



Because **grief** happens and **support** matters...

Post Traumatic Stress

After the Canterbury Earthquakes

What can I do?

People who have lived through a traumatic event, or a series of traumatic events, have reactions to this afterwards. It's a very normal human response to acutely stressful situations.

As you will have noticed, people can have all kinds of reactions. Reactions might be physical ones and they can affect our thinking, emotions and the way we respond to things. For example, reactions can include **things like this:**

**shocked • numb • shaking • jumpy • constantly on edge • fearful
tearful • unable to cry • uncontrollable crying • wanting to eat less or more
feeling sick • diarrhoea • hard to breathe normally • can't concentrate
panic attacks • wanting to avoid going some places • unable to sleep • nightmares
flashbacks • preoccupied with memories • difficult thoughts in your mind
forgetful • guilty • angry • helpless • difficult to trust • overwhelmed**

Think of it like this. Because our minds, spirits, emotions and bodies could not immediately cope with the traumatic experiences the first time they happened, they *gradually* deal with them. We find we replay the events in our minds and we react to them physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally, bit by bit, until we slowly come to terms with the reality of it all. You might find that many reactions happen in the weeks to come, and sometimes, much longer afterwards.

It's not an easy time. These kinds of post traumatic reactions are intense, frightening and sometimes can take us by surprise. If you were already having to cope with any kind of challenging life situation, or a physical or mental illness, *before the earthquakes*, then it can be even harder.

It will take time to heal and to recover, but you can, and you will. It may not be as fast as you are probably wanting. Remember, what happened was absolutely not your fault.

See some practical ideas to help you with post traumatic stress on the following pages.

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Try some of these ideas to help yourself, or others, when reactions come:

When you are experiencing reactions, remind yourself that it's normal. After the trauma and loss you've faced, the reactions are understandable, acceptable and necessary. Be kind to yourself and don't expect too much of yourself. One moment, one hour, one day at a time.

Sleep and rest. Experiencing trauma, or repeated trauma, is exhausting. So is enduring the post traumatic stress reactions after it. Get as much sleep as you can – even if taken in snatches. And take rests as you need them. Work out what could help you sleep better. Think of trying things like having an early evening walk, enjoying a warm, milk drink before bedtime, cutting down on caffeine and alcohol, turning off the TV, reading till you're sleepy, keeping a light on at night, being not too far from others, or having a warm bath (if possible).

Breathe. When we concentrate on our breathing – slowly and deeply – a lot of panicky feelings can decrease. Put your hand on your tummy and breathe so that it pushes against your hand. Focus on your breathing until you feel yourself calm down. Breathe slowly. Do this often.

Relax every part of your body. Moving up from your toes to your head, bit by bit, tense yourself, then let it go and relax. *Use these steps:*

- Tighten your toes – hold for a count of ten – then release.
- Flex tightly the muscles in your feet – hold for a count of ten – then release.
- Move slowly up through your body in the same way – legs, tummy, bottom, back, chest, arms, neck and face
- Take plenty of time – no racing at all
- Finish by breathing in deeply and slowly several times.

Another relaxation idea. Lie on the floor. Imagine you're incredibly heavy. Feel your body relax onto the floor. Then imagine yourself even heavier – and heavier. Imagine you can't lift your arms or your legs at all. Feel how the heaviness feels. Then imagine the heaviness lifting up and away and that you're now as light as a feather. When you're ready, lift yourself up onto your feet.

Limit yourself to the amount of time you expose yourself to information about the earthquake. (Like on the radio, TV and in the newspaper.) Tune in to specific programmes that give you the information you need.

Quietness and peace. Spend time in places where you can be quiet and still. This can be soothing when everything has been so chaotic – around you and inside your mind and body.

Get into nature. Many people find that spending time in a natural place – like a garden or forest, or up in the hills - can be very calming and healing.

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Tune into the here and now. This will help you feel more grounded. Become more aware of what's going on around you, and inside you. Becoming more aware of the here and now can help you deal with what's going on in a calmer, more balanced way.

- **A Quick Exercise**

Notice your feet on the floor, or where and how your body contacts the floor or a chair. Take a few very slow and deep breaths, then look around you.

