
- Get some appropriate physical exercise, along with regular sleep, rest, and relaxation. Try not to over-medicate or use drugs/alcohol for coping or escape.

- Use family and friends you trust for some informal “debriefing,” but feel free to use a professional counsellor for some debriefing, too. It can be part of dealing with an experience promptly and preventing future complications.
- Discuss your experience with anyone who went through the event with you. If a group debriefing meeting is offered (by a trained professional), take advantage of the opportunity. Try not to let yourself become withdrawn or isolated during this time.
- If your traumatic experience also involved a personal loss, such as the death of someone close to you, recognize that your stress or shock will be accompanied by grief reactions as well, which will deserve appropriate expression and recovery time in their own right.
- Understand that your mental, physical, or emotional stress reactions are not a sign of weakness, craziness, or loss of control, when they are probably a normal part of the recovery process.

It is important during times of high stress to make an extra effort to care for yourself.