

Coping with Major Trauma

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Shock, numbness, grief, fear, anxiety, anger, uncertainty. Most of us have felt some or all of these emotions in the past few tragic weeks. Healing is coming more slowly for some, especially if they knew some of the victims. For others it may bring up reminders of previous life tragedies and the emotions that come with those memories.

Many Americans have reported difficulty with sleeping and concentrating, and even more are feeling depressed. Some will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or "PTSD", referring to emotional symptoms that persist for greater than one month following a major trauma. Even for those who were previously successfully treated for PTSD, there is a risk of relapse.

Anxiety is a normal, healthy response which allows all higher animals to avoid danger. The brain will increase the breathing rate, heart rate, alertness, and muscle tone, preparing for "flight or fight". If anxiety becomes chronic however, this may lead to mental strain, insomnia, exhaustion, panic attacks, heart palpitations, or chronic muscle tension and pain. For people with PTSD, even normal events such as a plane flying overhead can trigger intense physical and emotional stimulation.

In Chinese medicine, anxiety is mostly linked with the heart and kidney. For example, if fear predominates combined with jumpiness, urinary frequency, and loose bowels, the acupuncturist would focus on the kidney. If anger was a presenting symptom, points would be added to treat the liver. For grief and loss, the lungs would be treated. Panic attacks and PTSD can be successfully treated with acupuncture.

One of the functions of Qi, or energy, is to regulate the emotions and provide stability and adaptability in times of change and crisis. If Qi is deficient, you will react more strongly and feel more vulnerable and unable to cope. Stressful situations will affect you more than other people. Part of the treatment in this case would include increasing and stabilizing Qi.

Supplements may help with the physical effects of stress. B-vitamins are considered the most important, but a good multi-vitamin insures you also receive antioxidants to combat free radicals caused by stress. Stress depletes calcium and magnesium, and you may wish to add an extra dose to your multi-vitamin on a temporary basis if you are having trouble sleeping. Many herbs are soothing to the nervous system including valerian, chamomile, and kava kava, and many come in tea form. Homeopathic preparations can be very helpful. Amino acids such as SAME or a multi-amino supplement may help some people.

Take a break from the news. Go for walks, and make sure you are breathing deeply. Be gentle with yourself, and try to reduce stress in other areas of your life for the time being. Allow yourself to have some fun and feel good without guilt.

Many people will be able to heal on their own in the next few weeks. Talking about the events and your feelings, either with a professional or a sympathetic friend can be very helpful. If your symptoms persist more than a month, you may want to consider seeking professional help.

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