- **Some other things to try**

Look around outside – notice what's there - the colours, shapes, people... take all the time you need. Now look inside – what thoughts or feelings are inside right now?

Smell – Notice what smells there are around you.

Listen to sounds – What can be heard?

Taste – Open your mouth and breathe in over your tongue. How does it taste?

Feel the touch - e.g. of the air against your skin, the clothing against your body. What different textures, temperatures or pressure are there? What can you feel?

- **Stimulate your senses to wake yourself up a bit and feel something physical.**

- standing outside in the wind
- touching something solid
- ask someone to give you a hug
- standing up and stamping your feet
- jump up and down – moving about
- turning on a bright light
- briefly feeling the cold in a fridge or freezer
- feeling hot steam coming up from hot water running into a sink
- swimming or showering then drying off.

(the last four need electricity or water, so maybe useful later on.)

Hold on to something that makes you feel safer – it could be a person's hand, or something special to you, a pillow or cushion, a soft toy, a blanket.

Keep something in your pocket that you can touch and rub – a stone, a shell, or something else special.

Wear something comforting – perhaps a necklace, a favourite t-shirt, or favourite perfume.

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Share your experiences – when you're ready to do this, it can be very healing. Talk honestly with others you know well or trust, or with a counsellor or your doctor. People do care.

Write. Many people find that writing down thoughts, feeling and memories can be very helpful. It gets them out.

Use Music. After getting comfortable and closing your eyes, listen or play music that relaxes you. Clear your mind of everything else. When the music ends, spend some time just breathing in and out, slowly.

Use water. Relax as you have a quiet shower, bath or a swim (once water is restored!).

Being held closely. Many people find they can relax more by being close to, or being held by, a loving person in their family, or a friend. It can be as simple as sitting together quietly, with no hurry to be anywhere else. This closeness provides a sense of safety that can allow you to let go of worries and tensions and let your body unwind and relax.

Spend time with your pet, or an affectionate animal. Many find this calming.

Make some simple decisions. Decide what you will eat at the next meal, what you'd like to drink, what to wear, what music to listen to, who you could phone for chat, or what you'd like to listen to on the radio or watch on TV. In those times when we feel powerless about a lot, making small decisions for ourselves – even the simplest ones – is helpful. We can start to feel a little more in control.

Get physical. Physical activity of any kind can be a stress release. Choose what would suit you best – even something simple.

Comfort. Everyone finds different things are comforting. Think what comforts you. It might be special foods, a hot drink, personal closeness, a massage, being with friends, reading a favourite book, visiting a special place. It could be a hot water bottle or a wheat bag, or smelling some fragrant aromatherapy oils. Maybe think about things you enjoyed as child – these can still be comforting to us when we are adults.

- Be aware that using a lot of alcohol or non-prescription drugs is not helpful at this time as they can disrupt your sleep and your mood (both have a depressive effect) and affect your judgement and perspective about things.

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Having daily routines can help. Even a simple routine can be helpful when so much feels out of control and too much to handle. Think about structuring each day in some predictable ways, as best you can. For example, checking in with family or friends each morning, having a hot drink after your meal or going for a daily walk. This helps adults and children too.

Use the support around you. Don't hesitate. Never see it as a weakness – it's a strength. One day you can help someone else. Right now, it's okay to lean on others and accept help and support. It can ease your way.

If nothing helps, get some extra help – see your doctor, a counsellor or a psychologist. Sometimes post traumatic stress does not ease up, even after many weeks, and so getting a hand to help you get through it is very important. See your doctor or a trained counsellor or psychologist who can give you some more strategies and perspectives that are tailored especially to you.

For information about supporting children through post traumatic stress, see Skylight's downloadable pdf *How Can I Help My Child* or *Teen After What Has Happened?*

For information about dealing with your grief, contact Skylight.

Go to www.skylight.org.nz – see the earthquake support page

or phone **0800 299 100** or **+64 4 939 6767**

*Courage does not always roar.
Sometimes, it's the quiet voice at
the end of the day gently saying,
"I will try again tomorrow".*

~Maryanne Radanbacher



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