

Tips for looking after yourself

At times of great stress it is important to look after yourself. Below are some tips on what you can do to make difficult times easier.

- Adjust your lifestyle to your needs. Don't just do things out of habit or because you planned them some time ago.
- Avoid making important life decisions until you can be objective. Make as many small decisions on a day to day basis as you like to ensure you have control over your life.
- Make time to practise relaxation or absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music - this helps your body and nervous system to settle and readjust.

Strategies to help you cope

The following strategies may help you cope with the demands placed upon you at work and at home:

- Develop a routine and rhythm that takes account of your needs, takes pressure off decision-making and helps you through periods of apathy or lack of motivation.
- Take regular, non-stressful exercise alternating with periods of planned, deliberate relaxation (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation exercises, meditation, baths, yoga, breathing exercises).
- Do something enjoyable every day, be nice to yourself - you deserve it, pleasure is the best antidote to stress.
- Think carefully about food, drink and diet. Eat regular balanced meals emphasising protein and complex carbohydrates. Minimise fats, sugar, alcohol, caffeine, chocolate and tobacco, as these prolong and complicate the stress response.
- Remind yourself daily that you are normal and that you can cope and are coping; don't be angry with yourself for being upset.
- Accept that you and many of your friends, family and colleagues are going through a highly stressful experience, things will be different for a while and you will have strong reactions; acceptance is the first stage of recovery.
- If memory, concentration and planning are affected, use aids, write things down and do things in short bursts.
- It is normal to have changing moods after bad news, respect your emotions even if they are not normal for you; feeling bad usually passes quite soon. Don't numb your emotions with alcohol or other means, these only make it worse by stopping real resolution, which will come in time.
- Find people you trust to talk to about your reactions; talking helps to defuse feelings and make sense of things and builds bridges with others.
- Take extra care of yourself; stress makes people more susceptible to infections, accidents, emotional decisions or mistakes.

This fact sheet has been reproduced from information provided by Dr Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist, consultant to the State Emergency Recovery Unit of the Victorian Department of Human Services. It is intended as a guide to help people deal with traumatic events and is not a substitute for seeking professional help.