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# COPING WITH THE RECENT TERROR ATTACKS

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It is completely normal to feel lots of different emotions and have a range of reactions to the recent terror attacks.

You may or may not feel like being at work right now, and it will be important to talk with your team leader and colleagues about what is manageable for you for the next few days and weeks.

There are some things you can do that will help you cope and some information that is important to know.

Most importantly, know that most people will cope and recover from these attacks. Take good care of yourself and do your best to support others. Try and keep your daily life and work as “normal” as you can but give yourself permission to also take things as easy as you can for the next little while. Ask for help if you are finding things tough. Limit your exposure to media and social media – facts are helpful, graphic images and emotional reporting are not.

## UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA - WHAT IS EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA?

It is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that can shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless or vulnerable. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. The recent attacks in Christchurch are examples of these experiences.

### A stressful event is most likely to be traumatic if:

- It happened unexpectedly.
- You were unprepared for it.
- You felt powerless to prevent it.
- It happened repeatedly.

## SYMPTOMS OF EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Following a potentially traumatic event, most people experience a wide range of physical and emotional reactions. These are **normal** reactions to abnormal events. The symptoms may last for days, weeks, or sometimes months after the trauma ended. They will gradually fade as you process (talk about/make sense of) the events and experiences. If they don't ask for help – see your GP or contact EAP.

### Emotional symptoms of trauma:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anxiety and fear
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling disconnected or numb

### Physical symptoms of trauma:

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Being startled easily
- Racing heartbeat
- Aches and pains
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Edginess and agitation
- Muscle tension

Another part of experiencing an event like the recent attacks is the loss of a sense of safety and security. The natural reaction to this loss is grief. Like people who have lost a loved one, people who have experienced a trauma go through a grieving process. This process can be distressing but is made easier if you turn to others for support, take care of yourself, and talk about how you feel.

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### STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU COPE

- **Stay connected to other people.** You may feel like you want to withdraw from others. However support from others is a key factor in recovery. Make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone. Plan to do enjoyable things with other people as well.
- **Ask for and give support.** It's important to talk about your feelings and ask for the help you need. Talk with colleagues, friends and family. You may also want to access professional support. Helping others will help you feel good and enhance your sense of control.
- **Establish a daily routine.** In order to stay grounded after a trauma, it helps to have a structured schedule to follow. Try to stick to a daily routine, with regular times for waking, sleeping, eating, working, and exercise. Make sure to schedule time for relaxing and social activities, too.
- **Take care of your health.** A healthy body increases your ability to cope with stress. Get plenty of rest, exercise regularly, and eat a well-balanced diet. It's also important to avoid alcohol and drugs. This is because alcohol and drug use can exacerbate feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.
- **Make time for activities you enjoy and get pleasure from.**
- **Delay making any important changes or decisions** until you are feeling better and the environment around you is calm again.

**Other useful strategies are staying grounded, deep breathing, and relaxation.**

### STAYING GROUNDED:

When things are chaotic around you it can help to stay 'grounded.' If you are feeling disoriented, confused, or upset, try the following exercise:

- Sit on a chair. Feel your feet on the ground. Press on your thighs. Feel your behind on the seat and your back against the chair. Or:
- Look around you and pick up particular objects and hold them in your hand. Notice how they look and feel. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded, and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer.

### DEEP BREATHING:

Deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. It takes just a few minutes and a place to stretch out. Try and practice at least several times a day or every time you feel wound up.

### How to practice deep breathing

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the stomach, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest. This allows you to breath more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you have a hard time breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Or put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

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### PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION FOR STRESS RELIEF:

This involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. With practice, muscle relaxation helps you recognise what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation.

### RELAXATION EXERCISE:

1. Start by taking a couple of slow breaths. Focus on your breathing and let your muscles slowly relax. Breathe slowly and gently. Now, feel yourself beginning to relax.
2. Concentrate your attention on your feet. Tighten the muscles by raising your feet and pointing your toes towards the ceiling. Hold this position for about 5 seconds. Then relax the muscles. Notice the changes in sensation in your muscles from tense to relaxed. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
3. Now tighten the muscles in your hips and legs by pressing down on your heels. You will feel tension in your calves and in your upper legs. Hold this position for about 5 seconds, and then let go. Relax. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
4. Turn your focus to your abdomen. Tighten your stomach muscles as much as you can. Focus on the tension for about 5 seconds. Then let your abdomen relax. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
5. Next we concentrate on your chest muscles. Take a deep breath. Hold it. Feel the tension around your rib cage. Then breathe out and feel the changes in your chest as you do so. Breathe in deeply, fill your lungs, hold it, notice the tension, and then breathe out. Let your chest muscles relax. Return to slow and gentle breathing.
6. Go to your hands and forearms. Place your hands palm up. Squeeze them into fists, and turn the fists towards the ceiling. Focus on the tension (about 5 seconds), and then let go. Let your hands and arms relax. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
7. Now for the rest of your arms. Create the tension by pressing your hands down as hard as you can. Hold it for 5 seconds. Then let it go. Focus on the relaxation in your arms (about 20 seconds).
8. And now, your neck. Tense the muscles in your neck. Hold the tension for about 5 seconds, and then relax. Focus on relaxing your neck muscles for about 20 seconds.
9. Your shoulders are next. Shrug your shoulders to tense the muscles. Pull your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold the position (5 seconds). Then slowly relax. Let your shoulders gently drop back down. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
10. Now your mouth and jaw. Clench your teeth and pull your mouth into a forced smile. Your mouth and jaw will feel very tense and tight. Hold it (5 seconds) and then relax your face. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
11. Move up to your eyes and nose. Close your eyes as tightly as you can, and wrinkle your nose. Hold for 5 seconds. And then relax. Focus on the feeling of relaxation for about 20 seconds.
12. Finishing with your forehead, raise your eyebrows as high as you can. Hold the position for 5 seconds, focusing on the tension and tightness. Then relax. Focus on relaxing (20 seconds).
13. Now that you've done all your muscle exercises, check that all areas of your body are as relaxed as possible. Check your: hands, arms, shoulders, legs, stomach and face. You can re-do any of the exercises if you still feel tension in any area.