

Living with Threats of Violence

Threats of violence can invoke great fear and concern. There is no way to predict what will happen, or what your personal circumstances will be, but there are simple things you can do to help cope and continue your life.

Ways to Deal with the Stress of Living with Threats of Violence

You may have recently been threatened in the community, at work, home, or school. The threat may start a stress response. Stress is a physical reaction to any change in our normal day to day lives. Today, acts of violence are being pushed to the forefront of the media. We are exposed to it everyday on TV, radio newspapers, and social media. This change in the status quo is certain to bring on stress.

When left unchecked, stress can lead to serious health problems. Forty-three percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects due to stress and 75–90 percent of visits to the doctor are related to stress¹. The following tips can help you cope during these stressful times:

- **Take care of yourself first.** Eat healthy foods and get enough sleep.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity relieves stress, and promotes well-being.
- **Budget your time.** Prioritize your tasks. Over-committing yourself will cause stress.
- **Balance work and play.** Plan time to relax and escape from your regular routine.
- **Prepare yourself for stressful events.** Practice feeling calm in stressful situations.
- **Try relaxation exercises.** Imagine a restful scene; practice deep breathing and meditation.

Overcoming Anxiety

It is not uncommon to feel anxious and apprehensive because of the threats of violence. These nervous feelings will come and go. However, if you are in a constant state of feeling anxious, it can quickly become overwhelming and may get in the way of your daily life. Below are some tips to assist you in overcoming anxious feelings:

- **Limit your television news viewing.** Keep informed, but don't watch it around the clock.
- **Volunteer.** Doing something nice for someone else can improve your frame of mind.
- **Limit caffeine.** Too much caffeine can make you edgy and anxious.
- **Avoid nicotine and alcohol.** They both contain chemicals that can cause anxiety.
- **Talk to someone.** If you start to feel overwhelmed, talk with a friend, family member, doctor, religious advisor or mental health professional.

¹ www.stress.org

Trauma - Do's and Don'ts

Individuals exposed to traumatic physical or psychological events can develop a trauma response. The effects are both physical and emotional. The following suggestions can help someone suffering from the effects of a trauma to feel better faster and reduce the probability of long-term post traumatic stress reactions:

Do

- Get enough rest
- Eat well and get exercise
- Talk to someone about the incident
- Take time for leisure activities
- Follow a familiar routine
- Spend time with family and friends
- Attend support meetings
- Take one thing at a time
- Expect the experience to bother you
- Seek professional help if your emotional symptoms persist
- Seek medical assistance if your physical symptoms concern you

Don't

- Drink alcohol excessively
- Numb yourself with drugs or alcohol
- Withdraw from significant others
- Reduce leisure activities
- Stay away from work
- Increase caffeine intake
- Take on new major projects
- Pretend everything is OK
- Make major changes in your life

Trauma and Sleep Problems

Sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, waking frequently, and having distressing dreams or nightmares are common to those with who experience trauma. In fact, sleep disturbance is a common response to past trauma or an anticipated threat. The following are common sleep problems associated with trauma:

Difficulty falling asleep:

- You may experience a continued state of hyper-arousal or "watchfulness." It is hard to fall asleep if you think you must stay alert to protect yourself and others from danger.
- Your thoughts can also contribute to problems with sleep. Thinking about the traumatic event, general worries or worrying that you can't fall asleep are all common reasons for having difficulty sleeping.

Difficulty staying asleep:

- Distressing dreams or nightmares are typical for those who experience trauma. Usually, the nightmares tend to reproduce either the event or some aspect of it.
- Night terrors are events such as screaming or shaking while asleep. The person may appear "awake" to an observer, but is not responsive.

What can you do if you have problems sleeping due to a trauma?

Sleep problems tend to be caused by what we are thinking. Fear, worry, or thinking about upsetting issues release stress chemicals that prevent sleep. Focus on meditative thinking – distract your thoughts, concentrate on your breathing, or focus on an object in the room. Peaceful or neutral thinking allows the body to relax and sleep.

If sleep problems continue, let your doctor know that you have trouble sleeping and that you think it may be related to a traumatic event. Tell your doctor exactly what the problems are; he or she can help you best if you share this information about yourself. Let your doctor know about any physical or emotional problems that you think are contributing to your sleep problems.

There are a number of medications that are helpful for sleep problems. Depending upon your sleep symptoms and other factors, your doctor may prescribe some for you. Your doctor may recommend that you work with a therapist skilled in dealing with emotional and behavioral problems.

In summary, be prepared to adapt this information to your personal circumstances. Stay calm, be patient and think before you act. With a little planning and common sense, you can be better prepared and better able to cope with the unexpected.

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