

Coping with a major traumatic event



Major traumatic events are not commonplace in Australia. What is being experienced with the Westfield Bondi Junction incident is unusual and difficult to process; your brain is likely operating out of the “fight or flight” response or “stress response”. In times such as these, it is important to manually switch off your stress response (it won’t automatically switch off itself), activate your parasympathetic nervous system (which will assist you to rest and relax), and re-engage the rational parts of the brain.

With the right strategies and support, it's possible to navigate through these challenges and rebuild a sense of stability and resilience.

Common reactions to trauma

For a period of time following a traumatic event, you may experience intense emotions or feelings such as fear, guilt, anger, sadness, or even grief. Some common reactions to trauma may include:

- Hypervigilance or feeling in a state of “high alert”
- Feeling in a state of shock or being emotionally numb
- Feeling highly emotional or upset
- Experience of extreme fatigue or tiredness
- Feeling highly stressed or anxious
- Avoiding particular locations for fear of “what might happen”
- Feeling overly protective of loved ones

For most people, as they begin to process the traumatic event, these feelings will subside; however, for some, these feelings may linger and may therefore benefit from some extra strategies to work through the event.

Personal management strategies

There are also a wide range of activities and strategies you can use to help you manage your symptoms. These include:

Making sense of the traumatic event

- Recognise what you have experienced is distressing, and it is normal to have a reaction to it.

- Accept that it may take time to get back to your usual self, but you will get through this process.
- Allow yourself to express your feelings as they arise, don't suppress them or bottle them up. Talk to someone about your feelings or write them down.
- Remember your strengths – even though it is difficult, you can deal with it.

Lean in to safe connections

- Turn to trusted friends and family members and share what you are going through.
- Try to keep up with your personal activities even if you don't feel like it.
- Schedule a weekly dinner with people who matter to you.
- Schedule a weekly lunch with a work colleague or a friend.

Recovery strategies

- **Prioritise relaxation activities** such as listening to music, having a bath, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga or breathing exercises. These will help switch off your stress response and activate your parasympathetic nervous system.
- Re-experiencing sudden feelings of anxiety and panic can be frightening. Try to maintain an awareness of your surroundings. Remind yourself that you are now in a safe place. **Try the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding technique:**
 - Name five things you see
 - Name four things you hear
 - Name three things you smell
 - Name two things you can touch
 - Name one thing you can taste
- If you experience upsetting dreams and it wakes you up, remind yourself it is a dream and you are not in danger. **Engage in a calming activity** like listening to quiet music or a mindfulness meditation such as yoga-nidra.
- **Focus on restful sleep.** Keep to a regular bedtime schedule and avoid heavy exercise and alcohol, caffeine and tobacco before bedtime. Keep all electronic devices like television and your mobile phone out of the bedroom. Don't lie in bed worrying, instead get up and engage in a relaxing activity like reading a book or herbal tea.
- When you are irritable or angry, try to walk away from the situation. **Regular exercise** can help manage your tension. If you become angry at family or friends, try to explain to them what is happening for you and how you are trying to manage your emotions. Talk to your doctor or counsellor for tips on how to manage your feelings.
- **Try the butterfly hug technique** to self-regulate intense emotional reactions. The butterfly hug utilises bilateral stimulation to soothe the body and mind. Follow this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGGJrqscvtU>

For further support in talking to your young person around challenging topics, reach out to the Employee Assistance Program on 1800 959 956, or make an appointment via the Resilience Box App.

