

# Stress

It is normal to experience stress following the trauma of a disturbing event. There may be feelings of intense shock, confusion, fear, of being overwhelmed, or being emotionally numb. Feeling physically and emotionally drained, overcome with grief, or finding it difficult to focus, sleep, or control your temper are all normal responses to abnormal events.

Behavior changes can include feeling physically and emotionally drained, overcome with grief, or find it difficult to focus, sleep, or control your temper. These are all normal responses to abnormal events.

## Signs and symptoms

Whether or not the event directly impacted you, it's normal to feel anxious, scared, and uncertain about what the future may hold and for people to have intense emotions and physical reactions. These symptoms can range from mild to severe and often come and go in waves.

### Emotional:

- Shock and disbelief
- Numbness and disconnect
- Fear, anxious, afraid
- Worried or tense
- Neglected and lonely
- Sadness and grief
- Helplessness
- Vulnerability
- Guilt
- Anger, agitation, frustration, moodiness
- Loss of control
- Difficulty concentrating
- Confusion
- Overburdened or overwhelmed

### Physical:

- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Stomach churning or tightening
- Excessive sweating, cold sweats
- Trembling/shaking
- Lump in throat or feeling choked up
- Rapid breathing
- Pounding, racing heart
- Tight chest
- Racing thoughts
- Pacing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Increased use of caffeine, alcohol or drugs

## Protecting people

Often stress and its symptoms start to fade as life gradually returns to normal over time following a catastrophic event. However, there is much that can be done to assist recovery and with coming to terms with trauma.

It is vital to remember that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to feel. People react in different ways to stress, and these reactions are absolutely valid.

It is important to not ignore feelings as this will slow recovery. It may seem better in the moment to avoid experiencing emotions, but they exist regardless. Even intense feelings will pass if people allow themselves to feel them rather than try to avoid them.

Reestablishing routine is important. There is comfort in the familiar. Getting back—as much as possible—to normal routine, will help minimise stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Even if a person's work or school routine is disrupted, they can structure their day with regular times for eating, sleeping, spending time with family, and relaxing. Engaging in activities that keep the mind occupied such as reading, watching a movie, cooking, or spending active time with family will help people avoid fixating on the traumatic event.

Major life decisions need to be put on hold. People making big life decisions about home, work, or family while traumatised will only increase their stress.

Created with support from:

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**Occupational Therapy New Zealand  
Whakaora Ngangahau Aotearoa  
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**Occupational Health Nurses  
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**Key tips to manage stress are:**

- Eat healthily where possible
- Maintain activity
- Try to maintain a good sleep
- Try to maintain routines
- Avoid unhealthy habits (alcohol, tobacco, substance use)
- Try deep breathing or meditation
- Connect with friends and family
- Write things down (a journal)
- Talk to others
- Don't be afraid to ask for help

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor

The Depression Helpline - 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 (to talk to a trained counsellor about how you are feeling or to ask any questions)

Youthline - 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) or online chat

The Lowdown Text 5626 for support to help young people recognise depression or anxiety

Alcohol Drug Helpline (0800 787 797)

Mental Health Foundation <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/managing-stress>

Your local Health Professional

General Practitioner

Nurse Practitioner

Occupational Health Nurse

Occupational Therapist

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